

Error Analysis: A Theoretical Framework

Abdunasir Ibrahim Abdulahlim Sideeg

June, 2002

nasirx72@yahoo.com

1.1 A Review of the Traditions of Error Analysis

Human learning is fundamentally a process, which involves the making of errors: **"to err is human."** Therefore, the process of language learning, like any other process of acquiring a skill, involves the making of a lot of errors. All learners of a second language commit a number of errors however the efficiency of the learning method and whatever the learning environment and learning conditions. Dulay and Burt (1974: 1) express this notion in the phrase "You can't learn without goofing". They see an error or a "goof" as a natural product of the process of L2 learning "for which no blame is implied."

However, the notion of **error** itself is controversial: its nature, description, and explanation depend mainly on the outlook on the process of human learning in general and language learning in particular. Generally, the analysis of L2 learners' errors has two main approaches:

- a. **A contrastive-based error analysis, and**
- b. **A non-contrastive-based error analysis.**

1.2 The Contrastive -Based Error Analysis

Within the behaviorist theory of language learning, which is prevailing before the 1960s, linguists and researchers in second language learning (henceforth SLL) believe that L2 learners' errors are mainly due to L1 interference. Errors are considered undesirable and fatal to proper language learning. Within this perspective of language learning, people learn by responding to external stimuli and receiving proper reinforcement. A proper habit - for language is viewed as a process of habit-formation- is being formed by reinforcement, hence learning takes place. Therefore, an error is considered as a wrong response to a stimulus and it should be corrected when it occurs. Brooks (1964: 58), quoted in Tarone and Yule (1995: 146), maintains that "like

sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome." Unless corrected properly and immediately, the error becomes a habit and a wrong behavioral pattern would stick in the learner's mind. The behaviorist view of SLL is that the learner carries over the old habits of his L1 into the L2 and hence, fails to acquire the proper habits of the L2 system. Clearly this explanation of SLL is related to a view of language learning as some sort of **habit-formation** which follows a mechanical route.

Linguists and SLL researchers who are working within this framework put a great deal of emphasis on contrastive analysis [CA]. The assumption is that: if linguists could analyze carefully and completely the systems of both L1 and L2, they would be able to predict and explain errors that would occur during SLL. The **contrastive analysis hypothesis**, (henceforth CAH) is that errors would occur at the point at which the two language systems are dissimilar. Weinreich (1953:1), cited in Van Els et al. (1984: 44), claims that "the greater the difference between the two systems . . . the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of interference." The solution, as Lado (1957: vii) suggests, is a systematic analysis of both languages in order to overcome this L1 interference: ". . . the comparison of any two languages and cultures [is] to discover and describe the problems that the speakers of one of the languages will have in learning the other" Lado (1957: 2) further explains this notion as follows:

Individuals tend to transfer forms and meaning and the distribution of forms and meaning of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture, both productively when attempting to speak the language ... and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language ... as practiced by its natives.

Brown (1987: 153) states that the proponents of the CAH, which is "deeply rooted in behaviorism and structuralism," claim that the "principal barrier" to second language learning is the L1 **interference** with the L2 system. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982: 118) observe that within the assumptions of the behaviorist language learning theory, L2 learners' errors occur due to the "automatic" transfer of the rules of the L1. Within the assumptions of CA, negative transfer or **interference** occurs when the systems of TL and SL are different. Positive transfer or **facilitation** occurs when the two systems are similar. Thus, the CAH proposes the theory that L2 learners' errors are primarily caused by the interference of the **old habits** of the L1.

However, all this remains a theoretical issue. Lado (1957: 72) warns that this "list of problems resulting from the comparison of foreign language with native language must . . . be considered a list of hypothetical problems until final validation is achieved by checking it against the actual speech of students." This reservation made by Lado, one of the initiators of CA analysis, is a source of much controversy on the **empirical validity** of the CAH. Hassan, Baghdady, and Buslama (1993: 13) argue that:

... it is difficult to fully assess contrastive error analysis because the discipline is very cautious in stating its assumption such as "the most important factor determining ease and difficulty" or "the chief source of the difficulty" (Lado, 1964) ... But we cannot take these reserved expressions into consideration too seriously as long as we have no statistical data to support them.

With regard to the last statement about the statistical data that verify the CAH, Ellis (1999: 29) observes that the main obstacle in the **empirical validation** of the CAH is "the lack of well-defined and broadly-accepted criteria for establishing which grammatical utterance are the result of language transfer." However, even allowing for this obstacle, most **statistical** evidences are against the CAH. Ellis (1999: 28) maintains that non-interference errors among L2 learners are "recognized" always except by few of the proponents of CAH. Dulay et al. (1982: 102) report that the frequency of errors due to L1 interference is "relatively low" among both children and adults. They further add that most of these errors are syntactic rather than morphological.

Experiments and observations made by researchers in the discipline reveal serious limitations in the approach of CA. Chastain (1976: 61) maintains that "recent investigations of errors made by second language learners have revealed surprising statistics." He observes that although some errors could be attributed to L1 interference, their percentage is not so large as predicted by CA. Whitman and Jackson (1972: 40), quoted in Brown (1987: 161), find no empirical support for most of the CAH predictions. They, after have **empirically tested** the predictions of the CAH, conclude that CA ". . . is inadequate, theoretically and practically to predict the interference problems of a language learner." Hanzeli(1975: 61), cited in Chastian (1976: 61), maintains that researchers in CA ". . . like Corder, Selinker, Burt and George, have proved conclusively that traditional contrastive analysis of two grammars cannot predict the frequency and hierarchy of learners' errors." In one of their studies of L2 learners' errors, Dulay and Burt

(1973) **empirically show** that only 3% of these errors are due to L1 interference. Ellis' (1999: 28) comment on this finding is that:

Dulay and Burt's research constituted a powerful attack on the contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Clearly, if only 3 per cent of all learners' errors are the result of interference, then a comparison of the learners' native and target language could not help to predict or explain very much about the process of SLA.

Thus, as Lightbown and Spada (1993: 113) argue, there is one obvious fact, that SLL is "not simply a process of putting second language words into first language sentences." **This is what CA claims to be but fails to show it empirically.** As Burn (1978: 280) argues, the rationale for CA is its "explanatory power." **If CA** "fails" to accomplish this task, it "scarcely seems worth the time and labour that has been expended on it."

1.3 The Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis

Chomsky's revolution in linguistics has a substantial influence on language learning theory. The belief that learning language is a process of **habit formation** is totally discarded by the radically cognitive perspective proposed by Noam Chomsky. James (1980: 20) comments that Chomsky's cognitive approach to language constitutes "something of a revolution" and his Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior is a "turning point" in SLL theory.

In his Review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior, Chomsky (1959) argues that human learning, particularly language acquisition, could not be explained by simply starting off with a "**tabula rasa**" state of mind. Chomsky claims that human beings must have a certain kind of innate capacity, which guides the acquisition of language (Tono, 2000). Influenced by this viewpoint, many researchers in SLL discredit the behaviorist language learning theory and the psychological foundations of CA are thus seriously shaken. Slama-Cazaw (1971: 59), cited in James (1980: 20), argues that within the framework of cognitive psychology "transfer" is considered a "controversial" and "hypothetical concept." Newmeyer and Weiberger (1988: 37) state that:

Just as Chomsky's 1959 review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior (1957) knocked out the underpinnings from the behaviorist psychology to which early contrastive analysis owed its theoretical rationalization, the first chapter of his 1965 book Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, by outlining a theory of language acquisition in terms of an innate "language acquisition device" that facilitated the learning of abstract grammar rules, made any sort of contrastive analysis seem theoretically suspect.

If the **contrastive-based** error analysis fails to account for the explanation of learners' errors in SLL, the **non-contrastive** approach offers the alternative. One of the major contributions of the **non-contrastive** based error analysis is its recognition of **non-interference** errors in the process of SLL. This is the core of what is called **ERROR ANALYSIS [EA]**. Brown (1987: 171) observes that one of the major distinctions between **contrastive analysis** and **error analysis** is that the latter examines errors whatever their source. Consequently, EA overshadows CA as a better tool in understanding L2 learners' errors and hence the process of SLL.

1.4 Implications of Error Analysis

In theory and practice of SLL, EA has some significant implications. Most literature of EA supports the following implications with regard to the process of SLL:

1. L2 learners' errors are the result of multi-factors; errors may occur both as a result of L1 interference [interlingual errors] or the incomplete interim grammar of the L2 learner [intralingual errors]. One basic assumption that stems from the concept of intralingual errors is that several L2 learners' errors are universal and common to both first and second language learning. Studies made by error analysts support the assumption that all L2 learners would commit similar errors irrespective of the learner' L1 background. In one of their empirical studies in SLL, Dulay and Burt (1973), for instance, report that child learners of English with Chinese and Spanish L1 backgrounds have acquired eleven English structures in the same sequence. Richards (1974) provides tables of errors made by learners from several L1 backgrounds. These errors are quite similar, a fact that empirically supports the claims of EA.

2. Errors on the part of the L2 learners should not be viewed as unpardonable sins. Errors, in the process of SLL, are not only natural and inevitable, but they are also significant. On the **significance** of learners' errors Corder (1981: 10-11) states that:

A Learner's errors, then provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using (i.e. has learned) at a particular point in the course They are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learnt or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly (and in a sense this is their most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner can use in order to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of language he is learning.

Chastain (1976: 65) hopes that future investigations in EA may provide much more information about the nature of learners' errors. This will give useful insights into the process of SLL and thus "provide clues to more efficient teaching-learning procedures." However, not all researchers in SLL would agree on this proposed significance of L2 learners' errors. On the **insignificance** of L2 learners' errors Hamilton (2001) argues that the cognitivist hypothesis of interlanguage neither explains nor provides a principled basis for classroom practice. He suggests that this approach adopted by the proponents of EA may divert attention from the contexts and practical situation in which errors occur.

3. In EA CA is assigned an explanatory role, which is to be called the **weak version** of the CAH. In this weak version of the CAH, CA is used **a posteriori** to explain a subset of L2 learners' errors; it is no longer used as **a priori** procedure involving the prediction of almost all L2 learners' errors on the basis, of L1 interference. Thus, CA is seen as a useful approach within a broader framework of explaining L2 learners' errors.

4. The cognitive approach of EA, which views SLL as a process of **hypothesis-testing**, leads to the coinage of the concept of "**INTERLANGUAGE**" which is introduced by Selinker (1972). Other similar terms coined by error analysts are "**approximative systems**"(Nemser, 1971), "**idiosyncratic dialects**" and "**transitional competence**" (Corder, 1971), the learner's "**built-in syllabus**" (Corder, 1967), and "**creative constructions**" (Dulay and Burt, 1973). As Mizuno

(1988) states, **interlanguage analysis** [IA] regards the **transitional linguistic system for the learner's L1 to the TL** as **interlanguage** [IL]. The goals of IA, as Mizuno (1991) states them, include the establishment of a well-knit theory of SLA, the elucidation of teaching and learning methods and materials, and the establishment of a "data-bank of universal grammar." Thus, SLA research, according to Mizuno (1988), needs to examine the common and differing elements of L1, TL, and IL as they relate to the learning strategies employed by L2 learners.

5. SLL, as opposed to L1 learning, is generally characterized by a lack of success with few learners achieving complete mastery of the TL system. Thus, the learner's IL is in a state of constant change. It is always revised as the learner encounters new language items, and absorbs them. As Benson (2002: 69) argues, "Interlanguage(the learner' interim grammar of the L2) is not fixed and rigid like the L1, but 'permeable'" Thus, the learner's IL becomes more complex and sophisticated. However, as Daniels (2000: 218) argues:

... the general lack of success of second and foreign language learners would lead us to anticipate that there is likely to be a point when this progress comes to a halt and learning stops. It is this point which is characterised as fossilisation.

Selinker (1974: 36) claims that at one of the main issues in the L2 learners' IL is the phenomenon of **fossilization**. He states that:

Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a 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 explanation and instruction he receives in the TL.

Mallows (2002) argues that a learner's IL develops "organically" and is "constantly changing and reacting to the feedback it receives." In some way it could be seen as an "open system" moving towards the "strange attractor which gives it both impetus and order." **Fossilisation**, thus, may occur due to the learner's "interlanguage becoming closed, and settling to a fixed- point."

Fossilization in the process of SLL is identified by comparing the different states of the learner's IL. The theory of **fossilisation** is associated with Selinker (1972) and his work on IL. Ellis

(1994) examines possible reasons for **fossilisation** and finds no single cause. Selinker (1974: 35) identifies five central processes associated with **fossilisation**: language transfer, strategies of SLL, strategies of SLC, and overgeneralization of TL material. The combination of these processes produces what might be seen as entirely **fossilised** IL competence, for language development has stopped.

6. The making of errors, within the perspective of EA, is viewed as the natural route followed by both children acquiring their L1 and L2, teachers "should be more tolerant of students' errors in initial and immediate stages of language learning." (Chastain, 1976: 63).

1.5 The Concept of "Error" in Error Analysis

EA nurtures a more tolerant view towards L2 learners' errors in comparison with that of CA. This is because language learning is no longer seen as a process of **habit-formation** but rather a process of **hypothesis-formation** and **testing**. Within the perspectives of EA, L2 learner's errors are regarded as inevitable, natural, and essential part of language learning process. Ellis (1999: 53) claims that one of the "most significant" roles of EA is its "success in evaluating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner workings of the language learning process." Newmeyer and Weiberger (1988: 37) state that within the cognitive approach of E.A:

... errors made by the learner took on a particularly central status. They are no longer habits to be eradicated, nor an inevitable by-product of the conflict resulting from the distinct structures, levels, and rules of two grammars; they are now evidence support the constructive hypothesis of the learner.

Harste, Woodward, and Burke (2000) eloquently express the view that errors are inherent in the process of language learning itself:

The openness of language leads to both creativity and error. That the process which leads to creativity is also the process which leads to error is something we must accept; but clearly, since we cannot have one without the other, then we cannot ignore, confine or fail to appreciate or to encourage this process.

Ultimately, however, the question of error comes down to the defining question: what exactly do we mean by an error? Lennon (1991: 181-182) maintains that "errors do not constitute as easily recognizable a feature as might be imagined. There are, in fact, great problems in unambiguously defining error, and considerable variation is to be found even among native speakers in error identification." However, researchers in SLL usually distinguish between errors of competence and errors of performance or mistakes. Brown (1987: 170) suggests that it is important to make a distinction of errors and mistakes in order to achieve a proper analysis of L2 learners' errors. Corder (1981: 10) makes a distinction between **errors** "which are the product of such chance circumstances" for which he reserves the term **mistake**, and those **errors** which reveal imperfection in the learner's "underlying knowledge of language" or his "transitional competence." According to Corder, errors of competence are the application of rules, which do not correspond to the L2 norm, while mistakes or errors of performance are slips of the tongue, which are the results of the learner's failure to use the L2 rules due to some sort of imperfection in the production of linguistic items. In accordance with Corder's approach, Hubbard et al. (2000: 327) state that an error is an "imperfect production caused by genuine lack of knowledge about the language," while a mistake is a "slip of the tongue etc. which the student can self-correct when challenged" However, Ellis (1999: 68), who recognizes the "practical difficulties" about this approach, maintains that Corder's proposed distinction of 'errors' and 'mistakes' is probably unworkable in practice. Corder himself (1981: 10) acknowledges that the question of "determining what is a learner's mistake and what is a learner's error is one of some difficulty and involves a much more sophisticated study and analysis of errors than is usually accorded them."

This is clear from the fact that Corder's distinction between errors of competence and performance suffers from serious practical limitations. This distinction is based on the discrepancy between the learner's knowledge of language rules and his actual use of language. The root of this notion is Chomsky's famous distinction between '**competence**' and '**performance**.' However, this distinction is too abstract to capture the concrete problems of SLL. After all, what is the learner's competence if it is not reflected in his performance? Van Els et al. (1984: 60-61) argue that "a large number of [L2 learners'] errors of performance may indicate lack of automaticity in using language skills, and therefore a lack of L2 competence on the part of the L2 learner." Lengo (1995:20-21) offers a similar view. He states that the distinction

between the deviations made by native speakers and L2 learners "derive" from competence. L2 learners' deviations are made as a result of their "paucity of knowledge" of the TL system, while deviations made by native speakers are "dismissed" as slips or mistakes.

Though Ellis and Lengo's views may lead to consider all second language learners' deviations as proper errors and thus serve for the practical purpose of this study, much theoretical issues still remain unresolved with regard to the distinction of errors and mistakes. Also, Corders' operational procedure to distinguish errors and mistakes by checking the learner for the explicit knowledge of L2 rules when he produces a deviant form is not always reliable. As Van Els et al. (1984: 60) argue, it is "possible that an L2 learner can recognize and repair his error on the basis of explicit L2 knowledge, but at the same time retains them in actual L2 use."

Another question in the specification of L2 learners' errors is the question of norm. Corder (1973: 259) refers to errors as "breaches of the code." Errors are seen as deviations from what is regarded as the TL norms. But the question is: **what this norm is.** Klassen (1991: 10) chooses the native speaker's judgment as the norm for L2 learners' errors. She defines an error as "a form or structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use." Richards et al. (1989: 95) express a similar view when they define a second language learner's error in speech or writing as the "use of a linguistic item in a way which, according to fluent users of the language, indicates faulty or incomplete learning." However, these definitions pose other new questions: **What is the criterion of this "native speaker" who serves as a norm for L2 learners' errors? And what is the criterion of "appropriate use"?** As Lengo (1995: 20) observes "languages have different varieties or dialects with rules that differ from the standard. Additionally, native speakers have different rules . . . there is not always a clear-cut boundary between errors and non-errors." It seems to be a hopeless case, but Lengo (1995: 21) offers the solution. He rightly argues that the "native speaker by whom Chomsky and other linguists swear is probably not an illiterate person." Lengo further adds that the "appropriate use" against which L2 learners' errors are checked is the "standard variety of the target language." He explains that while deviant forms produced by illiterate native speakers are considered as "non-standard", L2 learners' deviant forms are mostly **errors** that show their stage of

development and could be "tested against the norm of the standard variety of the target language."

However, Lennon (1991: 180-182) doubts the **reliability** of using native speaker's judgment as the norm for L2 learners' errors. Lennon argues that, ". . . considerable variation is to be found even among native speakers in error identification." To support his argument Lennon reports Hughes and Lascaratou's (1982) **experiment** on the native and non-native speakers' judgments on errors. In this **experiment** Hughes and Lascaratou present thirty two erroneous and four correct sentences to a group of thirty judges: (1) ten Greek teachers of English, (2) ten native-speaker teachers of English and (3) ten native-speaker non-teachers. The findings of the **experiment** show that one of the correct sentences is judged 'erroneous' by two Greek teachers, three native-speaker teachers, and five of the non-teacher native speakers. Another of the 'correct' sentences is judged 'erroneous' by two Greek teachers, nine native-speaker teachers, and nine of the non-teacher native speakers' judgement on errors. However, Lennon's argument is weak. If a panel of native speaker disagree on the status of only one or two sentences, this would not **invalidate** the criterion of using the native-speakers' judgment as the norm of measuring L2 learners' errors. This argument is supported by the findings of another **experiment** conducted by Hughes and Lascaratou (1981) and reported in Woods et al. (1993: 155). In this **experiment** three groups of judges are presented with 32 sentences, each one contains a single error. Ten of these judges are native speaker teachers, ten are Greek teachers of English and ten are native speaker non- teachers. This **experiment** is concerned with the evaluation of errors in these sentences. Each judge is asked to rate each sentence on a **0----5 scale**. A score 0 to indicate that there is no error, while a scale of 5 shows that the error is very serious. The total scores assigned for each sentence by the two groups of native speakers are displayed in the following table reproduced from Woods et al. (1993: 208).

Table [1]

The Scores of two Groups of Native Speakers' Judgment of Errors

Sentence	Group	
	(1) Native teachers	(2) Native-Speaker Non-Teachers
1	22	22
2	16	18

3	42	42
4	25	21
5	31	26
6	36	41
7	29	26
8	24	20
9	29	18
10	18	15
11	23	21
12	22	19
13	31	39
14	21	23
15	27	24
16	32	29
17	23	18
18	18	16
19	30	29
20	31	22
21	20	12
22	21	26
23	29	43
24	22	26
25	26	22
26	20	19
27	29	30
28	18	17
29	23	15

30	25	15
31	27	28
32	11	14

$$\bar{x}_1 = 25.30$$

$$\bar{x}_2 = 23.65$$

$$SD_1 = 6.25$$

$$SD_2 = 8.60$$

$$r = 0.772$$

The correlation coefficient [**r**] between the scores of the two groups is 0.772. This **r** is significant at 0.001P-value. This result indicates the reliability of the of native speakers' judgment as a norm for L2 learners' errors.

1.6 The Process of Error Analysis

EA is a many-fold process; it has a series of five steps: **Recognition, description, explanation, evaluation** and **prevention** or **correction** of errors. These five steps are systematically ordered. Each one logically depends on the former steps. Corder (1978: 126), for instance, observes that "Recognition of errors is crucially dependent upon correct interpretation of the learner's intention. *Description can only begin when recognition has taken place.*" This statement of Corder shows how immense and intricate the process of EA is.

Researchers in EA identify two aspects of the discipline. Ellis (1999: 53) identifies a **linguistic** as well as a **psychological** aspect in the process of EA. Corder (1978: 126) maintains that L2 learners' errors could linguistically be explained when we explore the way in which the learner "has deviated from the realization" of the TL rules. Also L2 learners' errors could be explained from a "psycho-linguistic" point of view, when we explore the causes of this deviation from the TL system.

For a linguistic explanation of errors, Richards (1974: 182 -188), for example, provides a list of tables of EFL learners' errors from different native language backgrounds. He shows the way these learners break the "realization" of TL rules. According to Corder (1973: 277), errors could linguistically be classified into four main categories: **omission, addition, selection, and misordereing**. However, Ellis (1999: 52) argues that information deduced from this type of classification is not very significant when it comes to understand the "learners' developmental sequence." Ellis argues that SLL is an ever-changing "process about which this type of linguistic

classification reveals very few information." On the other hand, Ellis (1999: 53) argues that the psycholinguistic explanation of L2 learners' errors is more informative about the strategies used in L2 learners' interlanguage.

In terms of this psycholinguistic explanation of L2 learners' errors researchers in EA introduce the concept of **intralingual errors**, an explanation of the source of errors, which extends beyond just the concept of **interlingual errors** which, is recognized by the proponents of CA as the main or only source of errors. Chastain (1976: 67) explains what an intralingual error is as follows:

An interlanguage error is not the result of conflict with native language but the result of some problem in the acquisition of second language itself. Intralingual errors arise from the lack of congruity between the second-language learner's set of rules and those of native speaker. These errors are termed developmental or restructuring errors are the direct result of the learner's attempt to create language based on their language hypotheses about the systems they are learning.

It is obvious that Chastain makes no distinction between **intralingual** and **developmental** errors. However, Richards (1974: 147) treats developmental errors as a distinct category of errors. Intralingual errors according to Richards are "those which affect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rule learning, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply," while developmental errors "illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the language from his limited knowledge of it in the class room or textbook." However, the distinction between intralingual and developmental errors is not clearly revealed from these two definitions. As Dulay et al. (1982: 145) observe, Richard's taxonomy of learners' errors makes it crystal-clear that most developmental errors are intralingual errors. Lo Coco (1976: 99), cited in Dulay et al. (1982: 145), offers a more loose view of what an intralingual error is. He states that "Intralingual errors occur when an L1 does not have a rule which L2 has, the learner applies an L2 rule, producing an error." This implies that whenever an error could not be attributed to L1 interference, it is treated as an intralingual error.

However, Dulay et al. (1982) present a radically different view with regard to the description and explanation of L2 learners' errors. They argue that in the literature of EA there is a gross

confusion between the description of L2 learners' errors and the explanation of their sources. Delay et al. (1982: 141) maintain "the description of an error refers to the product of language acquisition whereas the explanation of an error -the determination of its origins- refers to the language acquisition process." These two processes, as Dulay et al. argue, are quite dissimilar in every aspect. That while the description of errors entails the study of learners' verbal performance, the explanation of errors involves determining the processes responsible for these errors, which is a matter of **inference** and could not easily be attained. Dulay et al. (1982: 144) further add that the classification of errors according to their hypothesized sources takes up "a good portion" of EA, but it is all without avail. Such type of classification has two prerequisites:

"1. An error has one source, and

2. The specification of this source is relatively straightforward."

As Delay et al. (1982: 144) argue, "neither of these assumptions seems to hold up." Van Els et al. (1984: 61) argue that "it is . . . often far from easy to make a distinction between inter- and intralingual deviations from the L2 norm, because it often remains unclear which operating principle the L2 learner in fact uses." Van Els et al. bring instances of deviations made by learners of English with a German background. Two of these deviations would suffice here to show the alternative possibilities for explaining the source of errors, and hence the difficulty of the **specification** of the source of a particular error:

***(1) The futural design of the metro.**

***(2) It is an unordinary event.**

In the case of the first underlined deviation the "**operating principle**" might be **L2 interference** and the error is interpreted as a result of an "innovation analogous to **zukunftig**." [*the adjective from the German noun **Zukunft** which means **future***] Or it might be the **overgeneralization of L2 rules**, and the error is explained as an "**innovation analogous to structural**." In the case of the second underlined deviation the "**operating principle**" might also be **L1 interference** and the error is interpreted as a result of an "innovation analogous to **ungewöhnlich** [**extraordinary**]." Or, on the other hand, the error might be seen as an "**over application**" of **L2 rules** and explained as a result of an "innovation analogous to uncertain etc."

Olsson (1974: 67) reports a similar case from L2 learners of English with a Swedish background:

...The regularization of the irregular pattern verb inflection is due to intralingual interference, but it is also a learner characteristic. The *s*-ending added to the verb is here considered to be conditioned both by the *s*-passive in Swedish and by over-generalization of the *-s* in the third person singular in English. Consequently, it has been subsumed under the two headings intralingual interference and interlingual interference.

(Dulay et al, (1982: 143) et al, (1982: 143).

All this shows the practical difficulty or impossibility of assigning a particular L2 learner's error to a specific source. It shows that the concept of **intralingual errors** adopted by error analysts is as vague and impractical as that of **interlingual errors** proposed by contrastive analysts. They both fail to account for the L2 learners' errors. The problem with them is that they are based on a pseudo-explanation of the complex and intricate process of SLL.

However, even if we accept the simple classification of L2 learners' errors into **inter-and interlingual** errors and set absolute criteria for this classification, the interpretation of L2 learners' errors would not be easy as it seems to be. As Dulay et al. (1982: 145) put it; an error, which seems to be analogous to a form or structure in the learner's L1 could not be "automatically" referred to L1 interference. Similarly, an error, which seems to be developmental, could not unequivocally be attributed to L2 system. There are, in fact, complex mental processes that underlie such errors.

1.7 A Reappraisal of Error Analysis

One of the objectives of this study is to review the traditions of EA in order to set up a sound framework for the analysis of errors on English verb forms made by students of English at O.I.U. However, as the review of literature of EA indicates, the methods and procedures of EA are afflicted with a number of serious limitations, which should be overcome in order to establish a firm and sound framework for this study.

For instance, Van Els et al. (1984: 60-67) observe that, "any serious attempt to describe L2 phenomena in terms of EA will encounter serious limitations." First, the **distinctions** error analysts attempt to draw between **errors** and **mistakes** are **invalid** in so many cases. Second,

the procedure of EA cannot **unequivocally** explain the **source** of L2 learner's errors. This last statement deals the strongest blow to EA. Additionally, many a researcher observes that EA does not **provide** any **insight** into the course of SLL process; it only offers a synchronic or statistic picture of the learner's "sequence of development." Ellis (1999:68), for instance, argues that because EA examines learner language at a single point in time, it does not shed light on the "developmental route learners take." Dulay et al. (1982: 141) see the crisis of EA in the following points:

"(1) the confusion of error description of errors with error explanation,"

"(2) the lack of precision and specificity in the definition of error categories," and

" (3) simplistic categorization of the causes of learners' error."

Another serious criticism of EA is that it also fails to tackle the learners' **avoidance** of certain forms and structures of the L2. Schachter (1974) reports that Chinese and Japanese learners of English commit fewer errors in English relative clause production than Spanish, Persian, and Arabic learners of English. This is because Chinese and Japanese students avoid producing relative clause because they know that these structures would be problematic. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 62) comment that ". . . in none of these cases [of avoidance] would an analysis of errors alone have uncovered these apparent areas of difficulty."

Given the present state of the art, there is no definitional resolution on the concept of **error** in the process of EA. However, in order to carry a meaningful analysis of any type of errors, there should be a consideration of the specific situation and context in which these errors occur. It seems that most of the debate on the status of errors and mistakes stems from the concentration on spoken rather than written performance of L2 learners. This concentration is one of the characteristic features of the descriptive school of linguistics, which advocates the assumption that the proper field of the linguistic inquiry is speech rather than writing. But as Radford (1988: 9) rightly argues:

There is a sense, however, in which the whole debate about whether we concentrate on the written or spoken language is a non-issue. For, after all, what we are seeking to describe is ... the speaker's competence, i.e., his linguistic knowledge. This is a mental property,

which commonly has two physical manifestations (in the form of written or spoken language).

For practical reasons, this study tackles errors on English verb forms in the written performance of the study subjects. Hence, the question of the distinction between errors and mistakes is not crucial here. Because the written language is more deliberate, in the sense that students spend a fair time in choosing or producing a particular construction, this would allow for a more restricted definition of the concept of **error** and would exclude **lapses** and **mistakes** as described in most of the literature of EA. This may lead to accepting a view expressed by Dulay et al. (1982: 139) that an error is "any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter the characteristics or causes of deviation might be."

The problem that EA does not account for learner's strategy of avoidance stems mainly from the fact that most researchers in EA tackle only learners' errors of production. In this study, both errors of production and recognition are treated. This undoubtedly will make EA more informative about certain aspects of the SLL process. Richards and Sampson (1974: 17) maintain that:

Since most studies of second language learners systems have dealt with the learner's production rather than his comprehension of language, the question also arises as whether the grammar by which the learners understood speech is the same as that by which he produces speech,....

Troike (1969) also argues in favour of investigating learners' comprehension of language. He observes that since a learner of EFL "understands" the rules of the standard language, but fails to cope with them in actual production of the language, the exploration of the "distinction between his receptive competence . . . and his productive competence . . . may be useful." (Richards and Sampson, 1974: 12). Corder (1973: 269-63) argues that "if . . . it are established that receptive and productive abilities are regularly unequal then it might be necessary to question the validity of the concept of 'competence' as neutral between expressive and receptive behaviour."

The question of the classification of L2 learners' errors within the cognitive approach of EA is tackled earlier in this chapter. The categorization of errors into inter- and intralingual errors is shown to be inadequate and impractical in so many cases. But even allowing for the problem aroused by the introduction of the concept of **intralingual** errors, the subdivisions proposed by Richards (1974) are far from being precise and satisfactory. Richards (1974: 174) classifies the intralingual and developmental errors as follows:

- 1- **overgeneralization**: the device of using previously learnt strategies of L2 in the acquisition of new L2 items.

Example: see ----- seed [saw].

- 2- **ignorance of rule restriction**: the device of extending the rules to areas in which they do not apply.

Example: I want him to ----- I make him to do.

- 3- **incomplete application of rules**: the failure to learn a complete type of structures because there are simple ones, the learner finds communicative.

Example: when came you? ----- instead of: when did you come?

- 4- **false concept hypothesized**: this refers to deviations that result from faulty comprehension of the L2 distinction.

As earlier stated, Ellis (1999) considers these explanations of L2 learners' errors more relevant to the question of the strategies of the learners' interlanguage. However, it is not clear in which sense these explanations could be relevant to the learner' "strategies" in SLL. As Jain (1974: 190) acknowledges it, it is difficult to assign L2 learners' errors to certain psychological explanations. Jain also admits that in SLL, learners' "psychological processes ... in terms of learning strategies can at best marginally inferred from his performance data." From this statement of Jain, it is obvious that the explanations of L2 learners' errors in terms of their developmental causes reveal little about the L2 learners' "strategies" in the process of SLL. Moreover, Richards' categorization makes no clear-cut boundary between each of the types of errors proposed. For instance, the distinction between errors of "overgeneralization" and errors of "incomplete application of L2 rules" is not clearly stated. Richards (1974: 174) states that,

"overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structures on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language." In Richards' categorization, some of the errors which occur due to overgeneralization are the following:

***1- he can sings**

***2- we are hope**

***3- it is occurs**

***4- he come from**

At the same time Richards (1974: 157) defines "ignorance of rule restrictions" as the "failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures , that is , the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply." This is overgeneralization itself put in other words. The example of errors Richards attributes to the ignorance of "restriction in the distribution of make" [I make him to do] could also be attributed to an overgeneralization of the verb + "to-initiative" for Richards (1974: 176) himself admits that ignorance of rule restriction is "a type of generalization or transfer, since the learner is making use of a previously acquired rule in a new situation." Richards also treats "**analogy**" in the misuse of prepositions "as an instance of ignorance rule restrictions." In fact, analogy is nothing but "another term for OVERGENERALIZATION." (Richards et al, 1989: 12).

In addition, Richards' notion of "false concept hypothesized" is too vague to reveal any information about the causes of SLL errors. These errors, according to Richards (1974: 178), "derive from faulty comprehension of distinctions in target language." This definition is quite uninformative. Within the cognitive framework of EA, almost all L2 learners' errors are attributed in some way or another to "**faulty**" hypotheses about the L2 system in the learner's mind. The question that remains unresolved yet, is **why are these faulty concepts hypothesized in the process of SLL?**

Additionally, Richards' proposal of "incomplete application of rules" offers nothing new or interesting about the causes of L2 learners' errors. It shows that learners do not apply certain rules [omit certain forms and structures of the L2] but it tells nothing why this omission occurs. This is one of the instances in which the literature of EA confuses the explanation of errors with their description.

Another proposed explanation of L2 learners' errors within the framework of intralingual errors is that of **simplification**. Richards et al. (1989: 269) state that the "term [simplification] sometimes used to describe what happens when the learner makes use of rules which are grammatically less complex than TARGET LANGUAGE rules," This explanation does not help much in understanding the causes of L2 learners' errors. James' (1980: 159) counter-argument to such explanation is that:

It would be misleading to suggest that learners take target L2 forms and then simplify them, since if they could "take" these forms in the first place they would have no need to modify them – they could assimilate them in their full form.

But even if we accepted the use of the term **simplification** as Corder (1975), quoted in James (1980: 150), uses it to describe forms that are "less complex" than the TL forms rather than the L2 forms being simplified by the learner, this would reveal very little about the psychological process in SLL. Errors of **simplification**, like the category of **incomplete application of rules**, falls into what is linguistically called **errors of omission**.

This discussion reveals one fact: that Richards' **non-contrastive** explanation of L2 learners' errors is as unreliable as the contrastive explanation. Both seem to derive from a pseudo-understanding of L2 learners' strategies and SLL process.

Corder (1973: 271-2) attempts a different procedure to classify L2 learners' stage of development. In terms of Corder's criterion, errors are put into three categories: **(1) pre-systematic, (2) systematic, and (3) post-systematic**.

According to Corder, "pre-systematic" errors are those made while the learner is still attempting to make his hypotheses about the new language system, while "systematic" errors are those made when the learner "has formed some concepts of hypotheses which of the point of issue which are, however, wrong in some way." Errors, which are related to this type of inaccurate hypotheses regularly occur in the process of SLL. The third type of post-systematic errors covers deviant language forms, which occur where previously systematic errors have been corrected and that the rule has been rightly understood, but performance is inaccurate, because

the learner has temporarily forgotten the rule. Corder (1973: 272) proposes the following table for the explanation of these three divisions of errors:

Table [2]

Corder's Analysis and Explanation of Errors Divisions

Error type	Correction possible	Explanation possible
1- Pre-systematic	No	No
2- Systematic	No	Yes
3- Post-systematic	Yes	Yes

These three "categories have been widely accepted" by researchers of EA, though different "terminology" is employed. (MC Donough, 1992: 115). But the problem with Corder's division, as MC Donough (1992: 115) puts it, is that:

While this three-way divisional errors is eminently reasonable, and highlights the importance of the formation of hypotheses, their refinement and their eventual fixation, it lacks a robust criterion for an outsider who is not privy to the learner's to operate the division with.

In conclusion, as Dulay et al. (1982:144) argue, an adequate explanation of language learners' verbal performance seems "much too complex to be squeezed into taxonomic formats which are originally designed to classify rocks, flowers and other concrete observable phenomena." Such "taxonomies" might be used to categorize L2 learners' errors "according to directly observable characteristics." However, the fact that L2 learners' errors are difficult to assign to particular category of errors does not mean that these distinctions of error categories are utterly meaningless. In someway these distinctions might highlight some aspects of the process of SLL. But EA should not be merely confined to them. Researchers in EA should divorce the discipline from too much obsession with the far-reached and often impractical explanations of L2 learners' errors, a practice that diverts EA from being a tool for a better understanding of the process of SLL.