

THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO
SRI LANKA

ERROR ANALYSIS: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC STUDY

BY

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN
EDUCATION.

UCLIB



377307

JUNE 1981

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ABSTRACT

Despite seven to nine years of English language learning at school, a majority of Sri Lankan students continue to produce errors at the level of syntax, lexicology, semantics and at the broader levels of communication in the second language.

The purpose of the present study was to identify persistent error types and to trace possible sources of errors. In addition answers were sought to questions arising out of theoretical speculation. These pertained to strategies of language learning and the process of second language acquisition.

Errors were elicited by means of a written test administered to 300 Grade 10 Sinhala students whose medium of education was the mother tongue. Data on the language learning background of the subjects were gathered by means of interviews and observational techniques.

A corpus of material consisting of 10,250 written utterances was subjected to error analysis.

Two main features of this study are: (a) the analysis and quantification of errors according to both error types and sources of errors (b) the consideration of non-linguistic variables as possible sources of error.

The study drew on theories of first and second language learning and current psycholinguistic knowledge in the attribution of causes to errors.

Findings revealed that the subjects' principal English learning problems, in order of difficulty occurred in the following areas. (1) Interrogative forms (2) the Surrogate Subject (3) Negative forms (4) Verb and Tense forms (5) Articles (6) Prepositions (7) Word Order in Declarative (affirmative) sentence forms (8) Expression and Vocabulary.

According to the findings interference from within the target language was the primary source of error. Contrary to expectation mother tongue interference accounted for over 25% of the errors. A small percentage of errors resulted from an apparent cross-association of the mother tongue and the target language. There was a category of errors that was indeterminate as to source. Cultural and conceptual factors also emerged as possible sources of error.

Some interesting language learning strategies came to light. In the present state of knowledge however questions on the processes of second language acquisition cannot be answered in any profound way.

The study provided insights to help the teacher of English as a second language gain a better understanding

of students', difficulties, to evaluate teaching materials and methods, and to provide remedial measures.

It also revealed a need for further investigation - chiefly the analysis of English errors of Sri Lankan students of mixed mother tongue backgrounds, and of errors produced at different levels of second language learning.