

## ANALYSIS OF THE INTERLANGUAGE OF IGBO-ENGLISH BILINGUALS: FOCUS ON ENGLISH NOUN PHRASE

GIFT CHIDI-ONWUTA<sup>1</sup> & BENSON OLUIKPE<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Linguistics, Communication, Igbo, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Professor of Applied Linguistics, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

The study analyzed a sample of Igbo-English bilinguals' interlanguage to determine evidence of cross linguistic influence (transfer), using Prator's hierarchy of difficulty in CA procedure as possible predictor. Data were generated from Igbo-English translation of a passage from an Igbo text, using 150 randomly selected first year university students. Data were analyzed with focus on English noun phrase. The analysis consisted, first of all, of classification of the negative evidence into four groups which were described in terms of frequency and percentages of occurrence. The four error groups were collapsed into three to determine whether or not there is evidence of transfer, using Prator's hierarchy of difficulty as a predictor. The findings revealed two levels of difficulty in the Prator's scale—Levels 3 (re-interpretation) and Level 4 (over differentiation). While Level 4 tallied with evidence of transfer, Level 3 appeared to be variable by showing evidence of transfer in some cases and none in other cases. The study concluded that Level 4 of the difficulty scale, given the evidence from our data, is a most probable predictor of transfer in interlanguage studies. The study recommended that the sole aim of CA should be to predict cross linguistic influence, using the difficulty scale.

**KEYWORDS:** Language Transfer, Cross Linguistic Influence, Interlanguage, Errors

### INTRODUCTION

Remarkable factors are central to the success or lack of success in second language learning, amongst them include: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language communication, strategies of second language learning and overgeneralization of the target language linguistic material (Selinker, 1972). The role of transfer or what Mitchel & Myles (2004) referred to as cross linguistic influences from the first language has been debated for decades. The debate is centred on the role of the learner's first (native) language in written

production in L2, that is, how learners use their native language linguistic rules in specific subsystems relative to English as a second language. This study examines the impact that cross linguistic influences exert on second language learning, using written production of Igbo learners of English as a second language.

*Transfer* or *cross linguistic influence*, as used interchangeably in this study, is a theory that recognizes the significant role prior experience plays in any learning act (Odlin, 1989). Transfer, according to Odlin (1989, p. 27), is "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language (TL) and any other language that has already been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" The concept of language transfer is that the learner's first language influences the acquisition of his or her second language. To Brown (2007, p. 102), a learner "will use whatever previous experience he has had with language to facilitate the second language learning experience, the native language is an obvious set of prior experience". Following Brown's claim, transfer or cross linguistic influence is imperative in any

language learning. The theory of transfer, from the extant literature is construed within behavioural framework as habits that were generalized from one language to another. Reviewing the principle of transfer from the strong version of *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* (CAH) (which attempts to predict difficulty by means of *Contrastive Analysis* (CA)), behavioural psychologists claim that transfer is at work in second language learning (Nasri, 1997), and is divided into positive and negative. Positive transfer occurs when the first language is similar to the second language and the learner has no difficulty in learning language because prior experience is positively transferred into the second one. Negative transfer is observed when the influences of the first language are inhibitory to the learning of the second language especially when there are remarkable differences between the two languages.

Two groups of exponents in the *Universal Grammar* (UG) theory made input in the controversy about the role of transfer on second language learning: L2 direct UG Access and L2 Non – UG Access group (Cook & Newson, 2007). Proponents of L2 Direct UG Access (Krashen 1981, 1985) claim that UG is free to operate for the L2 learner more-or-less as a ‘clean slate’ unaffected by L1 parameterization. L2 learning, in consequence, is uninfluenced by the L1 that the learner has already acquired. Supporters of L2 Direct UG Access (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Bailey, Maden & Krashen 1974), through empirical studies, show that L2 learners from different linguistic backgrounds exhibit substantial similarities in their acquisition of different grammatical morphemes in the target language. To this group, L2 learners can build an L2 grammar from the scratch in exactly the same way they did in their L1, instantiating the principles and setting the lexical parameters. This claim is supported by Cook’s (2003) study who carried out a test where people whose L1 need structure dependency for movement (Polish, Dutch, Finish) were compared with people whose L1 did not have overt movement (Japanese, Chinese, Arabic). Their performances show that the knowledge about structure dependency did not come from their L1. Consequently, they maintain that L2 learners are controlled by UG principles and parameters of word order and not by their L1.

On the other hand, supporters of L2 Non-UG Access (Odlin, 1987), acknowledge the role of L1 in second language learning where L2 learning is learnt by invoking general explicit problem solving skills combined with the knowledge of the L1. Cook & Newson (2007) argue that since the universality basis of UG is no longer directly applicable to the L2 learner who is beyond the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967), a surrogate UG as made available via L1 begins asserting itself. Therefore, there will be evidence of a high rate of L1 influenced errors of the type which is characteristic of L1 parameterization. At the beginning stages of the L2 learning, such errors would accumulate but drop off at the later stages when strategies have been put in place in order to deal with the differing language input. L2 learners, according to Cook & Newson (2007), initially transfer their L1 parameter setting onto L2, the initial transfer period may alter the L1 settings to serve as the functioning ‘default status’ toward L2 settings. The work of Qaid & Ramamoorthy (2011) supports L2 Non-UG Access claim where most frequent errors in writing were due to interference of Arabic on English language especially in the omission of required elements in the target language due to lack of those elements in the first languages.

From the Competition model perspective, there are evidences of transfer during the processes of phonological, syntactic, and lexical learning (McWhinney & Bates, 1989). L2 learning, as they claim, begins with massive transfer from L1, the learner uses a variety of complex learning strategies in order to maximize the transfer of L1 structures. In some cases, simple transfer is blocked and the learner develops a set of strategies to get round this blockage by postulating more complex remapping from L1 to L2. Competition Model claims that when strictly formal, L2 learners interpret meaning through appeal to the first language (Brown, 2007), and that when that path is exhausted, second language learners

naturally look for alternative “competing” possibilities to create meaning. The implication of this argument is that L2 learners do not exclusively depend on formal linguistic features as their only tools for processing the target language.

Selinker, Swain, & Dumas (1975) cited in Carroll (2004) studied 7 –year old English-speaking children in a French immersion programme in Toronto and recorded instances of transfer errors that were attributable to English structure. The implication of Selinker, Swain & Dumas’ study is that the setting in which L2 is acquired determines the rate of transfer. Bearing this in mind, the absence of native-speaking peers of the L2 necessitates cross linguistic influence, a condition that subjects L2 learners to draw freely from their L1. Similarly, the work of Tao & Healy (1998) cited in Carroll (2004) also provides clear evidence of cross linguistic influence in adults where discourse processing strategies transfer from L1 to L2.

From the behavioural theory, UG (L2 Non- UG Access) perspectives, and Competition Model reviewed above, transfer is considered as an inevitable variable contributing to the success or failure in second language learning. Second language learning, in addition to the interfering effects of the first language on it, which exponents of CAH (Fries, 1949; Lado, 1957) expressed, involves creating a system where learners are consciously testing hypothesis about the target language from a number of possible sources of knowledge. Brown (2007) claims that they can achieve that through the knowledge of the native language, limited knowledge of the target language, knowledge of the communicative functions of language, and knowledge about language in general. L2 learners, according to Brown, slowly and tediously succeed in establishing a closer approximation to the systems used by native speakers of the target language, which Selinker (1992) cited in Brown (2007), called *interlanguage*. Brown (2007, p. 256) defines *interlanguage* as “the separateness of a second language learner’s system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native language and the target language”. Both the native and the target languages have their linguistic systems, the learner, at this level, forms what Brown calls his own self-contained linguistic system which is neither the system of the native nor of the target languages. *Interlanguage* studies do reveal evidence of interlingual transfer otherwise referred to as cross- linguistic influence (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013). However, the current controversy is on the extent of cross-linguistic influence in interlanguage. A number of studies have addressed the issue. For instance, Dulay & Burt (1973) as reported in R. Ellis (1985) instanced as low as 3% of the total errors. Of course, their position is by no means surprising since they are proponents of no transfer in second language acquisition/learning (Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974, 1975). On the other hand, Tran-Chi Chau (1975) instanced as high as 51% of total errors. According to Mitchell, Myles & Marsden (2013), other studies attribute a third of errors in interlanguage to cross-linguistic influence. These studies are significant in two respects. First, they reveal that cross-linguistic influence is not the only source of errors in interlanguage. Second, they affirm the variability in the findings of such studies.

Against the above background, this study attempts to analyze the interlanguage (IL) of Igbo-English bilinguals using data generated from Igbo-English translation. The focus is on noun phrase subsystem. The focus on the noun phrase (NP) is unique, in our view, because it invokes the category dependency principle of UG. The purpose is to determine errors which are induced by crosslinguistic influence, using Prator’s (1967) hierarchy of difficulty in CA procedure, as the predictor.

## METHOD

The population of the study is drawn from first year students in the General Studies Programme of Caritas University, Enugu, in Southeast Nigeria. A total of 150 Igbo –English bilinguals were selected using simple random

sampling. Igbo is a language that belongs to Benue Congo family of the Niger Kordofanian of African languages. It is spoken by people who are located in the Southeast part of Nigeria and some parts of Delta and Rivers States with a population of approximately 12 million people. Data were generated, using a passage from Igbo text entitled *Chike, nwata akwukwo Ihie High School* “Chike, a student of Ihie High School” translated into English by the subjects. Translating into the second language was the chosen task because, according to Chang (2011, p.115), “it is more cognitively demanding than working into the first language”. Such a demand would possibly lead to over-dependence on prior linguistic knowledge in discharging the task

Errors in the translation tests, which are in the area of category/categorical features of English NP, were identified, and classified into the following:

- Error of omission, and superfluous use of articles (ART)
- Error of overgeneralization of plural morpheme (OG)
- Error of Non count nouns (NCN)
- Error of word order of adjectives. (WO)
- Superfluous use of genitives (GEN)

Each group of error was described in terms of frequency and percentage of occurrence and discussed in the context of whether or not they were induced by crosslinguistic influence. To facilitate the discussion, the five groups of errors above were collapsed into the following groups:

- Category related errors (CRE)
- Categorical feature related errors (CFRE)
- Errors of Syntax (ES)

To predict crosslinguistic influence, the error groups were mapped onto Prator’s hierarchy of difficulty.

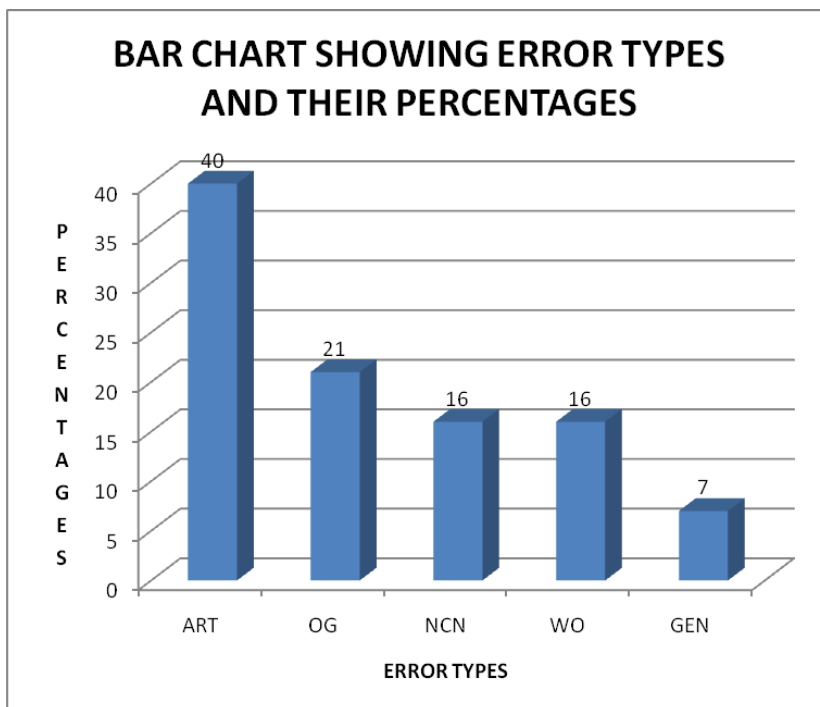
## FINDINGS

The statistical table below reveals the frequencies of occurrences of the errors made by the subjects and their corresponding percentages. It must be pointed out that the frequency of occurrence of errors are not based on tokens.

**Table 1**

<b>Error Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage(%)</b>
Omission and superfluous use of article (ART)	1611	40%
Overgeneralization of plural morpheme(OG)	864	21%
Non Count nouns (NCN)	651	16%
Word order of adjectives (WO)	651	16%
Superflous use of genitives (GEN)	270	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4047</b>	<b>100%</b>

On the other hand, the following bar-chart presents a graphic representation of the frequencies in percentages:



**Figure 1**

According to the table, error of omission and superfluous use of article (ART) ranks the highest with 1611 frequency of the total frequency of occurrence which represents 40% of the total frequency of occurrence as graphically illustrated in the bar-chart. The following typical errors of ART manifest in the data:

**Table 2**

Igbo Text (IT)	Interlanguage (IL)	Standard English (SE)
Otùwokejiugboàlàyajeahiazutanani otùmanyabiià.	One man went to market with his car bought one carton of beer.	A man drove to the market in his car to buy a carton of beer.
Nkemm’erinrin’uldoriri.	Nkem visits restaurants for meals.	Nkem goes to the restaurant for her food.
Okoro nyere m ñdùmodù nyere m aka.	Okoro gave me an advise that helped me.	Okoro offered useful advice to me.
ChickenwatàakwukwoIhie High School.	Chike student of Ihie High School.	Chike, a student of Ihie High School.

It must be remarked that Igbo is a tone language consisting of high, low, and step tone. These tones are reflected in the Igbo texts (IT) in this study as follows: all high tones are unmarked. Low tones bear the superscript / \ / while step tone carry the superscript / - / . Further, the tone pattern reflect that of the Ngwa dialect of Igbo, one of the dialects of Igbo. The dialectal tone pattern is used for this study because the authors, members of the Igbo language, speak theNgwa dialect.

Second in the hierarchy is errors of overgeneralization (OG). This category of errors has a frequency count of 864 or 21% of the total errors as shown in the table above and graphically illustrated in the bar-chart. Representing OG errors from the data are the following:

**Table 3**

IT	IL	SE
Aturu àtọ niileahù igbùrù bù òkègi.	Those three sheep you killed are your own.	The three sheep you slaughtered are yours.
òtutumgbè, idiòtutubirin'ulònàewetaesemokwu.	Many a times, living in public building causes problems.	Many a time, living together breeds quarrel.
Enwetaghi m oziahù di mkpàn'ogè.	I didn't get the necessary informations I needed early.	I was unable to receive in time the important information which I needed.
Ndinkuzinàngàlàbà Mass Communication.	Staffs at department of Mass communication.	The staff of the Department of Mass Communication

Third in the hierarchy is the deviant use of count/non-count nouns (NCN) with its frequency of occurrence 651 or 21% of the total errors in the data. This statistics is shown in the table above and graphically illustrated in the bar-chart. Typical errors in this category from the data are the following:

**Table 4**

IT	IL	SE
ndùmòdù ahu niile I nyèrè m	Those advices you gave me	The pieces of advice which you gave to me.
...nàenye m nnukwuòdùmòdù	... gives me a lot of advices	... gives me a lot of advice
Chike gbàjiri òtutu oche	Chike broke some furnitures.	Chike broke some pieces of furniture.

Pairing with NCN error is errors of word order (WO) as noted in adjective word order. Like its counterpart, its frequency of occurrence is 651 representing 21% of the total errors as revealed in the table above and graphically illustrated in the bar-chart. Typical errors in this category are the following:

**Table 5**

IT	IL	SE
Òtù obere ugboàlòochienke Japan	one old small car Japan one of Japan's old small car one small and old Japanese car one small vehicle of Japanese one small old car of Japan	a small old Japanese car a small old Japanese car a small old Japanese car a small old Japanese car a small old Japanese car
òkàtá jì jupùtárà	Basket full of yam	A full basket of yam

Finally, errors associated with the use of genitives is last in the hierarchy of errors. Its frequency is 270 representing 7% of the total errors in the data as revealed in the table above and graphically illustrated in the bar-chart. The following are typical errors in this category:

**Table 6**

IT	IL	SE
Òbòdòanyi à jògbùrùonweya.	These our country is bad.	This country of ours is unsafe.
nwanne m nwokeahù	That my brother....	That brother of mine.
Umùaka m aguchalaakwukwo	This my children have finished school.	All my children have graduated from the university.
alàanyi ....	This our land...	This country of ours...

## DISCUSSIONS

Following from 1.2, the discussion re-classifies the error types into three categories:

- Category Related Errors (CRE)
- Categorical Feature Related Errors (CFRE)
- Errors of Syntax (ES)

Each of these is discussed in turn.

**CATEGORY RELATED ERRORS (CRE)**

CRE consists of errors induced by categorial differences between English and Igbo. From the perspective of UG, all natural languages are category dependent (Radford, 1997; Hornstein, Nunes, & Grohmann, 2005). Given this dependency, two types of categories have been identified in all natural languages. They are lexical and functional categories. The data for this study reveal errors induced by functional categories in the form of articles (ART) and genitives (GEN).

From the data, errors related to ART are those of omission, as in:

**Table 7**

IL	SE
Chike student of Ihie High School Nkem visited restaurants for meals. One man went to market with his car to buy one carton of beer. Staffs at department of Mass Communication	Chike, a student of Ihie High School Nkem visited the restaurant for her meals. A man went to market in his car to buy a carton of beer. The staff of the Department of Mass Communication

In addition, errors of superfluity occur, as in:

**Table 8**

IL	SE
Okoro gave me an advise that helped me.	Okoro offered useful advice to me.

These errors reveal the attempt, according to Oluikpe (1978), of the Igbo/English bilingual to grapple with the idiosyncratic usage pattern of ART in the English language. This situation arises because there is no ART in the Igbo language. In using ART in English, the Igbo learner of English falls back on his prior linguistic knowledge by using the numeral *one*, the near equivalent of the English article in Igbo. Consequently, the following sentences in the IL occur:

One man went to market....to buy one carton of beer.

Because of the appeal to prior linguistic knowledge in the use of ART, it is the view of this study that cross-linguistic influence is at work in the errors above. Mapped onto Prator’s (1967) hierarchy of difficulty, the errors belong to Level 4 (over differentiation) of the hierarchy. Our conclusion is affirmed by Kharma’s (1981) study of errors of definite/indefinite articles committed by Arab English bilinguals. The findings revealed errors of omission and superfluous use of articles just as shown in this study. The study concluded that the errors occurred because articles are lacking in Arab languages. Similarly, Dickins, Hervey & Higgins (2002) attribute errors of this type to crosslinguistic influence.

In addition to ART, errors induced by differences between English and Igbo occur in the use of genitives (GEN). There are two types of GEN in English (attributive and absolute) while Igbo has one – attributive (Oluikpe, 1978). This contrast in this particular category between the two languages may be responsible for the difference observed between the

IL and SE below:

**Table 9**

IL	SE
This our country is bad.	This country of ours is corrupt.
This my brother...	This brother of mine...
This my children have finished school.	All children of mine have graduated from school.
This our land ...	This land of ours...

It is observed that IL uses attributive genitives in places where SE employs absolute genitives.

This is because absolute genitives are lacking in Igbo. Consequently, the Igbo/ English bilingual appeals to his prior linguistic knowledge by using attributive genitives in Igbo in place of absolute genitives not found in Igbo. Thus, it is noted that crosslinguistic influence is at work in this regard. Mapped onto Prator's hierarchy of difficulty, the errors of genitives belong to Level 4 of the hierarchy as in the case of ART which is also lacking in Igbo. The evidence in this regard confirms Brown's (2007) view that learners of a new language employ a number of strategies in approaching the new language. Top in the list is appeal to the native language.

From the study of Selinker, Swain & Dumas (1975) cited in Carroll (2004), it is claimed that the setting in which L2 is acquired determines the rate of crosslinguistic transfer. Absence of native-speaking peers of the L2 facilitates crosslinguistic transfer. In the view of this study, the absence of L2 speaking peers in this error type has facilitated the crosslinguistic influence which could have been avoided through social interaction with L2 speaking peers.

Against the foregoing, CRE manifest the following features: Firstly, the categories involved are lacking in Igbo. Secondly, the errors are caused by crosslinguistic influence. Finally, the errors belong to Prator's Level 4 (over differentiation) in the hierarchy of difficulty.

### **CATEGORIAL FEATURE RELATED ERRORS (CFRE)**

CFRE involves the application of pluralization as a categorial feature of nouns in the two languages. The data provides the following errors (negative evidence):

**Table 10**

IL	SE
These three sheeps you killed are your own.	The three sheep you slaughtered are yours.
I don't get the necessary informations I needed early.	I was unable to receive in good time the information which I needed.
Staffs at department of Mass Communication..	The staff of the Department of Mass Communication
Those your advices were valued.	I appreciated your advice.
Chike broke some furnitures.	Chike broke some furniture.

The examples of negative evidence above are used by proponents of UG to support their claim of absence of crosslinguistic influence in second language acquisition (Brown, R, 1973; De Villiers & De Villiers, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Cook, 2003). Since the above negative evidence feature in both the first and second language studies, it is argued that such negative evidence do not reflect crosslinguistic influence. From the perspective of CA, both English and Igbo have the noun category. Similarly, they have the noun subcategory  $\pm$ count (count/non-count nouns). In the same manner, both languages recognize the notion of pluralization. However, this notion is realized differently in the two languages. For instance, pluralization is marked morphologically and characterized by exceptions in English while, in Igbo, it is marked



post-nominally with the use of numerals except in the case of singularity, where the numeral *one* occurs pre-nominally to mark singularity. Based on the fact that noun category occurs in both languages as well as the categorial feature of pluralization, the negative evidence above may arise as the learner attempts to reinterpret the rules in the two languages by invoking the general learning principle of generalization. This means, therefore, that the principle of generalization as a learning process is at work in this situation rather than appeal to L1. Mapped onto Prator's hierarchy of difficulty, the negative evidence observed belong to Level 3 (Reinterpretation) of the hierarchy.

### ERRORS OF SYNTAX (ES)

ES errors are those emanating from adjective word typology in English. In Igbo, modification structures of NP are essentially post-nominal in occurrence. Such post-nominal structures do not occur recursively. On the other hand, English structures of modification are both pre-/post-nominal in occurrence. Adjectives, as premodification structures, are recursive in occurrence. (See Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; Oluikpe, 1978). This recursiveness is ordered semantically. From the perspective of CA, the lack of recursive adjectives as modifiers of an NP is predicted to induce negative evidence, as the following examples from the data:

**Table 11**

IL	SE
Basket full of yam	A full basket of yam
One old small car of Japan One small and old Japanese car One small vehicle of Japan	A small old Japanese car A small old Japanese car

The above negative evidence raises the question whether or not crosslinguistic influence has induced them. From our analysis, two factors appear to be at work in the above examples. First, the negative evidence, *a basket full of yam*, is a clear example of crosslinguistic influence as it conforms to the post-nominal structure of modification in Igbo. Second, the various translations of the phrase, *a small, old, Japanese car*, reveal, in our view, the learners' attempt to grapple with the semantic order rule of recursive adjectives in English pre-modification structure. One of the strategies which Brown (2007) claims to induce negative evidence in L2 acquisition is limited knowledge of the target language. The negative evidence from the translation in our data appear, in our view, to be caused by inadequate knowledge of L2. While noun and adjective occur in the two languages and adjectives modify nouns in the two languages, the learner, it is believed, does not have adequate knowledge to reinterpret the adjective word typology in English. Mapped onto Prator's hierarchy, this inadequate knowledge of re-interpretation belongs to Level 3 (Re-interpretation) of the hierarchy.

The findings, in ES error group, appear to predict that, in terms of syntax, some negative evidence may be explained through appeal to crosslinguistic influence while others may be induced by inadequate knowledge to re-interpretate new structural patterns formed in L2 by categories which occur in the two languages. This situation, in our view, affirms the variability which characterize IL studies (Ellis, R., 1985).

The foregoing discussion appear to reveal that, for category-based analysis of interlanguage such as this study, the errors fall into two levels of difficulty—Levels 3 and 4 of Prator's hierarchy of difficulty in CA procedure. While Level 4 seems to induce cross linguistic influence, Level 3, except in some rare cases as noted in ES errors, does not. The errors in this group may be explained through appeal to other sources of error in IL.

## CONCLUSIONS

We are inclined to conclude, in this study, that Prator's Level 4 (over differentiation) in the hierarchy of difficulty in CA procedure is a most probable predictor of cross linguistic influence in IL analysis, given the data in this study. Consequently, any IL analysis designed to determine cross linguistic influence should map the errors onto Prator's hierarchy of difficulty.

## IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The above conclusion implies that CA should be engaged in for the purposes of determining Level 4 in the hierarchy of difficulty in CA procedure to predict possible errors that could be induced by crosslinguistic influence and not for the purposes of predicting in advance all learners' difficulties (Chidi-Onwuta, 2014).

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