

## LOCALLY-ORIENTATED LANGUAGE COURSES\*

Studies in error analysis (EA) and contrastive analysis (CA) carried out in various parts of the world \* have revealed that «between a third and half of learner errors»<sup>2</sup> may be caused by dissimilarity

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<sup>1</sup> In his study of errors made by French-speaking Canadian learners of English R. Sheen found out that 74 % were caused by LI interference (see SHEEN, Ronald, *The importance of negative transfer in the speech of near-bilinguals*, in «IRAL», volume XVIII/2, 1980, pp. 105-119).

Gnutzmann, although he does not supply percentages, admits the importance of interference as a cause of errors in the English of his German students (see GNUTZMANN, Claus, *Zur Analyse lexikalischer Fehler*, in NICKEL, Gerhard, «Fehlerkunde», Berlin, 1972, pp. 67-72).

Yarmohammadi equally recognizes serious interference from Persian in the English of his Iranian learners (see YARMOHAMMADI, Lotfollah, *English consonants and learning problems for Iranians: a contrastive sketch*, in «TESOL Quarterly», vol. 3/2, 1969, pp. 231-236).

Similar confirmation is to be found in Bhatia's study of the English of Indian students (see BHATIA, Aban, *An error analysis of students' compositions*, in «IRAL», vol. XII/4, 1974, pp. 337-350).

Tran-Thi-Chau also discovered that interference from NL [Native Language] or «interlingual interference\*» was the greatest single cause of errors, accounting for approximately 51 per cent of the total number of errors analyzed\* (see TRAN-THI-CHAU, *Error analysis, contrastive analysis and students' perception: a study of difficulty in second-language learning*, in «IRAL», vol. XIII/2, p. 133).

Duskova agrees that interference from the mother tongue of learners is present in such errors as word order, sentence construction, and government in general, thus being a cause of deviancy in the English of fifty Czech postgraduate students (cf. DUSKOVA, Libuse, *On sources of errors in foreign language learning*, in «IRAL», vol. VII/1, 1969, pp. 11-36).

<sup>2</sup> JAMES, Carl, *Contrastive Analysis*, Longman, 1983 (3rd impression), p. 146.

between the learners' mothertongue (LI) and the foreign language (L2) they learn<sup>3</sup>. It seems to happen irrespectively of the native language they have. Errors whose cause is dissimilarity between LI and L2 are usually named interlingual or interference errors.

My own analysis of 3,033 errors made by Portuguese university students of English<sup>4</sup> demonstrates that 43.8 % of the total deviant forms analysed can definitely be attributed to interference from Portuguese. Almost every type of error includes examples of interference: from spelling to phonology, from adjectives to verbs, from pronouns to adverbs, from word/element order to lexis...

It comes as no surprise that the models of the students' native language tend to impose themselves upon their production in the foreign language, but it does surprise the analyst that in some particularly well-known areas of English the teaching process has failed to eliminate interference. A few examples will illustrate what has just been stated.

- (1) a) \* ... that makes possible the study of...  
(... que torna possivel o estudo de...)
- b) \* There is one example very interesting  
(Ha um exemplo muito inteerssante)
- c) \*I knew already what are the problems  
(Eu ja sabia quais eram os problemas)

In these three examples there is alteration of the target order of sentence elements, and the order given by students to the sentences they wrote in English is clear transference of the order that, in their LI, is more frequently used. The Portuguese version of the examples is giveji in brackets to make comparison easier.

Unlike English, Portuguese grammar is not so strict about the direct object immediately following a transitive verb. On the

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<sup>3</sup> MCKEATING, Douglas, *Error analysis* (in ABBOTT, G.; GREENWOOD, J.; MCKEATING, D. & WINGARD, P. (eds.), *The Teaching of English as an International Language*, 1981, pp. 211-234) quotes different figures: «Estimates as to the percentage of errors caused by MT [mother tongue] interference vary from 33 % to as low as 3 %» (p. 230).

<sup>4</sup> TORRE, Manuel Gomes da, *Uma Andlise de Erros: contribuigao para o ensino da lingua inglesa em Portugal*, Porto, 1985 (PhD thesis submitted to the Faculty of Letters Oporto).

other hand the two elements of the expression *tornar possível* are in most cases used together, (1a) plainly reflects a word order habit which was acquired in Portuguese and transferred to the foreign language. The second example, (1b), is typical of elementary stages of English learning in Portugal and can be taken as a proof of the difficulties caused to the learning process by contrasting linguistic items. In Portuguese, attributive adjectives usually follow the nouns that they modify. The first tendency of Portuguese learners of English is to transfer this same order into their production in the L2. In spite of the insistence of many teachers on contradicting such tendencies, as (1b) demonstrates, there are cases in which the power of L1-habits annuls teachers' efforts. It may be argued, of course, that the teachers should have tried harder or that they taught badly, but, even if true, this does not invalidate the general point. And because these cases may occur at advanced levels of the education system, one is led to think that one is in the presence of fossilized deviant forms. It seems more plausible, however, that learners who continue to make errors of the type of (1b) at the end of their university course have never been effectively alerted to the force of interference, which permanently insinuates itself into their foreign language production when they speak or write.

The third example of error is a very interesting one and could be the result of two concomitant factors: one interlingual and the other intralingual. As a matter of fact, in the sort of indirect questions represented by the Portuguese version of (1c), verb/subject inversion is the rule. It is no wonder, then, that Portuguese learners tend to apply this scheme to English, as I believe that, in most of the cases, the students formulate utterances in Portuguese in a first phase and afterwards (or almost simultaneously) translate them into the foreign language, i.e. their bilingualism is coordinate, with a strong Portuguese base and a weaker English base. This factor, however, may be reinforced by the habit of hearing and reading (as well as of speaking and writing) verb/subject inversion in direct questions begun by a *wh-* interrogative pronoun or adverb. What comes afterwards is simple overgeneralization of the 'internalized' word order to cases where it is not admitted by standard rules of English. It is my firm conviction, however, that the interlingual factor plays a more decisive influence in errors like (1c),

Another error which is familiar to all teachers of English in Portugal is the redundant *that* in

- (2) \*Of course that I would spend money  
(Evidentemente/E claro que eu gastaria algum dinheiro)

*Of course* is a phrase of high frequency of occurrence in both oral and written forms of English. If, as some authors believe<sup>5</sup>, exposure to 'comprehensible input' is sufficient condition for the acquisition of foreign-language forms, then the students who committed the errors now being analysed would never have used the redundant *that* after *of course* at the end of their (at least) nine years of English learning. In (2) the immediate cause of error was again LI interference. The fact of having heard and read the correct target form many hundred (or even thousand) times was not enough for errorless acquisition. Something more than simple exposure to L2 forms seems to be necessary.

In the area of lexis, influence of the native language is even more clearly detected. Let us look at some examples.

- (3) a) \*The plot is *actual*  
(O enredo e actual)  
b) \* After the first impact of the *notice*  
(Depois do primeiro impacto da noticia)  
c) \* Music and lecture are my favourite habbys  
(A musica e a leitura sao os meus passatempos favoritos)

Proximity or total coincidence in the spelling of the words in the two languages is no doubt the reason why the underlined words were given a meaning that they do not have in the target language. However, the target words that could have been correctly used, i.e. *modern*, *news*, *reading*, are absolutely familiar to all Portuguese university learners of English, who are certainly able to identify the correct meaning of these words when they happen to hear and read them. Why, then, did the correct words give place to those wrongly used in (3), all of them belonging to the category currently named 'false friends'?

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<sup>5</sup> V.g. KRASHEN, Stephen & TERRELL, Tracy, *The Natural Approach. Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, Pergamon/Alemany, 1983.

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The use of English adjectives is another rich area of deviance. Here are some well-known types:

- (4) a) \* All the Christians beliefs  
(Todas as crengas cristas)
- b) \* messages hostiles to mankind  
(mensagens hostis a humanidade)
- c) \* People will be more happy  
(A gente sera mais feliz)

Adjectives, in Portuguese, either attributive or predicative, always agree with the nouns they modify in number and gender. The students responsible for the first two errors in (4) applied this rule (as to number) of Portuguese grammar to English, though it is hard to believe that they would not be able to correct the mistakes if their attention were called to them. It is equally inconceivable that none of their teachers of English had ever told these students that the concord of adjectives in number does not exist in English. The fact is that the errors were not spontaneously (automatically) avoided. Why does this occur with (theoretically) advanced learners?

Something similar happened in (4c). With very few exceptions, the comparative of superiority of adjectives in Portuguese is 'periphrastic' and not 'inflectional'<sup>6</sup>, irrespective of the number of syllables which any given adjective may contain. Due to LI-habits Portuguese learners of English normally tend to use the periphrastic comparison in cases where the other process (i.e. inflectional) is due. One is again faced with a sort of error which is traditionally considered as very elementary and which learners are supposed to overcome in their early stages of learning English. Why does this happen?

The definite article, both in cases of obligatory use and zero article, is a sea of troubles and the cause of many an error. Asymmetry between the two languages appears to be the main explanation as is show by the following examples.

- (5) a) \*The ethical values represent a norm of conduct  
(Os valores eticos representam uma norma de conduta)

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<sup>6</sup> See QUIRK, Randolph & GREENBAUM, Sidney, *A University Grammar of English*, Longman, 1980, p. 114.

- b) \*The time seems to go from present to past  
(O tempo parece caminhar do presente para o passado)

As Lacey puts it, «the English article system presents a familiar problem to teachers of students whose mother tongue uses articles in a different way»<sup>7</sup>. Portuguese is definitely one of those languages and the examples under (5) show that very clearly. As can be seen in the Portuguese version of the examples, the use of the definite article is compulsory whereas in their English counterparts zero-article is the rule. In (5a) we have a plural count with generic reference, which, according to a rule of English grammar, implies zero-article. The same rule applies to (5b), where the noun is an uncountable. The omission of the article in the Portuguese sentences would minimally sound odd in (5a), and would be definitely incorrect in (5b). The application of Portuguese rules to English was the origin of the errors.

But there are instances of the opposite phenomenon.

- (6) a) \* What for think of others if I'm not happy with myself  
in 0 first place?  
(Para que pensar nos outros se nao estou contente  
comigo proprio em primeiro lugar?) b) \* ... the man  
who was 0 lover of his wife (... o homem que era  
amante da mulher dele)

In (6a) the learner limited herself to 'translating' the Portuguese «em primeiro lugar», an expression in which the definite article is never used in contexts similar to the one above. The explanation for (6b) is also simple, as the student obviously based herself on the Portuguese version given in brackets. Her solution could be correct if she had started from an alternative Portuguese form, which is perfectly 'grammatical' (i.e. «... que era o amante da mulher dele») and in which the definite article is used. If the student had translated this correct alternative into English, her solution in this language would also be correct. This is a hypothesis that raises the interesting question of how often transfer from the LI is facilitative and passes

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<sup>7</sup> LACEY, Andrew, *Rules in the teaching of English articles*, in «ELTJ», 1977, vol. XXXII/1, p. 33.

unnoticed, especially to error analysts. This, however important, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

My list of examples could be greatly extended, but I think those presented are enough to demonstrate how much the LI interferes with learner's production in the foreign language. Nonetheless, I would not like to finish the list without discussing two other 'popular' types of error:

- (7) \*It is without no doubt  
(E sem dtivida nenhuma)
- (8) \* What is money? He cannot give us...  
(O que e o dinheiro? Ele nao pode dar-nos...)

Unlike English, Portuguese accepts two negative markers within one same clause, something which is not uncommon in some varieties of 'uneducated' English, but which standard usage does not tolerate. Teachers of English in Portugal with some experience usually try to overcome the negative consequences of dissimilarity between the two languages by insisting on this aspect of grammar both when they deal with the formation of the negative and when they teach the use of *some*, *any*, and *no*. The explanation for (7) may be reduced practice with negative constructions or lack of consciousness of the rule that presides over such constructions in English.

Example (8) is certainly more curious still, and here, more than in any other example presented in this paper, the influence of 'thinking in the mother tongue' is manifest. The Portuguese language has only two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine. Because *dinheiro* (money) is masculine in gender, the student used *he* (corresponding to the masculine form of the 3rd person singular of the Portuguese personal pronoun *ele*), thus showing that she was not able to avoid her LI cognitive structures. If Portuguese had the comfortable neutral grammatical gender, many errors like (8) — particularly frequent at elementary and intermediate levels of learning—would certainly be avoided.

What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the sample of errors discussed above? First of all it seems to prove clearly that mother tongue interference is not a mere invention of some linguists and has to be recognized as an important cause of error. As I have already pointed out, I found in my study of university students' errors

that just under 44 percent of the deviances analysed were interlingual. Another obvious conclusion is that a long period of learning at school (at least nine years) was not enough to prevent interference, even in some areas traditionally considered as elementary, i.e. easy to master or early taught.

Besides these two a third conclusion seems to be legitimated by the errors used as examples in this paper (v.g. (7) and (8)): even at advanced levels of learning students 'think' in Portuguese and not directly in the foreign language, even in cases when the stimuli to which they respond are in English. But another conclusion can still be added: that mere exposure to comprehensible input is not a sufficient condition for foreign language acquisition. This conclusion is justified by the long time that the authors of the errors I have used devoted to the learning of the English language; especially as they were in their last four years at university, where, besides attending classes of English, they had to read widely in this language for English and American literatures and cultures.

If my conclusions are correct and the mother tongue is such a significant factor in the production of deviant English, methodologists, textbook writers, and all those directly or indirectly responsible for the teaching of English as a foreign language must not ignore learners' native languages. Something urgent has to be done in order that interlingual errors may be reduced, the teaching/learning process made more efficient, communication in English more accurate.

Error analysts and contrastivists have been unanimous in recognizing the importance of their studies as means to finding the most suitable pedagogical measures in foreign language teaching<sup>8</sup>. Such measures, however, when based on the study of interlingual errors,

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<sup>8</sup> Among others the following could be mentioned: RIVERS, Wilga M., *Contrastive linguistics in textbook and classroom*, in «FORUM», vol. VII/4, 1970, pp. 7-10; GHARESSY, Mohsen, *Implications of error analysis for second/foreign language acquisition*, in «IRAL», vol. XVIII/2, 1980, pp. 93-104; OORDER, S. Pit, *The significance of learners' errors*, in «IRAL», vol. V/4, 1967, pp. 161-170; SOUDEK, Lev L, *Error analysis and the system of English consonants: an application of contrastive phonology in TESOL*, in «ELTJ», vol. XXXI/2, 1977, pp. 125-130; FISIAK, Jacek, *Contrastive Analysis and the Language Teacher*, Pergamon, 1981; JAMES, Carl, *The diagnosis and analysis of error*, in «AVLJ», vol. X/2, 1972, pp. 75-79; and WILKINS, David, *Linguistics in Language Learning*, Edward Arnold, 1972.



have to be locally orientated; that is to say, they must be addressed to learners of a given mother tongue and not to learners of another mother tongue, if the latter is considerably different from the former. Locally-orientated pedagogical attitudes can work pretty efficiently with German or Dutch learners and be irrelevant with Portuguese or Brazilian or Chinese learners of English. This question raises the problem of universal English language courses, i.e. textbooks and complementary teaching materials (e.g. pupils' workbooks, tapes, lab drills, etc.). We all know that a lot of international English language courses are excellent pedagogical works, with well graded linguistic material, imaginative story lines and exercises, attractive illustrations and layouts. But we also know that some of these courses (to varying degrees) insist on particular grammar items, because their authors recognize that such items are traditionally difficult to master by learners, irrespective of their mother tongues, as they are what could be called universal trouble spots. Among these we could mention the third person *-s*, contact relative clauses, 'idiomatic' passive voice with indirect object as surface subject, the use of the operator *do*, etc. If insistence on these particular aspects of English is fully justified by their learning difficulty on the universal scale, nobody of good faith can question this pedagogical strategy. But it cannot be denied either that the points of grammar just mentioned are difficult because they normally contrast with their counterparts in almost all other better known languages.

Why not, then, make courses, and especially textbooks, even more efficient by adapting them to local linguistic circumstances, thus giving specific attention to local trouble spots at the same time as to international difficulties?

Economic (commercial) reasons certainly are serious obstacles to my proposal. ELT publishing is big business nowadays, and, as Esplen very elucidatively puts it, «publishing decisions are not made in a vacuum but in response to market needs»<sup>9</sup>. But the needs he speaks of are not pedagogical, they are commercial instead. The 'global market' he has in mind includes «the UK and Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, Japan, and parts of Asia»<sup>10</sup>. It is

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<sup>9</sup> ESPLEN, Mike, *ELT publishing — state of the art?*, in «IATEFL Newsletters N.º 89, 1985, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

obvious that LI interference in such different countries takes different forms and affects different components and uses of the English language. Therefore pedagogical solutions must be different, too, and «different textbooks will have to be produced for each language group»<sup>IX</sup>.

Publishers and authors of international English teaching materials certainly recognize this reality as well as the advantages of locally-orientated courses, but they comprehensibly hesitate about taking decisive steps towards the solution I am proposing here. Such a change in their publishing policy would obviously imply reduction in profit margin and royalties, something that goes against commercial standards of modern civilization. And, it is even the more obvious, no individual author or group of authors would be able to adapt his/her/their course(s) to all LI-communities where English is learnt as a foreign language. Lado himself was forced to renounce «the task of preparing separate language tests for all language backgrounds» because it was «so enormous that we may never hope to have such tests except for a limited few languages»<sup>12</sup>. The task of preparing English courses for all language backgrounds is even more gigantic and can only be achieved by different authors.

Nevertheless I do not think that a good language course can ever be developed without good knowledge of the native language of the learners to whom it is addressed or without the collaboration of experienced local teachers (be they natives or foreigners), or, alternatively, without access to reliable comprehensive EA data. Publishers could invest in this new modality of courses which aim at comparatively reduced publics. Simultaneously with English for computer science, English for nurses, or hotel English, why not publish separate general-English courses for learners whose L1s are Portuguese, German or Spanish?

If publishers continue their present EFL publishing policies, they will probably see a drop in sales. What is now happening in Portugal may be taken as symptomatic of what the future situation may be. Some years ago, very especially after intensive promotion

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<sup>n</sup> WILKINS, *ob. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>12</sup> LADO, Robert, *Survey of tests in English as a foreign language*, in «Language Learnings vol. X/2, 1950, pp. 51-66.

of the made-in-England CLT (Communicative Language Learning)<sup>13</sup>, one could hardly find a textbook in use in Portuguese state schools that was not a British edition. The present situation is exactly the reverse: you can hardly find a British edition in the very same schools. The main reason for such drastic change is, in my opinion, the absence of local orientation and consequent relative failure in teaching/learning results. Portuguese editions, written by Portuguese authors, and, in some cases, revised by native speakers of English, have been gradually substituted, even though the solution is not ideal for the obvious reason that, as non-native speakers of the language, Portuguese textbook writers, however competent in English, are always limited as to flexibility and authenticity. Naturally, the sort of English presented in their books reflects these limitations, which local teachers cannot compensate for because they have the same limitations themselves. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, such textbooks have found growing favour among Portuguese teachers, and this is certainly due to the consideration of specific problems presented by Portuguese pupils, which makes the use of books easier and teaching more efficient. The lower price of locally-produced materials may play some role in their growing preference, but this factor was ignored some 8-10 years ago, which seems to prove that the cost of the books is not decisive.

My proposal of joint ventures of native-speaking textbook writers and local consultant teachers can be objected to on the basis that any universal coursebook can be complemented by teachers as they use it, thus compensating for the omission of or non-insistence on special language points which require specific local treatment. Nobody could deny value to this argument, but here again the non-native condition of most local teachers has to be considered. In Portugal, the overwhelming majority of teachers of English are Portuguese.

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<sup>13</sup> A very interesting analysis of the efforts made by some entities to promote new methods and approaches is RICHARDS, Jack C, *The secret life of methods*, in «TESOL Quarterly», vol. 18/1, 1984, pp. 7-23, where he shows how much the success of new proposals depends on financial power used in publicity. He considers that CLT's popularity was due to the efforts and investment made by the British Council and British publishers, whereas some other recent methods (v.g. Silent Way, Suggestology, Counselling-Learning, etc.) remained practically unknown to the majority of teachers because their publishers had not the power of promotion which worldwide publicity requires.

This situation means that most of the English which is taught in Portuguese schools is, in the main, the language contained in the textbooks, exercise books, tapes, and auxiliary materials adopted. The majority of teachers honestly recognize their limitations and do not dare to produce their own materials as they fear that what they might produce may not be authentic or even correct. Although what I say should not be taken as a proposal to make teachers slaves to textbooks, it must be admitted that if teachers were left to prepare teaching materials by themselves, results would be even worse than those observed at the moment in Portugal.

In conclusion, what I have said in this article could be summarized in the following points:

- a)* The use of contrastive/error analyses data, where available and representative, could provide indications of local problems in learning English that require specific didactic and methodological treatment.
- b)* Courses should be developed according to what has just been pointed out in *a)*, and the best way of reaching this objective was the collaboration between local experienced teachers and native-speaking course writers.
- c)* Materials produced in obedience to the two preceding points would immensely facilitate the hard task of teachers of English in Portugal.

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