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Interlanguage Features of Adult Learners' Continuous Writing: Implications For Adult Literacy Teaching

Odiaka Stella I. Ph.D
Department of Adult Education,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Abstract

Communication is an indispensable activity in the lives of individuals in society. For proper communication to take place, language as a tool for communication must be adequately developed. Adults and adult learners are constantly in the process of communication, given the various roles they play in society. As a result of varying levels of educational attainment, some adult learners have developed defective interlanguage patterns that have not affected their roles positively. This paper examines the features of adult learners' interlanguage among some Diploma students in the University of Ibadan. Through the use of descriptive research design and random sampling, a group of adult learners' continuous writing skills were examined. Findings revealed that some adult learners lack syntactic competence and mechanical accuracy in their writings. The study, among other things recommends that adult learners be exposed to good literature as well as constant practice in grammar.

Keywords: *Interlanguage; adult learning, continuous writing.*

Introduction

Language has remained an indispensable aspect of human existence over the centuries. At different levels of communication (intrapersonal, interpersonal and mediated forms of communication), language remains the basic entity needed to encode and decode messages. At the intrapersonal level, language is needed to interpret the formulation of ideas going on in one. Since man thinks in language, where the intrapersonal communication is inconsistent, encoding of messages at the interpersonal level may also appear incoherent. It is through the use of language that this incoherency can be identified and probably corrected. Language is therefore a psychological and a social phenomenon. As a social phenomenon, the complexity of language use dwindles as one moves from the high socio-economic status of users to the low socio-economic status (Tizard 1988:9). This categorization of the complexity in language use could be based on the fact that the low working class members who are less exposed than their highly placed counterparts have scanty vocabulary items and simple grammatical structures in their language schema. On the other hand, the high socio-economic status has language users who have been exposed to good schools, educationally enriching experiences therefore, they use elaborate codes.

Education, as a process and as a system, utilizes language to ensure the production of manpower and resource persons who bring about the needed social changes in various communities. In community development, adult literacy and social welfare, language remains a central entity needed to permeate the activities of both urban and rural dwellers with a view to enhancing their standard of living. For the adult learner therefore, the ability to acquire literacy skills and remain functionally literate depends on his or her preparedness to improve his/her language skills. This improvement is very easily noticeable in the adult learner's interlanguage. This paper examines the features of some adult learners' interlanguage with the intention of identifying some problematic areas that affect communication and literary creativity among adult learners. Through this paper, it is hoped that negative interlanguage features which have fossilized and have adversely affected adult learners' written communication, would be addressed.

What is Interlanguage?

Before delving into the meaning of inter-language, it is necessary to examine the meaning of language itself. The term "language" has been defined in various ways by different authors. While some definitions have stressed its utilitarian value, others have looked at language from the point of view of structure. Quoting Dairo, (1997), Odunlami (2005: 103) described language, using the following terms. To him language is seen as:

- a storehouse of knowledge and means by which a community builds up and stores experience and transmits such experience.

- a major means of interaction so that the cultural acquisition/ cultural capital of a community can be communally enjoyed or reproduced.

- a means or retrieval system (bank) through which the culture of a community is stored for succeeding generations.

- a vehicle of thought and expression.

All these descriptions of what language is, reveal that it is necessary for the acquisition of culture as well as social interaction.

Interlanguage refers to the nature of language that exists between the moment a learner begins to learn a language and the moment he/she attains full approximation of the target language. It is the continuum between the acquisition of L_1 and the full acquisition of L_2 as represented below.

$$L_1 \mathbin{\vert\underline{\hspace{7cm}}\vert} L_2$$

(Interlanguage   )

As a language (L_2) learner gets exposed to the grammar, lexis, phonemes and writings of a target language, a form of language expression is formulated which he uses for communication. This form of expression has certain defects that reduce gradually as the learner approximates L_2. The kind of language that constitutes the language repertoire of the L_2 learner as he gradually internalizes

the content of the target language is known as interlanguage. Richards (1985:62) defined interlanguage as "a term that came to refer to a dynamic and evolving linguistic system that the learner constructed from target language input through the use of innate learning strategies and heuristics". This definition obviously points to the fact that interlanguage implies a progressive acquisition of the target language which is characterized by certain errors and idiosyncrasies.

According to Richards (1985: 65), error analysis and interlanguage analysis emerged as a reaction to the view of second-language learning proposed by contrastive analysis theory. While contrastive analysis theory attributes all errors in second language learning to mother tongue interference, interlanguage analysis views sources of errors from different perspectives .Such errors that manifest in the second language learners' writing or speech are seen as developmental errors. It is believed that if there errors are studied, they can reveal the cognitive processes involved in the learners' language processing patterns. Such errors are not termed "mistakes" but they are errors that persist and are difficult to drop because the speaker or writer has internalized them and they are continually part of his speech.

Types of Errors in Second Language Learners' Interlanguage

Three different theories within the Second Language Acquisition theories (SLA) have dwelt extensively on the nature of errors committed by learners while approximating L_2. The theories are Contrastive Analysis theory, Error Analysis theory and the theory of Inter Language. Richards (1988: 62-63).

Contrastive analysis attributes language learning errors exclusively to mother tongue interference where phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features in the native language are transferred to the target language. The point of departure between contrastive analysis and interlanguage theory is that the former attributes all errors to mother tongue interference while the later describes some errors as developmental errors. For instance, in Yoruba language, the third person plural pronoun "They"

is used for an elderly person; if this is transferred to English language, it is purely a case of interference. Other errors, however, exist which are not attributable to language transfer. For example sentences like these do not reflect interference:

➢ Wole, he didn't come here, he did?

➢ We runned down there immediately.

The sentences above purely reflect strategies adopted by both adult and children to gradually arrive at correctness in the target language. Error analysis views errors committed by learners with a view to identifying the sources of such errors.

Different scholars (Corder 1967: 162- 169; Nsakala 1990:1; Choon 1993:1) have investigated the nature of errors in the written and spoken expressions of second language learners. Choon (1993:1) asserts that such errors, if properly handled, are necessary tools for adequate learning and teaching of the English language.

Quoting Corder (1973: 259) and Nskala (1990:4), Jibowo (2005:6) classified possible language errors as follows:
- omission of some required elements;
- addition of some unnecessary or incorrect elements;
- selection of an incorrect element; and
- disordering of elements.

Rogers' (1985: 48 -60) ideas share great similarities with Jobowo's concept of classification of errors. According to Rogers developmental errors within the interlanguage continuum are classifiable into four; they are as follows:

Overgeneralization: this kind of error has to do with "the use of previous available strategies in new situation…" overgeneralization is reflective of deviation that occurs because the language learner, from his experience of other structures, uses such structures where the context does not permit them. Examples are:
* We are hope
* I was not found it
*He does not has it.
"They are sing". .

A major aspect of overgeneralization is where a learner uses the same tense form to represent other tense forms like transferring the single present tense to a situation where the present continuous tense should be used, for instance: "He sings" – Simple present tense "He is sings" – used as present continuous tense.

- *Ignorance* of rule restriction. This refers to the application of rules where they do not occur.
- Incomplete application of rules. Here, for example, a language learner may structure questions and still retain the basic pattern of declaration sentences e.g. 'He is here?".
- False concept hypothesized – Here, there is a total misunderstanding of how the structures of the language should be used to reflect meaning. This type of confusion is regularly seen in students' use of the words "too" and "very". These areas of confusion could have arisen from the methods of presentation of learning items by various teachers or by the strategies adopted by learners to understand each structure.
- In this paper, the features of adult learners' interlanguage will be examined based on the following guidelines:
- errors of generalization
- general commendable features in written expression
- ignorance of rule restriction
- incomplete application of rules
- other frequently occurring errors.
- disorderly presentation of items

Statement of the Problem

A common weakness exists among adult learners who, having lost touch with classroom learning, resume language learning at a later stage in life. Majority of these adults experience fossilization and limited code in their language use.

This paper therefore investigates the features of the adult learners' written expressions with a view to identifying those features that hamper communication. It is expected that the findings from this investigation would enable the adult language facilitator to overhaul the language and literacy curriculum of the adult learners.

Research Questions

To carry out this investigation the following questions will be asked:

(a) What kinds of errors are generally found in adult learners writing?

(b) To what extent do they commit the following errors?
- errors of generalization
- incomplete application of rules
- disorderly presentation of items

(c) Are there features in adult learners writing that are commendable?

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive research design.

Population for the Study

The population used for the study comprised all the 100 and 200 level Diploma students registered for the Distance Learning Programme(2008/2009 session) in the University of Ibadan.

Sampling and Sampling Techniques

Through random sampling, a total number of seventy students (70) was used in the study. These were students who registered for ADD 150 (English Language) and those who registered for ADD 282 (Rural Sociology) during the 2008/2009 academic session. These students carried out continuous writing on a number of occasions and a total number of one hundred and twenty essay scripts were examined by the researcher.

Research Instrument

This was made up of two different types of continuous writing requiring students to express their creative and organizational abilities in writing.

Analysis of Data

Although the scripts were marked using the normal guides of scoring content, expression, organization and mechanical accuracy,

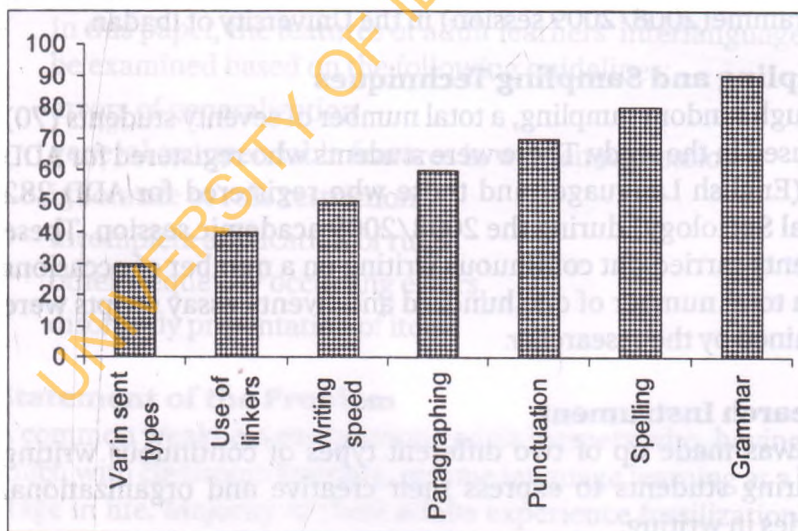frequency counts were taken with regard to the following items:
-    errors of generalization
-    incomplete application of rules
-    disorderly presentation of items
-    interference
-    mechanical accuracy.

Results

In discussing the results accruing from this study, reference will be made to the research questions.

Research question one: What kind of errors are generally found in adult learners' writings?

Table 1: Bar Chart showing the Frequency Distribution of General Errors in Adult Learners' Writings


The table above shows that many defects abound in adult learners' writing. They can be visualized as both mechanical and linguistic errors. The mechanical errors are spelling errors, slow writing speed

and poor punctuation. The linguistic errors are associated with grammar and general presentation of ideas.

Research question two: To what extent do adult learners' commit the following errors:
- error of generalization
- incomplete application of rules
- mechanical inaccuracy
- disorderly presentation of items
- Interference?

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Various Error Types in Students' Continuous Writing
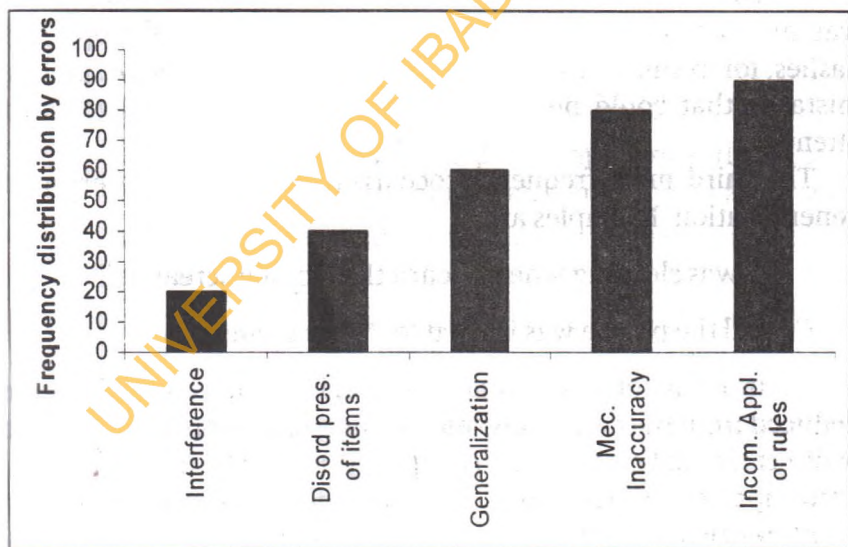
From table two it is obvious that the major weaknesses in adult learners' writing are found in the areas of incomplete application of rules and mechanical inaccuracy.

Research question three: Are there features in adult learners' writing that are commendable?

The study reveals that most adult learners' have the strong tendency to be detailed in their generation and presentation of ideas.

Discussion of Findings

From the analysis of the data collected during this study, and as reflected in table 1, the major error identified was the incomplete application of rules. Such error was seen in sentences like:

- "They wanted it to turn to religion crisis"

- "Mr. Olalokun was the man who usually stay....."

The next form of error in the order of frequency of occurrence was mechanical inaccuracy. Exclamation marks, full-stops and dashes, for example, were omitted at random. There were spelling mistakes that could be easily overcome if students gave them attention.

The third most frequently occurring error was the error of generalization. Examples are:

- "I was sleeping when I heard the women screamed".

- "All the people was invited to these ceremonies".

In terms of interferences, enough evidence could not be deduced from the data analyzed for this paper to prove this. Cases of direct translation were not commonly noticeable in the students' write-ups. A few sentences however, point to mother tongue interference in the scripts examined. Examples are:

- "The government have been warning them to sell market".

- "They sold different kinds of market at the street"

Student showed a positive tendency to express every detail in their writings in highly organized manner.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is obvious that some adult learners have problems as far as continuous writing is concerned. Even though there are tendencies that they can generate ideas and organize them in a fairly acceptable manner, efforts must be made to improve on their content. All the errors classified can be designated as syntactic and mechanical errors.

These two broad areas must be given attention both by the facilitators and the learners themselves. If this is done, speeches and writings by adult learners would be more comprehensible than ever before.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are arrived at:

-   grammatical items should be taught in the adult classes using the communicative language approach.
-   the proper use of punctuation marks should be taught extensively including spelling techniques.
-   adult learners should be made to write frequently, utilizing the instructions on grammar and mechanical accuracy.
-   they should be made to read as many literature texts as possible.
-   they should be encouraged to interact with several literacy materials like newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and radio.
-   literacy materials should be incorporated into the normal language classes to broaden their horizon.

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