# Language Transfer and Error Analysis: Study of Learner's Language
# with Reference to Foreign Language Learning (French)

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Language originated in man's mind with his intense requirement to express and share what he felt. Gestures, facial expressions and other physical modes of communication gradually gained complexity and transformed into sounds with meanings. Consequently although the earlier versions of language were simple and inelegant, language in today's sense is a complex and learned behavior.

A closely knit relationship exists between language and mind. Language is one potential sector in human behavior and therefore essentially coherence exists between human mind and language. The models 'Language Transfer' and 'Error Analysis' can be identified as two models used in both Psycholinguistics and Applied Linguistics of assessing transfer habits of one's familiar language(source language) to the target language when learning a second or foreign language in order to identify points of failure or inconvenience in learning the target language . Language Transfer and Error Analysis are an amalgamated process. These two models which are widely used in second language learning research can be successfully applied in foreign language learning research too as a closer pattern of language behavior can be observed in both processes. A collective analysis of language behavior in individuals with the utilization of these two models paves the way to identify some essential psychological factors in foreign language learning.

## Language Transfer: Facilitation and Interference

Unlike first language acquisition which is a natural and unguided phenomenon, language learning is a guided activity inclusive of formal instructions. Learning is defined as "the formal study of language rules and is a conscious process" (Richards and Rodgers, 199: 18). In language learning, a set of alternatives are used to express something using a different code. In this process, he uses the rules he already knows in the production of utterances of the target language. Sometimes if the structure and the constituents of the source language are alike to those of the target language those transfers fulfill and suit the requirement in L2. On the contrary, the replacement of the

habits of his source language to the target language intervenes badly due to idiosyncratic features of languages. The notion of replacing or substituting the habits of the source language (most probably mother tongue) to the target language (second of foreign language) is a 'transfer' and if the language behavior in both languages are similar, it is a 'facilitation' and if different, an 'interference'. Language transfer has been explained as "the inappropriate use of the rules of his mother tongue in his performance of the target language" (Corder, 1973:133).Although Corder specially refers here only to the mother tongue, it is evident that in some instances it could also be a second language. Many attempts that learners make in speaking the target language show that they use many structures and rules of their mother tongue or second language which is familiar to them for the new language.

In case of foreign language learning, transfer is always a result of comparison and substitution. Transfer was considered responsible for error occurrences in cross-linguistic studies (Lado, 1957; Corder, 1971). A learner doesn't know the full account of the new language. Sometimes he performs this new task in the only way he knows considering that both tasks are similar which results as an interference (negative). Firm establishment of these rules in mind makes their habits difficult to modify or extend. In this process, sometimes the learner is fully aware of transfer (such as in replacements and code-switching) and sometimes totally unaware. In the latter case, obviously, a learner makes errors. Yet the well motivated learner will overcome these difficulties without much effort over the course of time.

**Error Analysis**

Error analysis is a study of learners'. An analysis of errors is possible where a negative transfer takes place. Most of what appears to be mistakes in learner's language are 'errors'. Knowledge of a learner can be sorted out through the errors he makes in his language performance. Every learner goes through a transitional period called 'inter language' which manifests a mixture of the codes of the source and target languages. Accordingly errors can be explained as a set of distinguished features in their language development. Errors of a language learner are mostly observed in his developmental (intermediate) stage. That period can be identified as a transitional period where he tends to be lost between the two languages.

Committing errors at all linguistic levels: phonological, lexical, syntactical and semantic and in the developmental stage in foreign language learning is a frequently observed phenomenon. The reason for such errors seems to be mainly deriving owing to

'Language transfer'. A research conducted on the identification of syntactic errors committed by French learners of Sinhalese in their kernel sentences implied several facts which need an in depth linguistic explanation. The theoretical objectives of error analysis include identification of errors, observation of how errors originate and describing the nature and the source of these errors. In foreign languages learning, error analysis is a significant source of information to identify the nature of foreign language learners' knowledge, effectiveness and efficiency in language learning and the areas he needs attention or improvement. The extent of this transfer too can be identified through this. An observed phenomena though error analysis is that the errors that foreign language learners commit are not just random but systematic and arise from imperfect knowledge. This fact seems worth further investigating. Also through this study, it is expected to test the two hypotheses that (1) the differences between two languages and the difficulties that a learner encounters are similar or identical and according to Larsen-Freeman (Second Language acquisition Research, p 137) (2) it is often the similarities between the two languages which cause confusion. Further, the points of contrast in kernel sentences in English and French is expected be identified. Similarly, identification of the separate code which resembles neither the code of the mother code nor the code of the target language which is referred to as 'inter language' or as Pit Corder describes "breaches of the code'' (1973: 259) is expected.

The background of learning of those students marked a difference where they utilized the second language (English) and not the mother tongue (Sinhala) as their Source language in learning the Target language (French). Data gathered through this research showed that the learners prefer to use English as their Source language to learn French and they always expected translation equivalents and structural explanations from English to French and vice versa in relevant instances. The structural closeness or distance of languages plays a vital role in FLL (Foreign language learning and teaching, pg 375). Therefore learner's this preference too may result due to homogeneity of structures (SVO structure), grammar equivalences, orthography and vocabulary.

Conducted as a comparative analysis of two languages, this study on language transfer and error analysis confines itself only to the behavior of kernel sentences (simple declarative sentences) the reason being that an error analysis of French and English kernel sentences which is the basic unit of expression throws light on a number of relationships. Also errors in kernel sentences can be identified as the leading phenomenon that affects other major errors in complex constructions. Moreover a learner's ability to produce error- free kernel sentences demonstrates that he has already

learnt basic skills and competency in the particular language. Taking all these factors in. o consideration, kernel sentence is taken as the object of study and the prime concern. In this case, the learners of French are thoroughly competent in constructing kernel sentences in English which allows the comparison between the two languages possible and avoids the hypothesis that incompetency in producing kernel sentences in the second language results in errors in the target language learning.

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative data which include questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. Following a precise research methodology in error analysis, the study was performed on unguided and spontaneous language material such as compositions, essays, orals and translations preserving learner's freedom to choose his mode of expression. This is identified as a prerequisite in error analysis where reliable and authentic results can be expected. Also the errors investigated are presented as a collective sample of data which were appeared to be the most common errors among those foreign language learners.

Accordingly, the following syntactic errors in kernel sentences can be identified as recurrent and fundamental in the performances of French learners.

**Confusion over the behavior of the adjectives and their concord with gender and number**

  E.g. Original utterance: Il veut acheter une <u>moderne</u> maison

      Reconstruction : Il veut acheter une maison <u>moderne</u>

    Original utterance:  Ce sont des solutions <u>visible</u> et <u>pratique.</u>

      Reconstruction : Ce sont des solutions <u>visibles</u> et <u>pratiques.</u>

**Errors in the concord system of determiners and possessive, indefinite and demonstrative adjectives**

  E.g. Original utterance: <u>La</u> homes gentils aident les pauvres.

      Reconstruction : <u>Les</u> homes gentils aident les pauvres.

  E.g. Original utterance: Aujourd'hui, <u>mon</u> mère fête <u>sa</u> anniversaire.

      Reconstruction : Aujourd'hui, <u>ma</u> mère fête <u>son</u> anniversaire.

**Errors in the conjugations of verbs**

  E.g. Original utterance: Nous <u>observe</u> quelquechose.

      Reconstruction : Nous <u>observons</u> quelquechose.

**Errors in the use of tenses**

    E.g.    Original utterance: Elle <u>est joue</u> au tennis à l'école

                Reconstruction   : Elle <u>joue</u> au tennis à l'école

                Original utterance: Il <u>a travaillé</u> ici depuis 1950

                Reconstruction   : Il <u>travaille</u> ici depuis 1950

**Errors in the placement of adverbs**

    E.g.    Original utterance: J'aime la glace <u>beaucoup</u>.

                Reconstruction   : J'aime <u>beaucoup</u> la glace.

**Errors due to idiosyncratic features of French Phonology**

    E.g.    Original utterance: <u>Le</u> <u>é</u>tudiante voit <u>que</u> il y a <u>le</u> <u>h</u>orloge.

                Reconstruction   : L'étudiante voit qu'il y a l'horloge.

**Confusion over the use of the tenses appropriately**

    E.g.    Original utterance: <u>J'ai attendu</u> là depuis deux heures.

                Reconstruction   : <u>J'attendait</u> là depuis deux heures.

**Errors in the formation of plurals due to analogy**

    E.g.    Original utterance: les bateau<u>s</u>, les gâteau<u>s</u>, les animal<u>s</u>

                Reconstruction   : les bateau<u>x</u>, les gâteau<u>x</u>, les animau<u>x</u>

According to Richards and Rodgers, there are four kinds of data: descriptive data, observational data, effective data and comparative data (1995:160).Accordingly errors which also provide another means of data can be categorized into observational data while analysis of errors can be recognized as effective data.

A careful analysis of these errors reveals that the root cause for all such confusions is the intervention of the syntactic rules in English with French. Accordingly a novel conclusion which consists of both facts indicated through the two hypotheses can be observed through this analysis. Consequently, the two opposing views that differences result in difficulties and similarities result in difficulties both seem to be true in relevant instances. Similarities may exist resulting to the fact that the two languages are historically related and differences due to idiosyncratic features of each language. Yet an observed phenomenon in this analysis is that an equal weight cannot be put on both hypotheses. According to this analysis, similarities between the two languages seem to have a lesser impact on difficulties (or errors) and differences play a major role in causing difficulties. For instance, the SVO structure is preserved in both and the syntactic

atoms such as determiners, modifiers, nouns and verbs which build up the kernel sentences are found to be similar. This becomes facilitation to the learner. Yet their behavior within the sentences, inflections and conjugations do not resemble each other and this causes almost all the errors indicated above. This fact paves the way to the conclusion that both differences and similarities between English and French cause difficulties in foreign language learning in a multifaceted way.

It is also noteworthy that these transfer habits could only be visible at their transitional stage (Intermediate stage) and over the constant learning and use of the language they overcome these problems. Errors are a result of partial knowledge. Douglas Brown has expressed that "the linguistic and cognitive processes of second language learning in young children are in general similar to first language processes(Brown: 67-68) and a similar observation can be seen in foreign language learning too. Although the superficial account of errors can be identified as above, a thorough linguistic explanation indicates the reasons behind those errors. In some such explanations, the notion of surface and deep structure plays a big role. Though languages do appear to be different in their surface structure, they have strong resemblances to each other as evidenced by Universal Grammar features and the Theory of Transformational Generative Grammar by Chomsky. This resemblance may lie on any one or more of linguistic levels such as phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics. Therefore, correspondence of similarities will vary between units. In an overall comparison of the grammatical structure of the source and target language, the learner may identify the cases of equivalence and obviously the learner will master those areas.

Confusion over the behavior of the adjectives and adverbs in a sentence can be explained through Chomsky's theory of Transformational Generative Grammar. Learners presume that the behavior of the occurrence of adjectives and adverbs are identical in both languages. Although the structure of such constituents is similar in their deep structure, in the transformational process, the surface structure undergoes changes. Accordingly

**Deep structure**

Il veut acheter une maison moderne

| | |
|---|---|
| Relativization: | Il veut acheter une maison (qui est modern) |
| Relative reduction: | Il veut acheter une maison(est modern) |
| Auxiliary reduction: | Il veut acheter une maison moderne |

**Surface structure**

Unlike in English, in the transformational process, most French adjectives do not precede the noun. The errors committed in the use of adverbs happen to be a consequence of transferring the English syntactic structure directly to the target language. In the process of derivation, the adverbs immediately follow the verb always in its surface structure unlike in English where only adverb particles do follow the verb.

|                    | **Deep structure**          |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
|                    | Tu aimes la glace <u>beaucoup</u> |
| Adverb preposing:  | Tu aimes <u>beaucoup</u> la glace |
|                    | **Surface structure**       |

Some errors committed in kernel sentences result on the basis of analogy: overgeneralization of a rule in some linguistic formation which is not applicable. This can be vividly observed in the formation of plurals of French nouns. A learner of French who wrote 'les bateau<u>s</u>, les gâteau<u>s</u> and 'les animal<u>s</u>' over generalize the plural formation of nouns by adding's' without identifying them as exceptions. This manifests that efficient learning requires an overall identification and investigation of all the rules. Some errors occur in the sentence due to phonological features. Most often, French vowels which occur sequentially overlap each other in speech due to rapidity and in writing; vowels are omitted accordingly in relevant places.

Errors in the concord system of the determiners, verbs, adjectives and other adjectives and errors in the personal endings of verbs result from the differences between the two codes of the source language and the target language. This confusion over the use of the inherent features of gender can be identified in four main areas.

In the use of determiners
In the use of possessive adjectives
In the use of demonstrative adjectives
In the use of qualitative adjectives

Gender is an inherent feature in French nouns and except proper and some common nouns, all French nouns inherent either masculine or feminine gender including non-living things. Consequently all the other constituents such as verbs, types of adjectives and determiners are always inflected for gender and number of the relevant noun unlike in English. Therefore nouns in French can be identified as 'the dominant

figure' in an entire syntactic construction and the learner should possess a sound knowledge about the gender category of all the nouns. For instance, French possessive adjectives behave in a different way to those in English. In English, the choice of a possessive adjective is related not to any feature of the noun but to the sex of the person referred to. On the contrary, in French, the choice depends solely on the gender of the noun that they are modifying. The same phenomenon can be observed in definite and indefinite articles and demonstrative and qualitative adjectives where the relevant inflectional form (article or adjective) fitting to the gender of the noun should be used all the time. Choices to be made with different verbs are also very complicated. Some verbs are followed by prepositions such as 'to', 'of' and 'that' for which equivalences cannot be found in the target language as shown in the example. The same sort of transfer errors can be observed in the use of tenses too. For instance, the same inflected form of the verb can be observed in both Simple Present Tense and Present Continuous Tense in French whereas in English two such tenses exist. Therefore French learners tend to make lot of mistakes due this non-identification. They tend to insert auxiliaries such as 'est' (is) and 'sont' (are) where unnecessary. Most students commit errors in these areas due to this strangeness between the two languages. These errors are not a consequence of 'transfer' but the differences in the idiosyncratic features of the target language. The learners show difficulties in these areas since they are previously untried and novel rules. Yet sometimes a learner may grasp this novelty easily due to its uncomplicated nature.

In addition, this research manifests that the language ability of those who are well motivated and committed is in a higher level when compared to less motivated learners. Learners have an individual responsibility for their learning and the role of the learner depends on biological, emotional, social and instrumental factors related to personality and aptitude. Also in foreign language learning, the difficulty of learning depends mostly on the structure of the two languages. If the mother-tongue and the foreign language resemble to each other and if the other background conditions such as authentic materials,. a good teacher performance, aptitude and motivation are fulfilled, a learner easily learns a foreign language. Through the method of contrastive analysis of errors between the learner's L1 and L2, such areas of difficulty or simplicity can be easily identified.

## Conclusion

Learning a language is discovering a set of underlying patterns and alternatives to express something in a new code. In that shift, a learner is visibly affected by negative phenomenon such as transfer, overgeneralization, disordering and faulty categorization at

a certain stage in the course. In such cases, the solution lies not in giving tons of exercises, imitation drills and motivating 'parrot learning'. Also mere repetition of sentences tends to weaken understanding. Instead a methodology should be taught to provide appropriate syntactic rules and other relevant information (which can be sometimes comparative) after giving a precise understanding of the errors and the source of errors. A superficial description of error has only little explanatory value. Therefore the learner's attention should be drawn to the 'real fact' of such errors while giving an explicit analysis of correction. It would be effective to provide the learner with a reconstructed version of the erroneous construction. Thereby the learner may identify his point of contrasts or 'differences' and successfully overcome them in the course of time. This sort of analysis assists in the development of pedagogic strategies. Errors are a source of hypothesis formation about how the other language functions. Error analysis does not generate any negativity. In fact, errors are welcome signs which show learners are actively engaged in understanding a new code. Therefore, outcomes of analysis of this type of errors should be practically utilized in the field of foreign language learning to achieve better results.

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