

Abstract

This study is a broad investigation of grammatical errors in compositions written by 16-year-old learners of English in Sweden. It combines two areas within second language acquisition; error analysis and contrastive analysis. Approximately 400 compositions from two national assessment programmes carried out throughout Sweden in 1992 and 1995 are investigated. The material is randomly selected and, thus, can be regarded as approximately representative of the age cohort in the compulsory school. The grammatical errors are classified according to a system mainly based on a word class framework with the addition of two separate areas involving concord and word order errors. The intention for using this system has been for it to correspond to the categories used in school grammars and textbooks.

The aims of the study are (a) to investigate what grammatical errors Swedish learners make in English production, (b) to establish the frequency of different error types, (c) to analyse the causes of the errors made, and (d) to discuss possible pedagogical implications. The errors are discussed at two levels: as functional errors and executional errors, i.e. according to whether the intended grammatical category was chosen, and the correct form was chosen to realise that grammatical category. Failures of the former type are referred to as category errors and failures of the latter type are called realisation errors.

The results show that the same error types occur in compositions regardless of grades and that most errors involve what may be regarded as frequently practised grammatical features. An overwhelming majority of all the errors are category errors, implying that the actual mastering of grammatical structures is more difficult than the correct realisation of them. The results of the analysis of the errors confirm that transfer from the L1 is a very significant factor in learner errors, although overgeneralisation dominates on the whole. The results give rise to a discussion of actual performance vs. goals set in the curriculum, correctness vs. communicative competence, the role of instruction and feedback, as well as other pedagogical implications including the importance of language awareness and learners' L1 competence in relation to second/foreign language learning.

Keywords: second language acquisition (SLA), contrastive analysis (CA), error analysis (EA), category errors, realisation errors, transfer, overgeneralisation, simplification, markedness, feedback, correction, language awareness (LA).