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**LANGUAGE TRANSFER AS A LEARNING STRATEGY:  
A CASE STUDY IN INTERLANGUAGE**

Ibrahima Ba

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14 OCT 1992

To  
My wife,  
my children  
and Rane

## Abstract

This study is an attempt to show that language transfer is a notion which is still relevant in a theory of language learning, at least in a formal multilingual educational setting.

The first chapter, which is the background against which the problem of language transfer is perceived, deals mainly with the different views of errors from contrastive analysis to error analysis.

The second chapter deals with the methodology used for the collection of data, the data themselves, the subjects and the setting.

And finally, in the last chapter, the problems linked with a theory of language learning seen from the learner's standpoint are studied. The advantages the teacher can show from a knowledge of interlanguage theory are briefly examined too in the last part.

Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements	(v)
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 General	1
1.2 A justification of mother tongue transfer	2
1.3 Contrastive analysis	4
1.4 Error analysis	6
1.5 Interlanguage	9
1.6 Language transfer again	12
1.7 Aim and scope	13
<b>2. Methodology and Analysis</b>	
2.1 Methodology	15
2.1.1 Data	15
2.1.2 Subject	16
2.1.3 Setting	16
2.2 Analysis	17
2.2.1 Phonological	18
2.2.2 Morphological	19
2.2.3 Syntactic	21
2.2.4 Lexical	23
2.2.5 Translation	25
<b>3. Discussion and Conclusion</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1 Discussion	27
3.1.1 French versus Wolof	27
3.2 Problems	33
3.2.1 Lack of an adequate theory	33
3.2.2 Problems peculiar to language transfer	34
3.2.3 The role of the setting	36
3.2.4 Overlapping between the different strategies	37
3.3 A few practical considerations	38
3.4 Conclusion	41
 Bibliography	 43

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## Chapter One

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 General

Applied linguistics like linguistics is 'in a state of flux and agitation'. The wind of change which is sweeping throughout the scientific study of language is carrying new ideas and bringing back ideas which were thought to be dead. This constant agitation is noticeable in all the fields of linguistics. Not that it is only a phenomenon of contamination, i.e. that one change in one field can influence another, but rather linguists are all the time questioning their findings and theories.

The way errors have been tackled is a concrete sign of this 'flux and agitation'. Psychology has influenced language teaching to a certain extent and in particular in its methodology. Some methodologists thought that language was no more than a behaviour and should be dealt with as such. Therefore to teach language successfully errors must be minimized as much as possible. Errors were considered as something which prevented successful learning and drills were conceived in such a way that pupils were to produce correct utterances only.

This view of errors obliged syllabus designers to devise textbooks based on the contrastive analysis of the mother tongue of the learners and the target language. It was believed that mother tongue transfer was very common in language learning and that most errors were due to



differences in the two languages. Thus by analysing the differences, it was thought, people could predict the kinds of errors which could be made by the learners. Syllabuses were therefore designed according to the elements of language which were supposed to be at the source of errors, namely those which presented a great difference in the two languages. And some aspects of the target language were neglected because of their similarity with the learners' mother tongue.

However, future research both in the psychology of language learning and applied linguistics showed that the claim made by behaviourists and contrastive analysts was too strong and that errors are not only unavoidable but necessary in language learning. Learning as described by the behaviourists was supposed to be the same for all human beings. It is true that human beings possess the capacity to acquire language. However, contrary to what the behaviourists believed, as long as there is exposure to a language, acquisition can take place and this without repetition. This new view in language acquisition showed that the repetition or the production of a correct utterance does not mean that the rule of the language is known and that an error may be the indication that the learner is devising a system which will enable him to find the rule. Thus errors were approached in a new and more productive way.

### **1.2 A justification of mother tongue transfer**

A non-Wolof will never be able to understand this sentence written by a pupil in his 'BEPC' exams: 'Lend me my house'. This utterance is taken from a dialogue between a father and his son, it is produced by



the former. It is an extreme case when the learner is translating literally, word for word, his mother tongue into the target language.

In Wolof, the word, 'abal' may mean lend, for example in 'abal ma sa teere', 'lend me your book'. But it may mean, 'go away', 'get out', as in 'abal ma sa ma kër', which is what the learner wanted to say. However, the learner, not knowing what a native speaker of English would have said in that context, translated directly the phrase he knew in his mother tongue. The very choice of this phrase, which is more idiomatic, instead of 'genal sa ma kër', which is the literal translation of 'get out of my house', shows that the learner has transferred an idiom from his mother tongue to the target language. This example, though 'extreme', is an evidence that transfer does happen in language learning.

However, more conspicuous cases of language transfer appear at the phonological level. Many Africans cannot pronounce correctly the alveolar fricatives /ð/ and /θ/, they substitute them with the closest sounds in their system, either /d/ or /z/ for /ð/ or /f/ or /s/ for /θ/. This phonological transfer is observed in any contest where the learning of a foreign language is taking place. This is justified by the fact that, to paraphrase Trubetzkoy, the system of the mother is acting as a sieve through which everything passes.

Contrastive analysts, realizing this transfer, decided to contrast all the elements of any two languages which were going to be a target language and a source language.

### 1.3 Contrastive analysis

According to Lado,

individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture...

(Lado, 1957:2)

This assumption shows the necessity to predict errors as the tendency to transfer was there. Lado, quoting Fries, says that

the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully composed with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

(Lado, 1957:1)

Contrastive analysis therefore will show the differences and similarities of the two languages under study. The amount of differences will show whether the learners will have great difficulties in learning the foreign language or not. It is believed that the more the two languages are alike, the easier it will be to learn the target language. Psychologists have tried to show how present learning can be influenced by previous learning, as Rivers put it,

the way a student perceives a new situation is the result of transfer from previous similar situations.

(Rivers, 1968, p.128)

Hence, the more it is possible to transfer positively, the more the learner has facilities in his learning. This also gives the teacher

the possibility to diagnose 'quickly and accurately the problems troubling a student'. The teacher will know the items which are likely to be a source of problems for his students and those which are not. He will not, therefore, waste time teaching things which will be mastered through a mere exposure to the language thanks to their great similarity with the learner's native language. The claim of contrastive analysts that learners' errors and difficulties could be predicted was proved by future research to be wrong. Many of the errors which were predicted were not made, and many which were not were made.

Together with the realization of the failure of contrastive analysis, came a drastic change in linguistic theory. This change was led by Chomsky who argues that all human beings possess a language acquisition device which enables them to learn language and that it is innate. It is with this device that the child formulates hypotheses about the structure of the language to which he is exposed. The hypotheses are checked and modified according to whether they can account for all the data or not. In this process 'errors' are made, and they form an inevitable part of the learning process. It is a way for the child acquiring his first language to check the correctness of the rules he is formulating.

This view in first language acquisition, even though Chomsky thinks theoretical linguistics has no direct influence in language teaching, has various implications in second language learning. The first one is that learning will take place provided there is exposure to the language. The learning mechanism will work as long as there is

an adequate exposure.

The second implication is that errors may be the sign that learning is taking place as they may help the learner to find out the rules by changing his hypothesis. As our concern here is mainly error analysis, we will concentrate more on this topic.

#### **1.4 Error analysis**

Contrastive analysis failing to account for all the learners' errors and being wrong in most of its predictions, it became necessary to approach errors in a new way.

The new approach is based on the hypothesis that there is a great similarity between first language acquisition and second language learning. All human beings are endowed with the capacity to assimilate language. However, as far as the acquisition of a second language is concerned, the age up to which this capacity is still operational is an issue which has been the subject of debates in language teaching for quite a long time. It may be interesting to say a few words about the optimal age question.

Empirically, people have noticed that young children seem to be more at ease when learning a second language and hence the proposal by some educational theorists to start second language teaching as early as possible. However, due to practical reasons, i.e. not enough staff and a curriculum already wide enough for young children, many countries start second language teaching after the age of twelve.

The empirical observation that young children seem to be more at ease in second language learning has been supported theoretically by

researchers such as Lenneberg (1967) who suggested that there was a critical period after which language acquisition 'by mere exposure' was impossible. Learning a second language is then thought to be better before puberty if one accepts Lenneberg's conclusions.

Another view is Krashen's (1975) which modifies Lenneberg's critical period of language acquisition. Krashen argues that lateralization takes place earlier than puberty, at about the age of five. The implication of this modification is that, if there is a difference between the apparent facility with which young children are supposed to learn language and difficulties older people meet in language learning, the difference is not a neurological one. According to Krashen

the development of lateralization may represent the acquisition of an ability rather than the loss of an ability.

(1975, p.69)

The debate is still going on, however, so far, the existence of a critical period has not been demonstrated and Krashen, reporting the case of Genie, a girl who started first language learning at the age of 13 years, eight months, says language learning is possible after puberty, though the process is slower and less efficient than normal first language acquisition.

Therefore, the question of the critical period of language learning is still an issue which has not found a satisfactory answer. However, if we accept the hypothesis that first language acquisition is very similar to second language learning we may claim that some of the strategies, if not all, the child uses when acquiring his first

language are the same as those he uses when learning a second language. This claim receives great empirical evidence as far as errors are concerned.

A child acquiring his mother tongue produces utterances which are not correct according to adults' standards. However, no one considers those utterances as deviant. Rather they are considered as evidence of the linguistic development of the child. If adults do react at a child's incorrect utterance, they merely repeat it in a form acceptable by grown-ups. This reaction can be assimilated to what happens in the classroom when a learner makes an error. However, learners' errors are considered as deviant utterances. Incorrect utterances produced by children are no longer thought as marks of deviance, thanks to the scientific study of child language which has shown that children are formulating hypotheses about the rules of their language and are moving toward the correct form.

If a parallel is made with second language acquisition it is possible to see that the learner's errors play the same role as in first language acquisition, namely that the learner is using an 'approximative system'.

.An approximative system is the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language. Such approximative systems vary in character in accordance with proficiency level, variation is also introduced by learning experience (including exposure to a target language script system), communication function, personal learning characteristics, etc...

(Nemser in J. Richards, 1974, p.55)

We can therefore say with S.P. Corder

the making of errors is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language.

(S.P. Corder, 1981, p.11)

It will be interesting to know whether there is just one strategy or many strategies in second language learning.

### 1.5 Interlanguage

Errors seen from a learning standpoint are no longer deviances which must be banished, but rather processes which 'are psychologically relevant in a theory of second language acquisition'.

When we analyse the utterances of someone who is learning a second language, we realize that they are not the same as those which would have been produced by a native speaker of the target language if the latter had tried to get the same message across. This analysis will show also that the utterances do not belong to the learner's mother tongue linguistic system. Hence the learner is using a linguistic system which is neither that of his mother tongue nor that of the target language. This linguistic system is idiosyncratic but systematic. It has been called 'approximative system', 'interlingua', 'transitional competence' or 'interlanguage'. The latter term is the one which has a more widespread use.

According to Selinker, there are five processes which are

central to second language learning: first, language transfer: second, transfer of training: third, strategies of second language learning: fourth, strategies of second language communication, and fifth, overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

(Selinker in J. Richards, 1974, p.35)

Selinker claims that these five processes bear the items, rules and subsystems which are likely to be fossilized.

Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of instruction he receives in the TL.

(Selinker in Richards, 1974, p.36)

Fossilization constitutes one fundamental difference when second language learning is compared with first language acquisition. There is no sign of fossilization in the language of an adult speaking his mother tongue, the mistakes he makes are slips of the tongue and he can correct them.

The learner's interlanguage, being a transitional system, is going to be rather unstable as it changes with the amount of learning and exposure. The context in which the learning is taking place is of a fundamental importance as it can influence the shape of the interlanguage. What is going to be fossilized, though not predictable, is different whether one is dealing with a minority learning a second language in a dominant culture or a group of learners learning a second language in a formal setting. This can be explained by the fact that immigrants are not, most of the time, integrated in their host countries, therefore, they tend to develop a dialect of their own which acts 'as an instrument of self and group identification and of social perception' (Richards in Richards, 1971, p74). Immigrant speech can be described with the notion of interlanguage but the rules of this interlanguage are linguistic and social in origin. However, what



is important to note at the theoretical level is that many linguistic items of immigrant speech are the results of fossilization due to lack of exposure or reinforcement. We are going to borrow Richard's example which he himself borrowed from Fisherman. Reproducing an utterance made by a Puerto Rican in the United States, he writes

No make any difference, but I like when I go because I don't have too many time for buy and the little time we buy have to go to someplace and I find everything there.

(op. cit, p.70)

Here the speaker is using an approximative system and as Richards comments

heavy communication demands may be made on the second language, forcing the learner to mould what he has assimilated of the language into a means of saying what he wants to say...

(op. cit, p.70)

Whilst in a formal setting communication demands are not as heavy as in an informal setting with native speakers of the target language as interlocutors. Moreover, the origin of the interlanguage' is, most of the time, linguistic not social, therefore learners want always to receive reinforcement from their teachers.

Schachter (in Gass and Selinker, 1983, p.108), gives the examples of Japanese and Spanish learners who use the same hypothesis using rules of their languages, namely the unnecessary of subject marking when the topic is identified. 'In my country hasn't army, navy and air force.' 'In Venezuela is holiday(s) both days.' These examples taken from two different contexts show that one can expect one or two of the five processes in interlanguage to be dominant according to the

setting.

The example of the Puerto Rican's utterance shows the use of strategy in second language communication and overgeneralization. Whilst in those borrowed from Schachter, it is a case of language transfer. In a setting where English is learned as a foreign language, the concept of language transfer is going to have an important place as many of the techniques used by teachers are based on translation exercises. Moreover,

in the case of older children, either in a formal or informal setting, the influence of the mother tongue or other known languages become more evident...

(S.P. Corder, 1981, p.74)

## 1.6 Language transfer again

It is comforting to know that the investigation of first language transfer has once again become respectable. Whatever one's position on the relative importance of transfer in second language acquisition, transfer must be dealt with.

(R.W. Andersen in Gass and Selinker, 1983, p.177)

The reason why first language transfer had lost its respectability is that it was very much related to behaviourist learning theories which claimed that language learning was no more than a habit formation. Another reason is the connotation of the term 'transfer' which makes one think of a simple transfer of surface patterns. Now psychologists have moved away from behaviourism and they look at language learning from the standpoint of the learners, i.e. they are more concerned about how learning is done than about how teaching can

be effectively done.

In this new concern about the learner, the role of the mother tongue has again been the object of investigations by theorists of second language learning. Though it is quite clear that the first language plays a role in second language acquisition, the extent of that role has not yet been determined.

It is without doubt that second language acquisition at the phonological level is a restructuring process, i.e. the starting point is the mother tongue whose phonological system 'acts as a sieve'. However, as far as the acquisition of syntax and vocabulary is concerned, it is possible to say that it is not, most of the time, determined by the first language.

It is now generally accepted that in the learning process, learners formulate hypotheses and test them against the linguistic input and their first language system is part of the elements which constitute the device which enable them to create their own linguistic system, their interlanguage.

### **1.7 Aim and scope**

The aim of this study is to show, or rather to confirm, the role which is played by the languages previously learned by learners. It is not contrastive analysis as we are not going to contrast the different elements of the languages existing in the setting where the learning is taking place. However, we will have to compare different utterances, namely the learner's interlanguage, the reconstructed utterance, and the equivalent in the learner's mother tongue.

The hypothesis at the basis of this study is that in a multilingual and formal system of education, learners resort to their previous learning as a strategy in communication more often than in an informal setting.

We will try to show also that there is more transfer from the language which is closer to the target language, as there are elements which are more likely to be transferred. When transfer of the African languages occurs, it is either a phonological transfer or the result of a literal translation of a sentence, a phrase or a word. Obviously, it is sometimes difficult to say whether a strategy is language transfer or strategy in second language communication. There is a great overlap between the different processes.

As seen from the aim of this study, the scope is very limited. We are not dealing with interlanguage but only a part of what constitutes the learner's interlanguage. We do not pretend either to give a full account of transfer in the Senegalese setting.

## Chapter Two

### 2. Methodology and Analysis

#### 2.1 Methodology

##### 2.1.1 Data

Most of the errors analysed were collected from a test given to the analyst's students in June 1984. The test was based on a text and the students had to answer questions about the text, it was therefore a free composition. The text was dealing with the rapid multiplication of man and the following questions were asked:

- 1) What are the reasons for the flowing tide of human population? Explain the reasons clearly in your own words.
- 2) What has been done by man to abet the fast multiplication of his species?
- 3) Do you think there is real danger in this acceleration of world population? Why or why not? Are you in favour of or against birth control practices?

There are a few other errors which were collected at random in classes of different standards. However all of them are written data and we face many problems when analysing this kind of data.

The first is that it happens under conditions in which the learner is highly monitoring his output and thus tends to avoid using elements of language which sound or look erroneous to him.

The second is interpretation and reconstruction. It may be easy,

sometimes, to have a plausible interpretation of the learner's utterance, as we are sharing the same language background as him. However, utterances which are really ambiguous are difficult to interpret and reconstruct when the learner is not present.

Last, but not least, it is always difficult to say whether an error is an error or a spelling mistake when analysing written data, as we shall see in the phonological transfer and in E<sub>17</sub>.

### **2.1.2 Subjects**

The subjects are Senegalese who had been, at the time of the test, learning English for at least four years. Nevertheless, their standard is rather low as they were all in the technical section in which English is not considered a major topic though compulsory. All of them can be said to be fluent both in French and Wolof. Their contact with English is strictly limited to the written form except in the classroom. They have only one period of two hours weekly as far as English lessons are concerned.

### **2.1.3 Setting**

French is the official language of Senegal, the language of administration, of most of the media and of most of the leading financial and business institutions. It is still the medium of instruction throughout the system of education, though there are experiments introducing the six national languages in the first two years of primary schools. However, the use of French in every day activities is very limited, Wolof is used as a lingua franca in all

towns and most rural areas.

French and Wolof are the two dominant languages in the country. English is considered important because of political and academic factors. It is taught at all levels in the secondary schools and is the foreign language which has more students learning it. There are other foreign languages which are taught such as Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Italian, German and Portuguese. And depending on the section students can take up to three foreign languages, one being the minimum.

Thus the linguistic setting is rather complex and we can expect learners exposed to such a variety of languages to resort to them to devise strategy for learning others. This is more so since translation is still current and some teachers make an abusive use of it.

Now let us see how this complex linguistic setting is exploited by learners to learn a new language namely English in this study.

## **2.2 Analysis**

Though we are dealing only with transfer from the mother tongue, it is obvious that there is a great overlap between the different phenomena of interlanguage and some of our examples may reflect this overlap. We have tried to classify the data in five different categories being again aware that the border between those five categories is very narrow.

First of all we have data showing phonological transfer, then those which are morphological, thirdly syntactic, fourthly lexical and finally those which we call translations as they are difficult to

classify and represent literal translations from the mother tongue.

### 2.2.1 Phonological

Some may be suprised to hear of phonological transfer in written data as it is difficult to tell whether it is a spelling mistake or not. But teachers who have been working in a specific situation can always tell between what may be called a spelling mistake and a real phonological transfer.

In our first example,

E<sub>1</sub>. 'In the countries developing, they are many economic problems.'

the student wanted to say 'In the developing countries, there are many economic problems' or better 'there are many economic problems in the developing countries'. But we are interested in the use of 'they' instead of 'there'.

This is a very common error among Senegalese students even in their speech. The diphthong /ei/ exists in Wolof as in /*kei*/, today, but /*ed*/ does not. Therefore, /ei/ and /*ed*/ being very close, they assimilate them by using the only form which exists in their language. The error is equally due to the fact that the linking /r/ is always dropped by most teachers.

Another phonological transfer observable in their written work is the confusion between /*ɛŋ*/ and /*ɛŋk*/. The sound /ŋ/ exists in many Senegalese languages, but clusters do not. In the presence of clusters, Wolof speakers tend to insert a vowel or simplify the cluster. It is the latter which is happening in E<sub>2</sub> =

'I thing you must make attention.'



Though the data are limited, instances of mother tongue transfer can be found in the written work of foreign language learners. No doubt interpretation is always difficult in this kind of data and we must acknowledge that phonological transfer is more objectively judged in speech.

Written work gives more information about morphology, syntax and lexis.

### 2.2.2 Morphological

The learners who have been in contact with French for some time tend to transfer French rules to English.

E<sub>3</sub> 'For to abet this fast multiplying...'

Having learned that in French 'pour' is followed by the infinitive, and that in English the infinitive is realized as to + verb, this learner builds his sentence by amalgamating two rules. Here again the overlap between transfer of language, transfer of training and overgeneralization is obvious. However, this error is common enough and the transfer from French to English is without question.

E<sub>4</sub> 'In the underdeveloped country, the human life depends  
of the agriculture.'

Here the learner is using the wrong preposition 'of' instead of 'on'. Again the influence from French can be noticed easily as they say 'dependre de'. The example above must have shown that reference, namely the use of the definite article is one of the most difficult points to master. Many learners of English as a foreign language find it hard to use the definite article correctly. Senegalese students are

no exception and their task is made more difficult by their knowledge of French. Their task is complicated because the use of the definite article is, most of the time, totally different in the two languages. E<sub>4</sub> shows two instances when the definite article is not used in English whilst it would have been used if the sentence was in French.

The following examples are errors in the use of the definite article:

E<sub>5</sub> 'the life is very expensive.'

E<sub>6</sub> 'to permit the men to live.'

E<sub>7</sub> 'the death was very lot'

It is interesting to note that the learners seem to be using the definite article pervasively as if they were hypothesizing it should always be used, which is not the case in French.

E<sub>8</sub> 'I have afraid of that.'

instead of 'I am afraid of that.' Obvious transfer from French when 'avoir' is used in phrases such as 'to be afraid', 'to be sleepy', 'to be hungry',... etc.

E<sub>9</sub> 'Since many years'

E<sub>10</sub> 'Men are living on the earth a long time ago.'

E<sub>9</sub> is easier to reconstruct as 'since' is used instead of 'for'. But E<sub>10</sub> poses more problems. Does the learner want to say 'men have been living on the earth for a long time' or 'life on earth started a long time ago'? Anyway as we are looking for the influence of French in their learning strategy, we can attribute these two errors to the fact that 'for', 'ago' and 'since', can be translated by the same word, 'depuis'. Knowing that in French one word can be used, they tend

to think that those used in English are synonyms, as they do not seem to follow a particular rule but rather use them at random.

E<sub>11</sub> 'It can to cause many problems to the populations.'  
'Quand deux verbes se suivent le second se met a  
l'infinitif.'

i.e. 'when two verbs follow each other the latter is at the infinitive.' This is a rule which is learned right from the earliest years of primary school. Learners recite it so much that it remains in their subconscious. No wonder, therefore, that teachers of English face trouble when teaching the use of 'may', 'can' and 'must'. Most learners make that error by putting 'to' between these verbs and those which follow them.

Therefore we can conclude this section by saying that at the morphological level transfer from French to English is a constant strategy used by learners. The phenomenon of 'distance' is noticeable here as there is no trace of a transfer from African languages.

### 2.2.3 Syntactic

E<sub>12</sub> 'In the countries developing, they are many economic  
problems.'

In the first part of the utterance, the learner did not apply the right word-order, whilst he did in the second part of the utterance. This shows how difficult it is, if not impossible, to predict errors.

E<sub>13</sub> 'Man had a training medical'.

E<sub>12</sub> and E<sub>13</sub> show errors in word-order. What is happening here is rather complex. The learners are using a transformation which can be called

To-be deletion, in both languages, however, they do not accompany it with the movement of the adjective which is placed before the noun as it should be done in English.

In French the sentence; 'les pays qui sont en voie de développement' ⇒ 'les pays en voie de développement.' In English, 'The countries which are developing' ⇒ 'The countries developing' ⇒ 'The developing countries.' It is the same operation which is applied to E<sub>13</sub>. Thus in both examples the learners are aware of the deletion of TO-be but basing their hypotheses on French, they do not move the predicates.

Language transfer is also noticed in questions.

E<sub>14</sub> 'When Koffi can wear his new shirt?'

E<sub>15</sub> 'Where go you?'

E<sub>14</sub> shows how the learner's system is approximative. Though we can detect the influence of French, as the subject, Koffi, is placed before the auxiliary, the learner does not use the pronoun 'he' which in French is expressed. The French sentence is 'Quand Koffi peut il porter sa chemise neuve?'

Why doesn't the learner repeat the pronoun 'he' in the English sentence? He may have mastered one part of the rule only and is still trying to find the right rule for question.

E<sub>15</sub> 'Where go you?'

Apparently this is not necessarily language transfer. It may be considered as overgeneralization, knowing the rule for auxiliaries he may apply them to ordinary verbs. However, a closer look at the French sentence from which it may have been translated urges us to consider

it a transfer.

In French 'Où vas-tu?' which translated into English is 'Where are you going?' Usually what happens with the English sentence is copula deletion, 'where you going?', when learners are using communication strategies and under heavy communicative demands. However, when learners have time to think they tend to translate literally. Obviously, our evidence is not enough, but some errors which can be explained in other terms than language transfer, are, sometimes, caused by an interference of the mother tongue. Thus, phonologically, morphologically and syntactically, transfer is a strategy used by learners to overcome difficulties they are facing in the assimilation of new rules.

Now let us see if we can find instances of lexical transfer.

#### 2.2.4 Lexical

E<sub>16</sub> 'Because if I have many sons...?'

This looks like a correct utterance, but if we know the context where it has been taken from, we realize that the learner wanted to write 'because if I have many children'. As in Wolof we do not have three words for daughter, son and child. There is just one word 'dom' and if we want to be precise we say a 'male-child' or a 'female-child', So because of the semantic scope of 'dom' in Wolof, the learner is using 'sons' for children.

E<sub>17</sub> 'In Senegal we are in economic crease.'

E<sub>18</sub> 'They have habitud to live together.'

In those two examples, the learners, not knowing the right word or

phrase, use words or phrases which, according to their hypotheses, are close to English. 'Crease' is used instead of 'crisis', the learner being a Wolof speaker cannot pronounce the French word *crise* /Kriz/ properly, as there is no /z/ in his language. Thus the word closer in English to his pronunciation of the French is 'crease'. And in the second example, the learner is translating literally the French phrase, 'avoir l'habitude de', but he is not sure of the right phrase and therefore uses the French by dropping the 'e' at the end to make it sound more English.

E<sub>17</sub> and E<sub>18</sub> can be considered as language switching. Learners actually do use this strategy in the classroom when they cannot find the right word to express their idea. It is one form of appeal to authority. They are sure that the teacher will correct them when they use a non-English word.

E<sub>19</sub> 'I think you must make attention.'

The reconstructed sentence is 'I think you must be careful', which means in French 'je pense que tu dois faire attention'. The learner being aware of the pervasive use of 'faire' in French thinks that 'make' has the same distribution as the French verb.

We have seen just a few examples of lexical transfer which can lead to errors, obviously there are various ways in which lexical transfer can operate. However, what is important to note is that lexical transfer seems to place more constraints on learners. That is what explains why it is less used.

The last technique of transfer we are going to analyse is translation.

### 2.2.5 Translation

There is a general agreement among theorists that a language is not learned through translation. However, in specific situations learners resort to translations and this is reflected through the kind of errors they make when using this technique as a learning strategy. For instance, when writing a free composition, learners have enough time to think and monitor their output. As they do not master the target language well enough to think in it, they think in their mother tongue and then translate it. If we look at a few errors we will detect this phenomenon easily.

E<sub>20</sub> 'I ask god to give you a good husband and children'  
can be reconstructed as 'May god give you a good husband and many children.'

This utterance shows a linguistic and cultural transfer. It is very common in the African culture to formulate such a wish, but it is rarer in the European culture. The learner, therefore, has to find a means to get his message across by translating literally his mother tongue.

Translation is quite common among learners of a certain age.

E<sub>21</sub> 'But many births make the human body tired.'  
i.e. 'incessant childbearing damages women's health.'

E<sub>22</sub> 'me I go look in the room.'

E<sub>23</sub> 'the eat will be difficult to find.'

All these examples are actually translations from Wolof into English. The predominance of Wolof in what we call translation-transfer shows the presence of the mother tongue at a level where it is supposed to be superseded by French.

However, the predominance of either French or Wolof in the linguistic system of the learners depends on the topic and the individual. Some have reached a highly sophisticated knowledge of French, others have not. The latter think more in their mother tongue than the former.

Our last example shows a translation from French;

E<sub>24</sub> By instance, the case of those who had left Israel for  
to settle in U.S.A.

In French 'Par exemple, le cas de ceux qui avaient quitté Israël pour s'installer aux Etats-Unis.

An absolute word-for-word translation.

What this brief analysis has shown is that language transfer from the language or languages known by foreign language learners is a process which is part of the learners' interlanguage. Thus the mother tongue has certainly a role to play in a learner-centred curriculum.



## Chapter Three

### 3. Discussion and Conclusion

#### **3.1 Discussion**

##### **3.1.1 French Versus Wolof**

In the last section we wrote that those who mastered French better were using it more often as the basis of their interlanguage. In this section we will try to show the 'competition' which is taking place between the two languages. French is a high prestige language and moreover the medium of instruction, therefore all the teaching is done through it. Whilst Wolof, though spoken by the great majority of the Senegalese population is hardly used in instruction. However, as Sharwood Smith (in Gass and Selinker, 1983, p.222) quoting Carroll says, 'in teaching a second language we do not expect our students to forget the first system'. Thus, one can imagine the process through which the students' mother tongue is going in the learning setting. Early in their primary studies, the students were already facing two linguistic systems, the French system as the medium of instruction and their mother tongue as their medium of communication outside the classroom. We must note, in passing, that French is taught as a first language though not known by most school entrants. It is obvious therefore, if we believe that it is only by 'thinking in the mother tongue' that a learner can begin to communicate in a second language, we can expect learners in this situation to resort quite often to language transfer as a learning strategy. Time and space do not permit

us to analyse the learner's interlanguage in primary school. Let us just mention that French as well as English, is going through a process of adaptation in the former African colonies. That is the reason why people talk of a Nigerian standard English, for example. And if one reads a novel written in French or English by an African writer, one realizes that many expressions used are paraphrases or circumlocutions taken from African languages, and this is done on purpose. This strategy is used in everyday life by people who do not know those European languages well. Even intellectuals tend to use code-switching when discussing with people sharing the same linguistic background as them.

Now let us tackle our main issue. What will happen to the first language which is being superseded more and more by French, when learners are taking a third language? Does it disappear completely in the thinking process or is it still present?

The thinking process is a very complicated one. In

E<sub>1</sub> 'In the countries developing, they are many economic problems'

and

E<sub>2</sub> 'I thing you must make attention',

we have seen the mother tongue phonological system which was inferring in the learning process. However, the process can be more complex, in

E<sub>17</sub>, 'In Senegal we are in economic crease',

'crease', though it can be said to be a phonological transfer undergoes two processes. First it is identified with the French word 'crise', [Kɹiz] but with its Wolof pronunciation [Kɹis]. This

example shows that the basis of the interlanguage can be twofold, here it is Wolof and French.

In the translation transfers

E<sub>20</sub> 'I ask god to give you a good husband and children'

E<sub>21</sub> 'But many births make the human body tired',

E<sub>22</sub> 'Me I go look in the room',

E<sub>23</sub> 'the eat will be difficult to find',

the basis of the transfer is traceable to Wolof. We can assert that the learners were thinking in Wolof when writing those sentences. Why can we make such a claim? Because the subject they were discussing is a topic linked very much to the kind of existence they are facing every day. They discuss in their homes, with their friends, about contraception, family-planning and the scarcity of food. Therefore, they are provided with the linguistic materials to deal with these problems in their mother tongue.

It is interesting to note that in the morphological, syntactic and lexical transfers, very few instances were derived from Wolof. Here the notion of distance between languages play an important part. Compared to Wolof, French syntax is closer to English. Therefore one should expect French rules to be more transferrable. We have realized that older learners tend to use more language transfer than younger ones and that those who know at least two languages use this strategy too when learning a third language. When using transfer the learner is using his previous knowledge, his mother tongue as any language he knows, but also what is called 'imperfect knowledge' of the target language as we have seen in

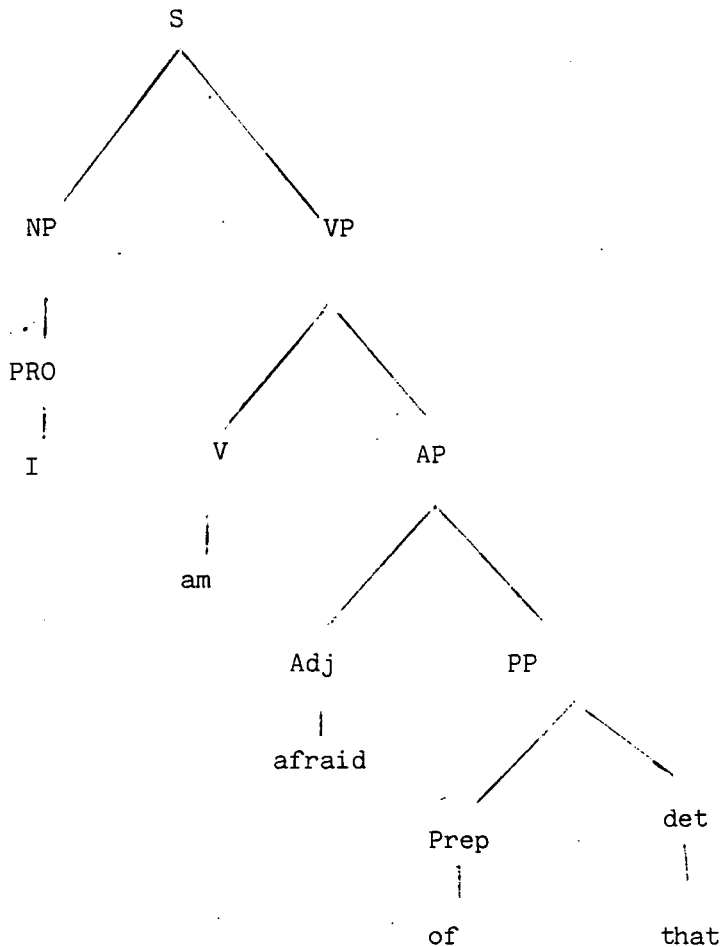
E<sub>14</sub> 'when Koffi can wear his new shirt',

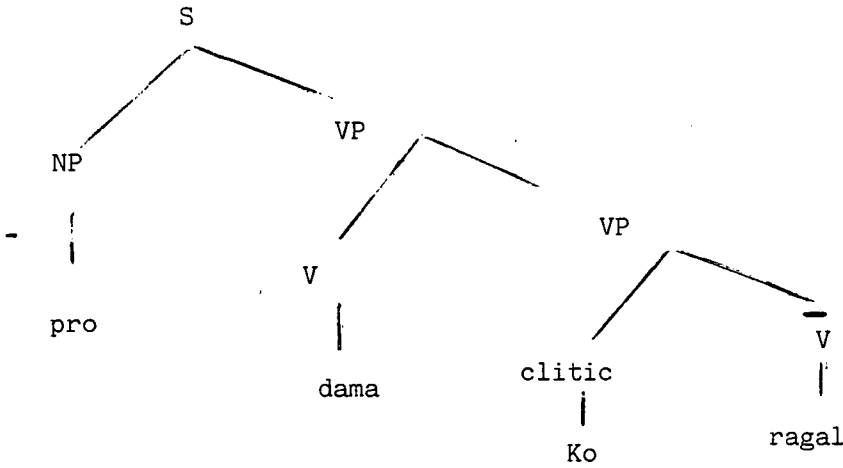
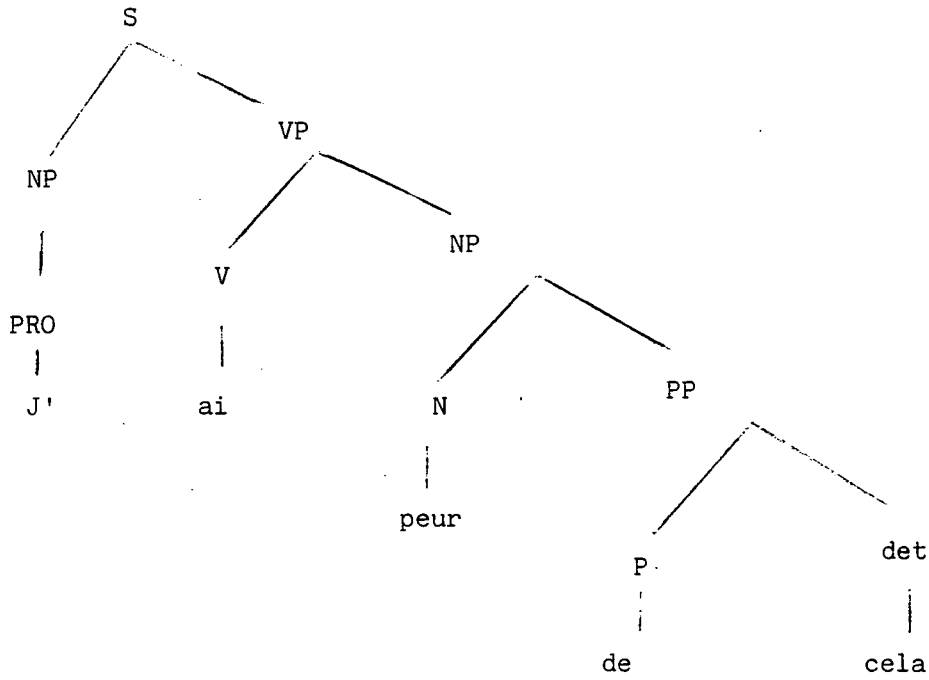
in which we said that the rule was not fully mastered. He may also have expectations about the target language, whether they are conscious or not. For instance, a Wolof speaker who is learning English may consider it closer to English because it is a European language, and this need not be conscious. This point may be a direction of research in the study of learning strategies.

Let us compare rapidly the three different structures in

E<sub>8</sub>, 'I have afraid of that',

as an illustration. The reconstructed utterance is, I am afraid of that, its French equivalent, 'jai peur de cela' and Wolof 'dama Ko ragal'.





What we learn from these three phrase-markers, is that, though they all have  $S \rightarrow NP VP$ , Wolof is different from English and French. Wolof is a pro-drop language in the sense of Chomsky (1981, 1982), in that it can have a null subject, which is characterized as pro. Another conclusion which can be drawn from the phrase-markers is that French is closer in its surface structure to English. However, we do not mean that whenever there is similarity in surface structure, transfer is necessarily going to be used by learners. What we are trying to show is that a structure such as the one we have in Wolof is

less likely to be transferred.

E<sub>11</sub> 'It can cause many problems to the population', here again the French sentence, 'Il peut poser beaucoup de problèmes à la population', can be thought to be at the basis of the transfer. This is a hint that there are constraints on language transfer. Learners do not know what these constraints are but rather they intuitively think of the two structures as distant or close, and therefore adjust their hypotheses according to their conclusion.

Learners resort to French or Wolof, not only because 'they think in their mother tongue', but also because the environment in which the learning is taking place favours more the phenomenon of language transfer. Not being involved in a conversation which will compel them to devise other strategies, they have enough time to think in the language which seems more appropriate to their topic and then 'translate their thoughts'. That is the reason why the place of phrase translations is paramount in their interlanguage. Another way of explaining the phenomenon is that teachers are now more concerned about fluency than accuracy. During lessons they try to make their students concentrate on the message, communication, not on the form.

From all this we can say with Krashen (1981) that 'transfer appears to be strongest in word order and in word-for-word translations of phrases'. And second that 'language transfer is weaker in bound morphology', In our data there are few errors due to omission of plurals or adjective-noun agreement.

And finally language transfer 'seems to be strongest in "acquisition poor" 'environment', i.e., a setting which is highly

academic and formal, where 'natural appropriate intake is scarce and translation exercises are frequent' (Krashen, 1981 p.66).

To sum up, we can say that learners who are bilingual resort to both languages as they devise learning strategies. However, the two languages may play different roles according to their distance vis-à-vis the target language and the standard of the learner. Our data have shown that the mother tongue is used to translate phrases, whereas French is used as the basis for structural transfer.

In spite of this division of labour between the two languages in the earlier periods of learning, one can envisage a period when learners will feel confident enough to think in the target language and resort to other strategies in communication with little or no transfer.

### **3.2 Problems**

#### **3.2.1 Lack of an adequate theory**

Improvements in the methods and materials of second language teaching are likely to remain a matter of trial and error until we have a better understanding than we have at present of the processes of learning a second language.

(S.P. Corder, 1981, p.26)

The complexity of the learning process and the difficulty to analyse data based on errors scientifically have prevented researchers from devising a theory of interlanguage with enough explanatory power. We still do not know what is happening exactly when someone is learning a second language. The state of linguistic science does not permit us to

assert that second language acquisition operates in the same way as first language acquisition. There are many points which need clarification for the building of a theory of second language learning. However, this lack of an adequate theory instead of deterring researchers has compelled them to concentrate on particular points in the learner's language. Selinker (1972) has tried to show the processes which are psychologically relevant to a theory of second language learning, namely, language transfer, transfer of training, strategies in second language learning, strategies in second language communication and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material. Selinker's psychologically relevant factors, though posing a few problems, which we will discuss later, constitute a basis for a description of the learner's language.

Another important move forward is that there is general agreement among researchers that learners use hypotheses as Schachter puts it:

The idea that learners formulate and test hypotheses against linguistic input has been with us for some time now and is generally, if not universally, accepted.

(in Gass & Selinker, 1983, p.104)

Therefore, though the interest in the study of interlanguage is recent, much progress has been made and different theories, though incomplete, developed.

### 3.2.2 Problems peculiar to language transfer

In spite of all the studies based on contrastive analysis and language transfer, our knowledge about the phenomenon called language transfer is very limited. For instance, we do not know what is



transferable and when transfer occurs. Transfer, having been closely associated to behaviourism, can be a misleading term and some authors such as Pit Corder and Schachter ask for the use of another term which does not have a negative connotation, or at least its redefinition. And Schachter attempting to define transfer writes:

What is called transfer is simply the set of constraints that one's previous knowledge imposes on the domains from which to select hypotheses about the data one is attending to.

(In Gass and Selinker, 1983, p.104)

This new view of language transfer is pointing at directions for future research, namely constraints on transfer. It is important in a theory of language learning to see whether there are constraints on transfer or not. This is important on the one hand, because if there are no constraints, the range of hypotheses will be very wide and the learner's task will be very difficult. On the other hand, the theorist will no longer be concerned with the prediction of transfer but with the identification of areas where transfer can happen. Adjémian, about this theoretical framework, writes:

This theory, coupled with a conception of the learner as an active analyzer and hypothesis formulator, encourages us to locate areas of lexical space where the lexical relatedness appears to the learner to transcend the defining edges of a single language. These areas, then, are perceived as transferrable thereby simplifying the language-learning task for the learner by permitting the use of ready-made hypotheses.

(In Gass and Selinker, 1983, p.265)

Thus, the theoretical framework seems to be set for a much more

systematic study of language transfer. If we accept the notion of the influence of previous knowledge in any form of learning, and that of the learner as an analyser and hypothesis formulator, we must acknowledge that the mother tongue plays a role in second language acquisition and that this role must be studied.

### 3.2.3 The role of the setting

As many sociolinguists have shown the social context has an important part to play in any theory attempting to describe language in use. And as second language learning is language in context we must expect the setting where the learning is taking place to have some effect in the acquisition process. We have already said that the learner's language is idiosyncratic and this is going to add up to the complexity which will be brought by the variety of settings. Richards (1974) has shown that the interlanguage of different groups of immigrants vary according to some social factors. For instance, immigrant Indians who keep shops in Britain and cater for an Indian community will need little English. They will be in communication situations in which they will have to use strategies in second language communication, overgeneralization more than language transfer. However, this form of their interlanguage can be described by the model proposed by Selinker, ie the five processes which are psychologically relevant to a theory of second language theory. Another case is the learning of English as a foreign language. In this case the most conspicuous strategies used by learners will be transfer of training and language transfer as most of the teaching is done

through translation. In a setting where English is learned as a foreign language, the learner's language can be studied with the same model as in the setting mentioned above.

Therefore, though the nature of the interlanguage can be different according to the setting, one theoretical model can be used in any setting to account for the various data. Thus, the difficulty which may be linked to the variety of the contexts in which second language learning is taken is not insurmountable as far as one model of analysis is available to theorists and researchers.

#### **3.2.4 Overlapping between the different strategies**

Five processes have been said as constituting strategies learners use. However, Selinker himself acknowledges the difficulty to identify unambiguously which of the five processes we are dealing with. Therefore a real difficulty is there and one has to face it. Theoretically it is possible to tackle a problem while knowing that it is not possible to characterize it exactly. However, provided we use the right theoretical framework to analyse what is happening, the results can be sound enough to account for the data. This difficulty is not peculiar to linguistics, it is met in other scientific fields where there is, sometimes, an overlap between two phenomena which cannot be separated quite clearly. Two or three strategies can be conflated and explained with the same model of analysis we have been dealing with.

### 3.3 A few practical considerations

We have been leading an investigation from the standpoint of the researcher or theorist, now we are going to see what the implications are for teachers.

Teachers must have some knowledge of interlanguage theory in order to react positively when their pupils make errors. Teachers used to try to eradicate errors and they tended to be impatient with students who made many errors. But if teachers are convinced that erring is one way of learning, then they can help their students find out what is wrong in the hypotheses they are formulating. Of course, we agree with Krashen when he says that formal teaching does not help very much. However, we as teachers must face this problem. We have at some point to teach or at least to provide our students with the input we think can help learners acquire the linguistic material they are lacking. Obviously, we do not have any control on the intake, but a sympathetic attitude can do much good to learners who will be more willing to participate.

As we have seen, errors in the learning of English as a foreign language can be due to language transfer. Though our data show clearly this, there is some disagreement among researchers. No matter what the opinion of teachers is, they must be aware of the phenomenon of language transfer and the conditions in which it is likely to be used as a learning strategy. This awareness of the problem can urge teachers to create conditions in which there will be more positive transfers than negative ones. Their teaching techniques can be improved a great deal if they gather data about the kinds of errors which are made by their students. Moreover, they can concentrate on individuals, and thus give a more personalized teaching.

A knowledge of interlanguage theory can also help teachers improve textbooks by bringing new material in the classroom. If they know what errors mean they will be able to detect through their students' errors the flaws in their teaching. If, for instance, they realize that most of the errors are due to transfer of training, they must change the way they teach. Therefore error analysis is a means for self-evaluation for teachers. Errors give information about the learners, the textbooks, the teaching and the context. Therefore, they are valuable to any teacher whose aim is to help his students improve his learning strategies. However, a word of balance must be put here. Showing a sympathetic attitude does not mean being permissive. A false comprehension of interlanguage may lead to disasters in the classroom. Immigrants can reach a point when their interlanguage is used as a creole or a lingua franca, for instance, pidgin English. But learners of English as a foreign language cannot reach that level. The objective of learners of English as a foreign language is to be as near as possible to native speakers' standard. Therefore, they expect their teachers to assert some sort of authority by helping them get rid of their errors. It is a difficult task as it is not always easy to know when an error is a minor one or is not. By trying to correct all the errors, the teacher is going to inhibit learners. Richards, quoting James, writes:

Accepting the interlingua, like accepting a child's non-standard speech avoids the necessity to halt the communication process for the sake of the learning process.

(Richards, 1974, p.89)

Thus, it is by only having a wide sample of their students' errors that

teachers can be able to know when to correct and when not. The emphasis must be laid on communication and if it is achieved successfully, teachers need not worry very much. However, they must cater for the needs of their students who will face other interlocutors who may laugh at their mistakes and this can cause inhibition. Learners must be prepared psychologically in the classroom. Teachers will be more prepared to achieve this task if they have a knowledge of interlanguage theory.

Another important thing for teachers to know is that the learners' personality has a certain role to play in their attitude towards errors. Some favour fluency and do not worry very much about making errors. Others are over-conscious of their errors and tend to avoid speech as much as possible. Teachers, in both cases, have to be very cautious. As in any human enterprise, the balance is not always easy to find. In the case of the former an excess of sympathy can bring the learning to an end and in the case of the latter a lack of sympathy entails the absence of learning. Therefore teachers have to show to over-confident learners that they communicate well but languages have rules and that they cannot communicate in whatever way they like. And quite a different thing is going to be said to inhibited learners.

We can assert at this point that a good knowledge of interlanguage theory is an important asset for teachers. A systematic analysis of errors must be a constant preoccupation for teachers. By doing this they will detect the weaknesses of their students, the structures which prove to be difficult or those which are never used and which are, however, necessary for communicative purposes. Error analysis shows too the flaws or the good aspects of the syllabus. Last, but not least, teachers can

detect where their weaknesses lie as far as their teaching techniques are concerned.

### 3.4 Conclusion

We have reached the end of our investigation and we must draw a conclusion. We have, however, to acknowledge that there are many aspects of our topic which could have been investigated and which were not. If time and place had permitted us to do so, we would have analysed problems such as constraints in language transfer, as this seems to be a turning point in language transfer. We could have tried too to find out whether there were other strategies than those which are described in the classic literature of interlanguage theory.

In this brief and limited analysis we have tried to show that language transfer has its place in a framework of error analysis. We have attempted to show the shortcomings of contrastive analysis which claimed that all errors were traceable to the mother tongue. Such a strong claim has urged error analysts to minimize the importance of language transfer as most data could be described through different processes. Hitherto, researchers do not agree completely on the importance of language transfer as a learning strategy. However, one thing is clear - they all agree that learners use hypotheses and that previous knowledge plays a part in the learning process.

Our data have clearly shown that in a formal educational setting, language transfer can be at the source of many errors. This constitutes a good reason to consider this phenomenon as a strategy which must be studied to understand how learning is done.

It is obvious that there are many problems related to the model of

analysis we have been using in our investigation. However, whether it is the difficulty of identifying errors exactly, or the lack of an adequate theory, theorists can use this model to account for data of various origin. It may be necessary to refine the model, but error analysis is evolving and every day researchers are making breakthroughs which bring new insights.

And finally in the last section we have tried to see what the implications were for teachers. We have shown that a good knowledge of interlanguage theory is useful to teachers and that they can benefit from the findings of researchers if they use their discoveries judiciously.



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