ERRORS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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1.1 - The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

In almost every study of adult foreign language learning one of the researcher's central questions is related to the extent to which the learner's native language influences his interlanguage. Some authors have claimed that errors in foreign language learning can be predicted by means of a comparison between the source language and the target language because wherever there are similarities between the two languages, learning is facilitated and wherever there are contrasts, learning is retarded. Lado (1957, p. vii) argued that

> *we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing sistematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student.*

But it was Fries who, as early as 1945, first stated that

> *the most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.* (p. 9).

The above statements represent the basic assumptions of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis which, according to Wardaugh (1975) may be stated in two versions, a strong version and a weak one. One of the main differences between the two is that the first is

predictive whereas the second is explanatory. The same author pointed out that the weak version "does not require what the strong version requires, the prediction of those difficulties and, conversely, of those learning points which do not create any difficulties at all" because "it starts with the evidence provided by linguistic interference and uses such evidence to explain the similarities and differences between systems," (pp. 14-15).

The pedagogical value of contrastive analysis was very clearly stated by Politzer (1972: p. 90). According to him

> *the interference in performance in L_2 which can be associated with competence in L_1 can be counteracted by exercises which are specially designed to reduce the influence of competence of L_1 on performance in L_2.*

He also argued that

> *in practical experience, the use of contrastive analysis is likely to be explanatory rather than predictive - and the ultimate pedagogical usefulness of contrastive analysis depends on the efficiency of the pedagogical assumptions to which it leads. (p. 91).*

Everything that has been said so far about the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis leads us to the conclusion that one of its aims is to prevent learners from making erros, i.e., they should be stimulated to produce only correct utterances.

1.2 - The Error Analysis Hypothesis

Some authors have not accepted the idea that all errors in foreign language learning should be attributed to interference from

the learner's mother tongue. They believe that a variety of factors is responsible for errors in foreign language learning. Corder (1977: p. 169) pointed out that

> *it is a generally agreed observation that many - but not necessarily all - the idiosyncratic sentences of a second language learner bear some sort of regular relation to the sentences of his mother tongue.*

It has also been argued that interference is not accounted for only in terms of differences between native and foreign languages for similarity in language structures can also cause errors on the part of the foreign language learner. An example of this phenomenon is the confusion between the infinitive and the past participle among Brazilian students, though these forms are exactly parallel in English and Portuguese. This problem occurs when the learner produces the verb form 'had fall' instead of 'had fallen'.

Because of all these problems the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis has been rejected by many authors (Wardaugh, Richards, Corder, Dulay and Burt). Its weak version, however, has been accepted to explain the errors after they have been made.

One of the assumptions of the Error Analysis Hypothesis is that the elimination of all errors in foreign language learning seems to be impossible. The literature on modern language teaching suggests that errors are to be regarded as evidence of the learner's strategies of learning. This view is based on Chomsky's mentalist theory of language acquisition. According to it children learning their mother tongue do not simply imitate what they hear from adults; they produce utterances which they have never heard before using rules they have internalized by being exposed to language

produced by native speakers. They are said to use language creatively.

Dulay and Burt (1977: p. 97) defined creativity in language acquisition as

> *the process by which learners gradually reconstruct rules for speech they hear, guided by innate mechanisms which cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved.*

An example of this creativity is the use of the forms 'breaked' and 'brang' by children learning English as their mother tongue.

The production of forms such as the ones above shows us that many of the rules the child formulates are incorrect or incomplete and therefore their application results in errors in the child's speech. The making of errors should then be considered as an inevitable and necessary component in language acquisition. They are evidence that language learning is a hypothesis-forming activity and, according to Wilkins (1975: p. 170), they provide "the only means that the child has of finding out the limits to the domain of the rules that he is formulating."

The mentalist theory of language acquisition can be applied to foreign language learning because many recent studies dealing with this subject, especially those by Corder, Richards and Dulay and Burt, have shown that many errors made by foreign language learners are very similar to those which can be found in the performance data of children learning their mother tongue. This means that at least some of the strategies used by foreign language learners are the same as those used in native language acquisition.

Richards (1977: p. 174) pointed out that there are errors which

"illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypothesis about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook." Errors of this kind have received different labels,as for example, intralingual and developmental errors and errors of overgeneralization. Furthermore they can be found in the interlanguage of speakers of different mother tongues and therefore cannot be accounted for by means of contrastive analysis.

Very often however the division between errors traceable to L_1 interference and those that are independent of L_1 interference is not invariably clearcut. Jain (1977: p. 190) believes that the phenomenon of errors caused by the cross-association of both L_1 and L_2 also seems to exist. Dommergues and Lane (1976: p. 113) also argued that "it is a mistake to believe, as the literature on L_2 acquisition seems to imply, that errors are either of one kind or the other" because "most of the errors students make in L_2 reflect the two sources, interference and analogy, working together." An example of this type of error is the form 'Portugueses', produced by Brazilian learners. Since in both English and Portuguese, the general rule for the formation of the plural of nouns is the same, i.e., the addition of the morpheme '-s' to the singular form, this error may be attributed to one source or the other, or even to both, acting together.

The types of errors discussed so far demonstrate the learner's use of unconscious learning strategies in his attempts to produce utterances in the target language. It has been argued that errors attributed to interference from source and target languages are usually produced without the learner being aware of the problem.But not all the strategies employed by the foreign language learner are unconscious. Tarone (1977: p. 195) pointed out that "conscious communication strategies are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey

the individual's thought." Selinker (1977: p. 39) commented that "strategies for handling TL linguistic material evolve whenever the learner realizes, either consciously or subconsciously, that he has no linguistic competence with regard to some aspect of the TL." There is a difference, then, between unconscious learning strategies and conscious communication strategies. The former are related to errors due to interference from the source language as well as to errors due to interference from the target language; the latter are related to errors learners make when they are conscious of their lack of knowledge of the target language item or structure.

This author believes that there are at least three different types of errors which can be accounted for in terms of conscious communication strategies. The first is the omission of a content word, which is called by Tarone (1977: p. 198) *topic avoidance*, and "occurs when the learner simply does not talk about concepts for which the vocabulary is not known." The second is *conscious transfer* and occurs when "the learner simply uses the NL term without bothering to translate." The third is *paraphrase* which is defined as "the rewording of the message in an alternate, acceptable target language construction, in situations where the appropriate form or construction is not known or not yet stable."

Finally, it seems that errors in foreign language learning can also be unsystematic and nonrecurrent and cannot be attributed to any of the causes mentioned before. Duskowá (1969: p. 15) pointed out that those errors "defied all attempts at classification, being unique in character, nonrecurrent and not readily traceable to their sources." Therefore they are of no particular significance to the language teacher.

1.3 - Conclusion

As Corder (1977: p. 25) pointed out the learner's errors are important because of three main reasons. First, they tell the teacher what the learner has already learned. Second, they tell the researcher what processes the learner employs when he attempts to learn a foreing language. Third, they cannot be avoided because they constitute a necessary stage in the process of language learning,both the native and the foreign.

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