Chapter 4

Errors in the Written Productions of Spanish Undergraduate Engineering Students:
A Comparative Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Writing is a language skill that for most FL students is difficult to master. Therefore, students often find it difficult to write a specific composition which is not their FL. Especially for undergraduate technical students, this seems to be a challenging task since the presence of difficulties in any FL writing forces them to commit errors in their written productions. Therefore, what this chapter will identify is those errors made by engineering students in a public Spanish Polytechnic University over the last two years. The authors shall attempt to categorise errors based on their source following the comparative taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen. So, a total of 60 essays undertaken by these engineering students were selected taking into account their productions in the task assigned during the semester. The main objective is to prove that the results have undoubtedly demonstrated that the majority of errors committed by these engineering students can be classified as belonging to the interlingual category, being the category with the highest number of occurrences.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a clear tendency to consider the errors made by students in their process of language learning not as a negative aspect of language learning but, rather on the contrary, as a natural step in the development of their language skills. As Corder stated, "the errors that learners make are a major element in the feedback system of the process that we call language teaching and learning" (Corder, 1981, p. 35).

In the past, teachers considered errors committed by students as something undesirable, something to prevent from occurring at all means. But in the last decades, given the different scientific studies published, researchers came to consider errors as evidence for a creative process in language learning.

Error analysis provides us with scientific evidence for the system of language that students are using at any time in the course of development of their studies. Basically, this analysis consists of four main steps: to identify the errors, to explain the errors, to categorise the errors, and to evaluate the errors.

Consequently, the errors which emerge from the students' learning process can clearly tell us what needs to be taught or fostered and how the learning is ongoing at any time in order to take the necessary adjustments. Quoting Saville-Troike "learner errors are windows into the language learner's mind" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 39).

Also, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) believe that an analysis of errors made by language learners can help us understand the process of language learning deeply. Besides, it also helps teachers to decide on those teaching materials that best fit the learning needs of the language learners. Therefore, at universities, students are taught to master, at least up to a certain level, English in its four different skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And among these four skills, writing is undoubtedly the most important productive to be learned. But not only is the most productive of the four skills, but it is also the one that they usually face with certain suspicion and even fear due to their proven inability to express correctly in written English, regardless of the nature of the task assigned. As a result, this turns out to be problematic when it comes to giving feedback.

We should especially bear in mind the fact that we are not working with students doing an English studies degree at university, whose English level could be expected to be higher than average, but a technical one within the engineering field. Consequently, all this background information has its natural reflection on

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