Chapter 1

Analysis of Errors in the Written Essays of Engineering Students:
Using a Comparative Taxonomy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a clear tendency to consider the errors made by learners in their process of language learning not as a negative aspect but as a natural step in the development of their language skills. In recent decades, researchers have considered errors as the evidence for a creative process in language learning. Therefore, the main objective of this chapter will be to classify the errors made by undergraduate engineering students in a public Spanish Polytechnic University over the last two courses. The authors categorise those errors following the comparative taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen in "Language Two" (1982). This taxonomy arranges errors into the following categories: interlingual, developmental, ambiguous, and other errors. Consequently, this chapter demonstrates that the most frequent category of errors is the interlingual category. And in order to lead this research, a corpus of a total of 72 essays was examined, comprising their written productions in the task assigned throughout these last two years.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays there is a clear tendency to consider the errors made by learners in their process of language learning not as a negative aspect but as a natural step in the development of their language skills. In recent decades, researchers have considered errors as the evidence for a creative process in language learning. Therefore, the main objective of this paper will be to classify the errors made by undergraduate engineering students in a public Spanish Polytechnic University over the last two courses. We will try to categorise those errors following the comparative taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen in "Language Two" (1982). This taxonomy arranges errors into the following categories: interlingual, developmental, ambiguous, and other errors. Consequently, what we will demonstrate along this article is that the most frequent category of errors is the interlingual category. And in order to lead this research, a corpus of a total of 72 essays was examined, comprising their written productions in the task assigned throughout these last two years.

Error Analysis is a branch of Applied Linguistics which emerged in the 1960s to reveal that the errors that the learners did were not only due to their mother tongue but rather it also reflected certain universal strategies. This trend supposed a reaction to Contrastive Analysis that considered native language interference as the main source of errors in the field of second language learning.

Nzama (2010) states that error analysis is useful in second language learning because it reveals to the teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers what the problem areas are. The teachers could design remedial exercises and focus more attention on the trouble shooting areas. Corder (1967, as cited in Nzama, 2010) states that errors are visible proof that learning is taking place. He has emphasized that errors, if studied systematically, can provide significant insights into how a language is actually learned by a foreigner. He also agrees that studying students errors of usage has immediate practical application for language teachers. In his view, errors provide feedback; they tell the teachers something about the effectiveness of his teaching. Sercombe (2000, as cited in Nzama, 2010) also explains that error analysis serves three purposes. Firstly, to find out the level of language proficiency the learner has reached. Secondly, to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning, and thirdly, to find out how people learn a language. From this statement it can be concluded that the study of errors should also be looked at as something positive both for learners and teachers

Jack C. Richards (1971) explained in that sense that "the field of errors analysis may be defined as dealing with the differences between the way people learning a language speak and the way that adult native speakers of the language use the language" (Richards, 1971: 1). Similarly, Corder (1981) stated "the errors that

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