

Error Analysis

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Abstract

In language learning, mistakes and errors have been inevitably produced. Learners make errors in the process of constructing a new system of the language they are acquiring. Thus, learners' errors have long interested many researchers in the field of second language acquisition (Corder, 1981; Ellis, 2008). This paper presents major approaches used in studies on native language interference (also known as language transfer, L1 interference, and linguistic interference) as well as various aspects of error analysis including definitions of errors, their significance in language teaching and learning, classification of errors, causes of errors, and previous studies on error analysis.

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Introduction

Errors have long been the obsession of language instructors and researchers. Before Corder (1967), errors were looked at as a problem that should be eradicated. However, errors are now considered as a device that learners use and from which they can learn (Corder, 1967); they provide evidence of the learner's level in the target language (Gass and Selinker, 1983); they contain valuable information on the learning strategies of learners (AbiSamra, 2003; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975); and they also supply means by which teachers can assess learning and teaching and determine priorities for future effort (Richards and Sampson, 1974). Conducting error analysis is therefore one of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of analysis can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are revealed, it is possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions.

Approaches Used in Studies on L1 Interference

It is essential to study the characteristics of the language errors, the pattern of the common errors, and the situation involved in the errors to help analyze errors systematically, as well as to understand and find the causes of such errors. Moreover, the study of error analysis will improve the process of second language learning and develop more information for developing the second language acquisition theory.

In this study, four approaches relating to L1 interference are described: contrastive analysis, error analysis, analysis of interlanguage, and contrastive rhetoric. The relationships among the four approaches are shown and explained in the Figure 1.

According to Figure 1, studies on L1 interference in second language acquisition have been developed from the traditional approach (Contrastive Analysis) to the contemporary approaches (Error Analysis and Interlanguage Analysis) and the modern approach (Contrastive Rhetoric). Each approach is discussed below.

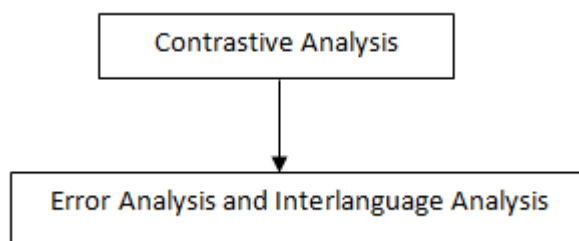


Figure 1 The relationship among approaches used in studies on L1 interference

Contrastive Analysis (CA), the primary approach used to study L1 interference, was developed and practiced in the 1950s and 1960s by American linguist Robert Lado as an application of structural linguistics to language teaching. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), and Fang and Xue-mei (2007, p.10), CA focuses on the scientific, structural comparison of the linguistic systems of the two languages, especially the sound and grammar systems of L1 and L2, to predict and describe second language instruction problems as well as to find solutions to those problems. A more effective pedagogy was believed to result when the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 were taken into account (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p.52). CA is based on the following assumptions: (i) the main difficulties in learning a new language are caused by interference from the first language or ‘language transfer’, (ii) such difficulties can be identified by contrastive analysis, and (iii) teaching materials can make use of contrastive analysis to eliminate the interference effects. Contrastive Analysis emphasizes the native language as the main factor affecting second language learners’ errors and the principal barrier to second language acquisition. An error is believed to occur when learners could not respond correctly to a particular stimulus in the second language and serve as a negative stimulus reinforcing “bad habits”; thus, it should not be allowed to occur. In the classroom teaching, therefore, more emphasis is placed on mechanical pattern drills and an attempt to correct any errors or mistakes.

In the 1960s, Error Analysis (EA) was developed and offered as an alternative to Contrastive Analysis. It suggests that the influence of the native language on second language is more complex; second language learners’ errors are caused by many complex factors affecting the learning process such as the target language itself, the communicative strategies used as well as the type and quality of second language instruction (Hashim, 1999).

Thus, different types of errors were classified by Richards (1974), and Richards and Schmidt (2002) for an analysis as follows: (i) overgeneralizations are errors caused by extension of target language rules to inappropriate contexts, (ii) simplifications are errors resulting from learners producing simpler linguistic rules than those found in the target language, (iii) developmental errors reflect natural stages of development, (iv) communication-based errors result from the use of communication strategies, (v) induced errors result from transfer of training, (vi) avoidance is caused by failure to use target language structures since they are thought to be too difficult, and (vii) overproduction errors are structures being used too frequently.

By the late 1970s, because of the weaknesses of previously proposed theories which overemphasized the interference of the outer environment of language study while totally neglecting the language learners themselves, error analysis had largely been superseded by studies of interlanguage and second language acquisition. Interlanguage, a term adopted by Selinker (1972) from “interlingual,” is conceptualized as “a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language” (Brown, 1994, p.203). A number of terms have been coined to describe the perspective which stressed the legitimacy of learners’ second language system. While Corder (1971) presented the notion of the “idiosyncratic dialect” or “language learners’ language” (1978), Nemser (1971, 1974) referred to it as the “approximative system.” While each of these designations emphasizes a particular notion, they share the concept that second language learners who are in the process of learning a target language are forming their own self-contained independent linguistic systems (Fang and Xue-mei, 2007, p.11). Therefore, the concept of interlanguage (IL) might be better understood if it is thought of as a continuum between the L1 and L2 along which all learners traverse. Interlanguage analysis concerns an analysis of the linguistic systems of L1 and L2 in relation to the transitional competence of second language learners. It also involves an analysis of the continuum systems of second language learners’ linguistic development (Connor, 1999).

The most important feature of interlanguage, according to Fang and Xue-mei (2007, p. 11), is that it has its own legitimate system where learners are no longer looked on as producers of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes, but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition creatively acting upon their linguistic environment. The second feature is that this system is dynamic and it is based on the best attempt of learners to

produce order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. Finally, it is a linguistic system which reflects the psychological process of learning and the psychological process of foreign language learning. As a result, analyzing the interlanguage system requires an understanding that in learning a target language, learner language is influenced by different processes such as i) borrowing patterns from the native language, ii) extending patterns from the target language, e.g. analogy, and iii) expressing meanings using the words and grammar which are already known (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

Contrastive analysis, error analysis and interlanguage analysis stress the structuralist tradition of linguistic study regarding phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics, to improve second and foreign language instruction. Contrastive analysis goes on negative effects of the native language on the second language. Though error and interlanguage analysis goes beyond the native language as the vital cause of errors, the native language is still considered a negative influence by many previous researchers. By the late 1960s, Krashen's monitor model (1977) suggested that the native language does not necessarily have a negative effect on second language influence. This model moves the study of language transfer and errors or 'deviation' to 'the positive transfer'. It looks at the similarities of the native and second language features and the extent of the native language support to learning second language. This leads to the study of 'Contrastive Rhetoric' in the 1990s as "a means of enhancing the awareness of the background and culture of the native language and its effects on the native language writing produced" (Hashim, 1999).

Error Analysis

1. Definition of errors

Many attempts to categorize deviance, or any form that deviates from the desired target language form, concentrate mainly on Chomsky's (1965) differentiation between 'competence' and 'performance.' Mistakes are "errors of performance" or performance errors that have varying degrees of seriousness (Bell, 1981) and are either a random guess or a "slip," in that they are due to a "failure to utilise a known system correctly" (Brown, 1994, p. 205). They are considered performance-related deviances which can occur as a result of factors external to the competence of the speaker, such as tiredness or lack of concentration (Corder, 1967, 1971). Mistakes are neither systematic and nor significant to the process of language learning.

Errors, on the other hand, are deviances caused by a lack of competence and “a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker” (Brown, 1994, p. 205). Errors can be differentiated from mistakes in the way that errors are systematic in nature being “errors of competence” which occur in the continuum of the learning process. They are the result of learners’ transitional competence and are not self-correctable.

Like Corder, Norrish (1983, p. 7), defined “an error” as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently “get(s) it wrong.” Edge (1989) defined errors as forms that language users cannot correct by themselves even though they have been taught. James (1998, p.1) also identified a language error as an unsuccessful bit of language. He adds that language learners cannot correct their errors until they have additional knowledge on the topic. These errors occur in the course of the learner’s study because they haven’t acquired enough knowledge. Once they acquire additional knowledge, they will be able to correct their errors and the more errors the learners correct, the more conscious of language they will become. Moreover, it was pointed out that error is unique to humans, and error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language.

2. Significance of errors in language teaching and learning

According to Corder (1983), learners’ errors provide invaluable evidence of the system of the language they are using (i.e., have learned) at a particular point in the course. According to Corder (1981, p. 35), “studying the errors made by learners of a second language needs no justification. It is something which teachers have always done for purely practical reasons.” Errors are significant in three different ways (Corder, 1967, 1983). First, errors tell teachers how far toward the goal learners have progressed and consequently, what remains for learners to learn. Second, errors provide researchers with evidence on how language is learnt or acquired, what strategies or procedures learners are employing in their discovery of the language (Corder, 1967). Thirdly, errors are indispensable to learners themselves because errors can be regarded as a device learners use in order to learn. The making of errors is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language. Errors can be accepted as a kind of learning activity in learners.

In the article, “Describing the Language Learner’s Language” (1972), Corder distinguished remedial error analysis from developmental error analysis. The former type of EA facilitates teacher evaluation and correction; the latter describes the successive transitional dialects of a language learner. Richards (1983) concluded that teaching techniques and procedures should take account of the structural and developmental conflicts that can come about in language learning.

Hendrickson (1987, p. 357) also stated, “Errors are signals that actual learning is taking place, they can indicate students’ progress and success in language learning.” According to Brown (1994) and Littlewood (1998), language learners’ errors come from systematic and non-systematic sources. Systematic sources contain interlingual errors of interference from the native language and intralingual errors within the target language. Non-systematic sources contain the sociolinguistic context of communication, psycholinguistic cognitive strategies and countless affective variables.

According to Ellis (1995, pp. 51-54), the most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide. Thus, errors are no longer seen as “unwanted forms,” but as evidence of learners’ active contribution to second language acquisition.

3. Classification of errors

The classification of errors into categories is an important step in conducting an error analysis. Various classifications of errors have been proposed.

James (1998, pp. 104-113) and Tono (2003, p. 804) study error taxonomies and classified errors into two types:

3.1 Linguistic category classification

This type of taxonomy specifies errors in terms of linguistic categories and in terms of where the error is located in the overall system of the target language. First, it indicates at what level of language the error is located: in phonology, grammar, lexis, text or discourse and if it is at grammar level, what particular grammatical construction does it involve? Some possibilities they list are: the auxiliary system and passive sentence complements. Having established the level of the error, one next asks about its class. Given that it is a grammar error, does it involve the class of a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, or determiner? Which leads to the assignment of a rank to the error, in terms of where it lies on the hierarchy of

units that constitute its level? Finally, we need to specify the grammatical system that the error affects such as tense, number, voice, countability, transitivity.

3.2 The surface structure taxonomy

This is the second type of descriptive taxonomy first proposed by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982). Many researchers (e.g., Dulay et al., 1982; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; James, 1998; Kaeoluan, 2009) describe this taxonomy as being based on how learners alter surface structures of the language when they use it incorrectly. Errors can occur because of change in surface structure in specific and systematic ways (Dulay et al., 1982, p. 150). Based on this taxonomy, there are four ways in which learners “modify” target forms in specific and systematic ways:

1) Omission

Learners in the early stages of learning tend to omit function words rather than content words. More advanced learners tend to be aware of their ignorance of content words and rather than omit one, they resort to compensatory strategies to express their idea (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997). For example, “be” is left out in the sentence “My sisters very pretty.”

2) Addition

This manifestation of error, according to Dulay, Burt and Krashen, is the ‘result of all-too-faithful use of certain rules’ (1982, p.156) and they suggest there are subtypes.

2.1) Regularization, which involves overlooking exceptions and spreading rules to domains where they do not apply, for example producing the incorrect “buyed” for “bought” or “eated” for “ate.”

2.2) Double marking, defined as ‘failure to delete certain items which are required in some linguistic constructions but not in others’. Here is an example: “He doesn’t knows me.” or “He didn’t came.”

2.3) Simple additions, i.e. additions not recognized as regularization or double marking, e.g. “I do see you,” which could be a non-native error or a native speaker use of emphasis, depending on the context.

3) Misinformation

Dulay et al. (1982) define misinformation as use of the wrong form of a structure or morpheme, including the sub-categories of:

- 3.1) Regularization (e.g. “Do they be happy?”)
- 3.2) Archi-forms (i.e. use of “me” as both subject and object pronouns)
- 3.3) Alternating forms (e.g. No + verb and Don’t + verb)

4) Misordering

This category is relatively uncontroversial. The learners can select the right forms to use in the right context, but they arrange them in the wrong order, for instance, adverbials, interrogatives and adjectives, yielding errors as in:

*He every time come late home.

*Tell me where did you go.

*The words little

As Dulay et al. (1982) observe, misordering is often the result of learners relying on carrying out ‘word for word translations of native language surface structure’ (1982, p.162) when producing written or spoken utterances in the TL.

According to James (1998), errors are classified into five patterns as follows:

- omission
- over inclusion
- misselection or using wrong words not wrong forms
- misordering
- blends: Blending arises when two alternative grammatical forms are combined to produce an ungrammatical blend.

4. Causes of errors

Language errors as identified by Norrish (1983, p.21-42) arise from carelessness, interference from the learners’ first language, translation from the first language, contrastive analysis, general order of difficulty, overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, material-induced errors and a part of language creativity.

In writing, learners easily make errors because information has to be transmitted without any aid from sources other than the language itself. However, there is a danger that the language learner will tend to focus on the errors rather than on the presumed aim of the piece of writing: communication (Norris, 1983, p. 65).

Richards (1974) classified sources of competence errors into two categories: (1) interlingual errors caused by the mother tongue interference, and (2) intralingual and developmental errors occurring during the learning process of the second language at a stage when they haven't really acquired the knowledge. Almost 90% of errors are said to be intralingual errors (Dulay and Burt, 1974).

James (1998) states that there are four causes of errors: interlingual errors, intralingual errors, communication strategy-based errors, and induced errors.

4.1 Interlingual errors (Mother-tongue influence). These kinds of errors are influenced by the native languages which interfere with target language learning. It is seen as a process in which learners use their knowledge of the first language in learning a second language. Learners translate word by word idiomatic expressions, vocabulary and even the grammatical rules of the learners' first language into the second language. In contrastive analysis, it is believed that the type of errors made by the learners of the target language can be predicted and their causes can be determined. In order to prevent and eliminate these errors, Richards (1974) has given the following figures: Between 3-25 per cent of all errors are errors of mother tongue influence and 75 per cent of errors are 'non-contrastive' errors.

4.2 Intralingual errors: These types of error are caused by the target language (TL) itself. Apart from recourse to L1 transfer, the learners in ignorance of a TL form on any level and any class can do either of two things: either they can set about learning the needed item, engaging their learning strategies, or they can try to fill the gap by resorting to communication strategies. Learning strategies are used for code breaking while communication strategies are encoding and decoding strategies. Both types of strategy can be the source of error.

Errors caused by learning strategies include:

1) False analogy: Learners assume that the new item B behaves like A: they know that “boy” (A) has its plural “boys” and assume that “child” (B) behaves likewise, so pluralizes to “*childs.”

2) Misanalysis: Learners form a wrong hypothesis. An example of this strategy occurs in: they are carnivorous plants and *its (ü their) name comes from. The false concept in operation here is that it is the s pluralized form of it. A false concept is the result of the learners misanalysing the TL.

3) Incomplete rule application: This is the converse of overgeneralization or one might call it undergeneralization as the learners do not use all the rules. They change or decrease the complicated rules to simpler rules as they aim at simplification rather than attempt to get the whole complex structure. An example is seen in the deviant order of subject and verb ‘be’ in: Nobody knew where* was Barbie (ü Barbie was). The learners have applied only two components of the interrogative formation rule: they have selected and fronted a wh-element (rule components 1 and 2), but have omitted to invert the subject and verb.

4) Exploiting redundancy: This error occurs by carrying considerable redundancy. This is shown throughout the system in the form of unnecessary morphology and double signalling.

5) Overlooking co-occurrence restrictions: This error is caused by overlooking the exceptional rules. An example of this is I would enjoy *to learn (ü learning) about America caused by ignorance of the fact that the verb enjoy should be followed by a gerund complement.

6) Hypercorrection (monitor overuse): This results from the learners’ over cautious and strict observance of the rules. One might say that the learners’ deliberate suppression of a potential L1 transfer, for fear of being wrong, is another form of hypercorrection: an example of this is the seventeen year*s old girl.

7) Overgeneralization or system-simplification: This error is caused by the misuse of words or grammatical rules. An example is the generalization of the relative pronoun that as in:

Bill, *that had a great sense of unconventional morality...

The learners use that to the exclusion of who which cannot be used here.

4.3 Communication strategy-based errors

1) Holistic strategies or approximation: The term 'holistic' refers to the learners' assumption that if you can say X in the L2, then you must be able to say Y. Lacking the required form, it must be all right to use another near-equivalent L2 item which they have learnt. It takes on a number of forms, the first of which is to use a synonym; The second is to use an antonym or opposite: not happy for ü sad. The third is to coin a word. Until you be unconscious to lose your *sensities. (senses)

2) Analytic strategies or circumlocution: Analytic strategies express the concept indirectly, by allusion rather than by direct reference. This kind of error comes from the students' experience. James (1994) finds that the learners in the classroom used the L1 transfer strategy much more than the acquirers. (Acquirers are people who are self-directed learning, such as a taxi driver, a foreigner's housekeeper.)

4.4 Induced Errors: These errors are the result of being misled by the way in which the teachers give definitions, examples, explanations and arrange practice opportunities. In other words, the errors are caused mostly by the teaching and learning process as follows:

1) Materials-induced errors: Teaching materials with errors will make the learners confused, and they will make similar errors again and again.

2) Teacher-talk induced errors: This kind of error might be caused by both native or non-native teachers if they do not provide models of the standard TL in class.

3) Exercise-based induced errors: The learners make errors while doing exercises on sentence combining, for example, the teacher feeds to the learners the raw ingredients: simple sentences that the learners must combine. Conditionals linked by if or unless are examples:

I can't afford a new car combined with I shall win the lottery.

should yield

I can't afford a new car unless I win the lottery.

but will also yield at times from at least one learner forms like

*Unless I can afford a new car I shall win the lottery.

The likelihood is especially great when the students have been told that unless is equivalent to if...not, which will suggest to them the possibility of replacing the negative element in can't with unless.

4) Errors induced by pedagogical priorities: Learners' achievement tends to match other teacher expectations of what they will achieve. Some teachers choose to prioritize one of the following: accuracy, fluency or the idiomatic in teaching communication, thus if fluency is considered as superior, accuracy would have lower priority or vice versa.

5) Look-up errors: There have been many learners' dictionaries and grammar books in recent years, and these publications usually come with useful guidelines on how to look up aspects of the L2 about which one is in doubt. But, strangely, learners do not like to read such user-instruction, and as a result they frequently misuse these reference aids. In addition, the learners sometimes use the new words from the dictionary inaccurately or get incorrect references from the grammar books.

5. Studies on error analysis

There are many studies on error analysis because error analysis helps to improve the teaching and learning process. If learners' errors and the causes of those errors are identified, errors can be corrected, though not all. Moreover, error analysis helps direct the focus of the teaching and learning process.

Newmark and Reibel (1968) proposed another approach to ignorance hypothesis which emphasizes avoidance strategy. This same idea that learners who avoid using certain structures and have no errors in those errors may not know how to use those structures was supported by Duskova (1969).

Michaeldes (1990) analyzed and put errors into eight domains according to importance and frequency, such as wrong order of words, wrong tense, wrong use of articles and prepositions.

Cumming and Mellow (1990) studied errors at the grammatical morpheme level and found that they could indicate second language learning ability.

Polio (1997) studied second language writing, and error free writing, the use of the holistic scale, T-units and numbers of errors as criteria and finds that counting error numbers may be better for homogeneous population.

Olsen (1999, pp. 191-205) carried out research in English written by Norwegian EFL learners. Language problems on different linguistic levels were analyzed and the theory of compensatory strategies was used. The results showed that less proficient learners had a higher number of grammatical, orthographic and syntactic errors, which can be attributed to cross-linguistic influence.

Connell (2000, pp. 95-103) analyzed the kinds of errors Japanese students made on tests which required full, written sentences to get the results for constructing a suitable syllabus. Each error was analyzed on how it affected the understanding of the sentence in which it was used. The results showed that the use of subject in a sentence, the parts of speech and general word order created more problems than other grammatical aspects.

In Thai context, Angwatanakul (1980) finds that the most frequent errors of Thai learners are verb forms, articles and prepositions. Pastor (1986) finds that most common interlingual errors are using the present simple tense in the place of the past simple tense, using the wrong verb form after modal, no inversion of auxiliary verb in questions, and using the wrong subject verb agreement.

Rujikiatkumjorn and Chiewkul (1989) analyzed errors of students at Khon Kaen University to find frequent errors made by students from each faculty and discovered that there is a dependency between errors and each faculty.

Thananart (2000, pp. 88-101) examined errors in comparison and contrast paragraphs written by EFL university students at Chulalongkorn University. The vast majority of errors were grammatical structure (73.86%), and the other types of errors were errors in using transition signals (10.01%), verb forms (7.68%), word choice (6.90%), and spelling (1.55%).

Sereebenjapol (2003, p. iv) conducted a study to analyze the main types and frequency of errors occurring in the discussion sections of scientific theses published in 2000 at Mahidol University, and to determine the probable causes of those errors. The most frequent errors occurred in the categories of syntax, lexis, morphology and orthography respectively. The most frequent local errors were the use of subordinators and conjunctions. One error could be traced to various causes depending on interpretation and the linguistic background. The probable causes could be carelessness, incomplete application of rules, and differences between English and Thai.

Thep-Ackrapong (2005) identified passive voice as one of the major conceptual discrepancies between Thai and English contributing to a large number of errors produced by the Thai students as well as problems involved in the teaching of English to Thais. This is because the English passive voice is characterized by its syntactic structure, by the verb 'be' and the 'past participle' as in "The room is cleaned every day." However, passive voice in Thai can be interpreted by its contextual clues such as "Pad Thai, put egg and lunch box." (Meaning put an egg in pad Thai, a Thai dish, then put the pad Thai in the lunch box.) As a result, Thai students produce errors concerning in the passive voice in their English sentences such as "She was continuously taken the photos."

Sattayatham and Honsa (2007, pp. 170-194) carried out a research study to identify the most frequent errors of first-year medical students at Mahidol University. The students were required to translate from Thai into English at the sentence level and the paragraph level. The results showed that the most frequent errors were at the syntactic and lexical levels which led to the overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, and building of false concepts. Mother-tongue interference was detected as major cause of errors. However, some linguistic items, such as articles, tense, and verb forms appeared to be the source of frequent errors.

Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008, pp. 17-38) studied the types of errors of first-year medical students from four medical schools at Mahidol University. They were assigned to write an opinion paragraph in English on medical ethics based on a reading passage chosen from the Internet. It was shown that most students had errors in standard format of paragraph writing. The top four criteria (or causes) of errors were: no transitional words, lack of organization, no introduction, and no conclusion. Moreover, most students also had difficulty in using English grammar.

Simargool (2008) studied passive construction produced by third-year students at Chulalongkorn University. Passive sentences were analysed and divided into five groups: well-formed passives, malformed passives, actives, possible pseudo-passives, and other constructions. Unexpectedly, only a small number of interlanguage pseudo-passives have emerged in the data. Instead, most problematic passives concerned malformed past participles. One of the main reasons was said to be the language proficiency of the Thai subjects.

Conclusion

As it can be argued that the analysis of errors mainly focuses only on the negative aspects of a learner language, there are certain patterns or tendencies that are evident. With research, and/or observation, the teacher can exploit these negative aspects to the advantage of their learners. Error analysis can, therefore, benefit the teachers, lesson planners, as well as materials developers in the lesson or material preparation and instruction. They should be aware of the errors the students are likely to make and thus put an emphasis on the areas that can be problematic for the students.

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