Interlanguage, a learner's strategy
in Foreign Language acquisition
A Case Study

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Abstract:

The aim of the present study is to shed light on Algerian students' EFL writing strategies through a chosen method of investigation. It consists in an analytical study of a corpus of a written composition of 165 (93 girls and 72 boys) third form secondary school students. They are aged between 14 and 18 (foreign languages and literary streams) at Zaghloul Youcef secondary school, Oued-Lili, Tiaret, Algeria.

The study includes an analysis of students' errors in their interlanguage (Selinker 1972) performance in English writing.

Key words : interlanguage, language interference, fossilization, avoidance, error analysis

الملخص:

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على استراتيجيات الطلبة الجزائريين في الكتابة بالإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للتعرف على ما إذا كانت طريقة 'ما بين اللغات' تعود بالإيجاب أو السلب في تعلم الكتابة، من خلال إتباع طريقة التحقيق. وتتألف هذه الأخيرة من دراسة تحليلية لعينة محررة كتابيا من طرف 165 طالب (93 بنات و 72 بنين) بالسنة الثالثة ثانوي، تتراوح أعمارهم بين 14 و18 سنة من أقسام اللغات الأجنبية و الأدبية بثانوية زغلول يوسف، واد ليلي، تيارت، الجزائر.

كما تشمل الدراسة تحليلا لأخطاء الطلاب في 'المرحلية' (سيلنكر 1972) في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرحلية، التداخل اللغوي، التحجر، التجنب، تحليل الخطأ

1. Introduction:

The main objective of most of the English courses of the new syllabus designed to the three years of secondary education is to help learners improve their reading and writing skills so as to acquire certain competencies which would enable them to speak and write appropriately. Yet establishing one aim is one thing; having it realized is quite another. For our learners who neither study English at the primary level nor practise it outside school   [where a completely different variety of language is used, i.e., Algerian Arabic (AA)] , the task to learn this language might be very complicated. In spite of the initiatives and well-observed acts on the part of professionals in the domain of teaching, those learners are still unable to write without breaking the correct structure of the sentence. In their process of learning, they tend to use certain strategies proper to them. These strategies are referred to as 'interlanguage' which has, according to different linguists, a great impact on L2 acquisition. The objective of this paper is whether this interlanguage helps or hinders learners' progress in English language learning.

The hypothesis that one may put forth is that although learners' interlanguage can serve as a facilitator in some cases, it can, most of the time, stand as an impediment in the way of their correct acquisition of English.

To illustrate this hypothesis, students' errors are analyzed at the lexical and morpho-syntactic levels. The field research is based on observation and experiment. In case the research hypothesis is confirmed, it may allow for thinking up suitable methods for the best strategies learners might use to learn English.

2. Interlanguage as 'learner language'

'Interlanguage ' as mentioned by Ellis (2000: 33) was coined by the American linguist Selinker (1972) who claims that L2 learner who has not become fully proficient form a linguistic system based on L1, but which is different from it and also from L2. In other words, interlanguage is neither the system of the NL nor the system of the TL, but a system which falls between the two with its own grammar, and its own lexicon. The learner's system (interlanguage) changes as soon as he gains more knowledge and becomes more proficient in the language. For Ellis (ibid), a learner's interlanguage is

> **"a unique linguistic system in which the learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules which underlines comprehension and production of L2. This system of rules is viewed as a mental grammar." (ibid)**

The learner's grammar, according to Ellis may lead to the omission, overgeneralization and transfer errors, or to adding rules, deleting rules, and reconstructing the whole system of L2, i.e., the learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules which includes the comprehension and the production of L2. This unique linguistic system which the learner develops on his own manner is seen as evidence of his learning strategies.

The interlanguage rules are claimed to be shaped by several factors, including L1 negative transfer, strategies of L2 learning and communication, as well as overgeneralization of the TL patterns.

2.1. Language Interference / Negative Transfer

Lee says that:

> **"The prime cause, or ever the sole cause of difficulty and error in foreign language learning is interference coming from the learner's native language. (1968: 180)**

Language interference, also known as cross-linguistic interference or transfer, is based on the influence of the learner's L1 in the production of L2 as a result of the similarities and differences between the TL and the one previously acquired (Odlin 1989: 27). Learners, particularly in the first stages of L2 acquisition, usually transfer items and structures that are different in both languages. This may take place at the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels.

The most frequent elements shared among different languages to mark grammatical structure are word order, inflection (bound morphemes), derivation forms and other items with which sentences or utterances are structured in the learner's mind.

At any given point in the development of a learner's interlanguage, the learner tends to transfer the sentence forms, modification devices, the number, gender, and case patterns of his native language. Here are some examples of grammatical negative transfer learners of English at Zaghloul Youcef Secondary School very often make:

1) "The trousers the new" instead of "The new trousers". This sentence is derived from the AA [eserwe:l eʒdi:d]. In AA and CA the article is doubled on the qualifier of the noun (adjective) which is often placed after the noun. In English the adjective is usually used before the noun.

2) "Today the sea calm" instead of "today the sea is calm". The omission of the linking verb 'is' in the first sentence. The noun phrase existing in AA: [elju:m elbħar zi:n] or CA: [eljawma elbaħru dʒami:lun]

does not need a 'verb' to make a complete sense. In this case, the learner's sentence is implicitly taken from AA or CA.

3) " He's big than me." instead of "He's older than me." The AA [kbi:r] is 'big' in English, yet it does not provide the same sense as 'old'. There is also the absence of the inflection 'er' which marks comparison. This indicates that the speaker thinks in his mother tongue.

4) "I'm speaking, no!" instead of "Don't interrupt me!" This sentence has also its derivation from the AA [ra:ni nehdar la].

Other than learners' language negative transfer, there are some other strategies which represent their major source of error, especially in the early stages of learning. This might include the following:

2.2. Distribution

Linguists such as (Bloomfield, 1933; Lado, 1957: Fries, 1972) consider the 'word' as the basic unit of communication. They measure language learning by how much vocabulary has been memorized. They talk about words in isolation as parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. In most languages, each word has more than one meaning in different situations according to the context in which it occurs and its relationship with other words in the same sentence.

By distribution, it is meant the range of positions where words or any other units can occur. The distribution of words is the responsible of the change of sentence. In English, for example, a noun can change into a verb or adjective according to the position it takes in the sentence without a change in its form. In English the word 'room' which is a noun can have different meanings depending on the position it takes in the sentence. In the sentences:

a) He wants a double room.
b) Ask room 18 if they need coffee
c) More along and make room for me.

In sentence a) 'room' is a division of a building separated by walls. In b) it is referred to the people in one such division of a hotel or large office building. In c) it means space for occupying or moving in.

Lado (1957: 79) stresses the importance of the distribution of words because each language has its own habits of restrictions in distribution. The English word "water", for example can be used as a noun as in 'a glass of water', as a verb as in 'water the garden' and as a noun adjunct as in 'water meter'; however, in other languages this word might have only one usage, as the Arabic 'الماء' /al-maʔu/ and the Spanish word "agua" which are used only as nouns. Learners' incorrect use of word distribution can also be

added to those cases of interference which stand as a barrier to their L2 learning.

Here are some cases of lexical interference introduced by the same learners at Zaghloul School, Oued-Lili.

1) "My brother <u>reads</u> in the secondary school" (My brother studies at the secondary school). The word 'reads' is translated from the AA word [jeqra] in [χu:ja jeqra feli:si].

2) "I <u>have</u> 16." (I'm 16.) In AA one would say [ʕendi seṭa:ʕeʃ nʕa:m]. This means that the equivalent of the AA [ʕendi] is 'I have'. The learner, in this case has thought in AA and made a direct translation into English.

3) "Please, remember me of the score" instead of "Please, remind me of the score" The word 'remember' is an equivalent to [jataðakar]. In English 'remind' is not the same thing. It is 'to make someone remember'. Learners very often substitute 'remind' by 'remember' because they think it provides the same sense.

4) "She brought twins" instead of "She gave birth to twins". In the case it is apparent that the learner makes a word-for-word translation from AA to English. In AA this would provide [dʒa:bet etwe:m]

2.3. Avoidance:

Avoidance is a tendency for learners to avoid those aspects of production that they consider as a problem for them. This happens especially when certain features of L1 are different from those of L2. Thus, a learner very often tries to avoid a difficult word or structure and uses a simpler one instead. This phenomenon in L2 learning is termed 'avoidance behaviour' (Schachter 1974). Richards and Schmidt (2002: 44) give the example of the learner who is not sure of the use of the relative clause in English. Instead of using the relative pronoun 'where' in the complex sentence "That's the building where I live." He simply cuts this sentence in two simple sentences: "That's my building. I live there."

Avoidance behaviour has a direct influence on L2 performance. It may be employed at different levels: grammatical, lexical and phonological. Learners may leave out a necessary item so as not to run the risk of choosing the wrong one. Schachter (1974) in Robinett & Schachter (1986: 358-359) conducted a study on the number or errors made by some non-native speakers of English. The four language groups he chooses include Arab, Persian, Chinese and Japanese learners. The item under study is

'relative clause production'. The investigation reveals that Chinese and Japanese learners make less errors in the use of 'relative clauses' than do Persian and Arabic learners. Yet, this might be because the number of relative clauses they use is less than the ones used by Persian and Arabic learners. The difficulty they encounter as a result of the different manners the clauses are structured in both Chinese and Japanese makes them adopt avoidance strategies as a sole resort to avoid possible errors. Schachter puts the stress on this point by saying that

"It is plausible and I think correct to suppose that they produce fewer relative clauses in English because they are trying to avoid them, and that they only produce them in English when they are relatively sure that they are correct, which would also account for the extremely small number of errors they make. (1974: 359)

Accordingly, it is concluded that avoidance behaviour results from various causes related to the similarities and the differences between the L1 and L2.

2.4. Overuse:

Overuse or 'over-indulgence' (Levenston 1971) is one of the learning strategies used in L2 acquisition. The learner uses the forms he knows rather than tries out the ones he is not sure of. This strategy which may be concomitant with 'avoidance' includes 'overgeneralization type of intralingual processes. Ellis (2000: 305) mentions the learner's overgeneralization of the regular past tense inflection to the irregular verbs in L2 English as the case of "costed" instead of "cost". Overuse for him can also appear as a result of the learner's transfer from L1; very often a consequence of the avoidance or underproduction of some difficult structures.

2.5. Fossilization:

Fossilization is a term referred to a permanent obstruction of progress towards L2 acquisition. It is considered as a natural stage for many learners to go through despite all efforts for a better learning. It includes those items, rules and sub-systems that L2 learners retain in their interlanguage relative to a particular L2, regardless of the age of the learner and the kind of instructions and explanations he receives in the TL (Selinker 1972: 215).

The phenomenon of fossilization, following a period where learning takes place, is most saliently manifested phonologically, syntactically and lexically in the speech or writing of even those who have learnt an L2 quite well. For Selinker (Ibid: 212), the majority of L2 learners cannot overcome

interlanguage fossilization, i.e., the number of L2 learners who are considered to develop the different language skills in the same way as the natives do, is considered to be very small. This means that it is extremely rare for learners of L2 to achieve full native-like competence. Learners' errors seem to resist whatever the number of years spent in L2 learning. Learners may continue to make progress in certain areas of study, yet return again to the same errors. Many advanced learners of English, for instance, could communicate with great skills and make only a few errors; however, they still do not master the past perfect tense of the English verb, or do not know the difference between the gerund and the present participle…etc.

Some linguists argue that native-like performance in L2 is not possible at a certain level of proficiency, and fossilization phenomenon could be a result of a learning environment that is far from being suitable for the conditions needed to the learning process.

3. Field Work
3.1. Corpus, Situation, Participants and Data Collection

Based on a corpus of a written composition of 165 (93 girls and 72 boys) third form secondary school students, aged between 14 and 18 (foreign languages and literary streams), the research will provide a description of different errors in their interlanguage performance, and construct an account of the interlanguage competence of Algerian learners of English in Zaghloul School, Oued Lili, Tiaret. In the process, 24 informants out of the total number could not achieve the task. Thus, 143 was the number considered in the study.

The written topic has been selected by the four teachers of the same school, and all the informants are unanimously required to write around 200 words about their aim to study English. The topic is 'Why do you like to study English?' The pupils' errors are underlined and corrected and their written productions are marked under a definite scale.

3.2. Data Analysis

The pupils who participate in the study are categorized into four levels: A, B, C, D, according to the marks they have got in the test (see table 1); hence, only 77 papers are taken into account.

level	Range of marks	Number of pupils	Percentage	Number of errors	Percentage

A	50 - 60	03	02.9 %	17	12.87 %
B	40 - 49	27	18.88 %	26	19.69 %
C	30 – 39	30	20.97 %	37	28.03 %
D	20 - 29	17	11.88 %	52	39.39 %
Total		**77**	**54.63 %**	**132**	**99.98 %**

Table 01: Classification of learners' marks in the written composition

Learners' marks mentioned for the three levels (A to D) indicate that 54.63 % of the learners have got over the average. This means that learners, mainly in the A and B categories, make the least number of errors in terms of language form and content.

It is worth mentioning that learners' developmental errors are not considered in the study. Only those errors resulting from learners' interlanguage are examined and arranged into four types: L1 interference, avoidance, overuse, and fossilization (see table2). Each of these types is subdivided into subtypes according to the sources of these errors.

Type of Inter-language Errors	Number of errors	Kinds of errors	percentage
interference	18	L1 transfer	23.37 %
avoidance	20	omission of language items	25.97 %
overuse	27	tense inflection misuse	35.06 %
fossilization	12	misuse of parts of speech	15.58 %
Total	**77**		**99.98 %**

Table 02: Classification of Learners' Errors

3.3. Discussing the Findings:

a) Learners' negative transfer from L1 (Arabic) is in term of both lexis and grammar. Most of the 18 errors (23.37 %) of the total errors spotted during the correction of learners' written papers are found in sentences such as:

1- 'English a world language' from the Arabic /ʔal-ʔɪndʒlɪːzijatu luɣatun ʕæːlamijatun/ (omission of verb 'to be').

2- 'I make my best to study English /ʔaʕmalu ma: fi: wusʕı lıdıra:şatı ʔal-ʔındʒlı:zıjatı/, instead of 'I do my best to study English'

3- 'The pupils learn English for reasons many /ʔatala:mi:ðu jadruşu:n ʔal-ʔındʒlı:zıjatı lı

asba:bın ʔadı:datın/ , instead of 'The pupils learn English for many reasons'

4-'All we like to know other language'/dʒam ı:ʕan nurı:du ʔan naʕrıfa luɣatun ʔuχra/, instead of 'We all like to know another language'

5-'It brings good results' /taʔtı bı nætæ:ʔIdʒ dʒajıda/, instead of 'It brings about good results'

6- ' It easy communication with people who speak English' /tusahIl ʔaʔItIşa:l bı ʔal-ʔaʃχa:ş ʔalaðı:na jatahadaθu:na ʔal-ʔındʒlı:zıjatI/

7- 'English is good equipped' / ʔal-ʔındʒlı:zıjatı/ mutazawida dʒajidan/, instead of 'English is well equipped'

b) Concerning learners' avoidance behaviour, 25.97 % of the deviations they make are due to their difficult use of words or sentence structures, especially because of the dissimilarities existing between Arabic and English. Because they ignore the English grammatical items in question, they seek for simpler words or structures instead. This leads to the omission of some necessary language items. The following examples illustrate learners' deficiencies in using English conjunctive adverbs and relative pronouns in their productions:

1- 'I study English hard. I want to acquire this language' Instead of:
   'I study English hard so as to / in order to acquire this language.'

2- 'English is used in all parts of the world and it is an international language.'
   Instead of:
   'English is an international language; therefore, it is used in all parts of the world.'

3- 'I use many books. They are useful for learning English.' Instead of
   'I use many books which are useful for learning English.'

4- 'One should go to England. He can learn to speak English there.'
   Instead of
   'One should go to English where he can learn to speak English.

c) Learners' overuse is summed up in learners' misuse of tense inflection. 35.06 % of their erroneous sentences are in terms of inflectional and derivational morphemes. This includes verb tense concordance, nouns and adjectives, and can be illustrated as follows:

1) 'they do not learning…' instead of 'they do not learn'
2) 'students can want to…' instead of 'students want to…'
3) 'worser than' instead of ' worse than'
4) 'it is more requiring than to…' instead of 'it is more required to…'
5) 'it is really really a good method…' instead of 'it is really a good method'

d) In the case of learners' fossilization, the study shows that 15.58 % of them fossilize. Some examples of fossilization include the following:

In syntax: misuse of some language items:

1- 'I no understand English good' instead of 'I do not understand English well'
2- 'They not speak only Arabic, but also English' instead of 'They not only speak Arabic, but also English.

In morphology: word- inflection missing:

3- 'She dance' instead of 'she dance<u>s</u>'
4- 'they always going…' instead of 'they always go…'

4. Implications of the study

This research paper may serve as a basis for issues related to EFL teaching in Algeria. It is assumed that interlanguage has a debilitating effect on learners' advance in L2 acquisition. The study findings show that when learners are encountered with certain complexities of L2, they negatively transfer, overgeneralize, avoid, fossilize, and simplify as easy ways to learn; yet these behaviours will obviously reduce their ability and hamper spontaneity of their reading and writing. Thus, all practitioners in the field of EFL teaching should think seriously for the possible remedial measures to infer the nature of learners' interlanguage at a given stage in their learning and discover what they still have to learn. Teachers' correction should be based on the classification of errors first. The distinction between those errors will lead them to draw a picture on learners' competence and their performance errors, understand their learners' different strategies, diagnose the effectiveness of their teaching material, their teaching techniques, and what part of syllabus is adequately taught and what needs a further study focus.

5. Conclusion:

Errors in foreign language learning, especially in English are the cases which are

difficult to avoid. Along with other grammatical and lexical errors learners make as a result of their ignorance of the rules of the TL, the mother tongue

interlanguage interference is still one of the main causes of error in FLL. Some of other aspects of interlanguage strategies which also represent learners' source of errors are avoidance, overuse and fossilization. These strategies, as shown in the work above, have a negative influence on L2. The attempt to identify and determine the kind of incident, nature, cause and consequence of these errors is led by means of empirical evidence through the error analysis approach. This is for a better understanding of the process of FL acquisition, and for the possible remedial measures necessary to improve L2 learning.

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