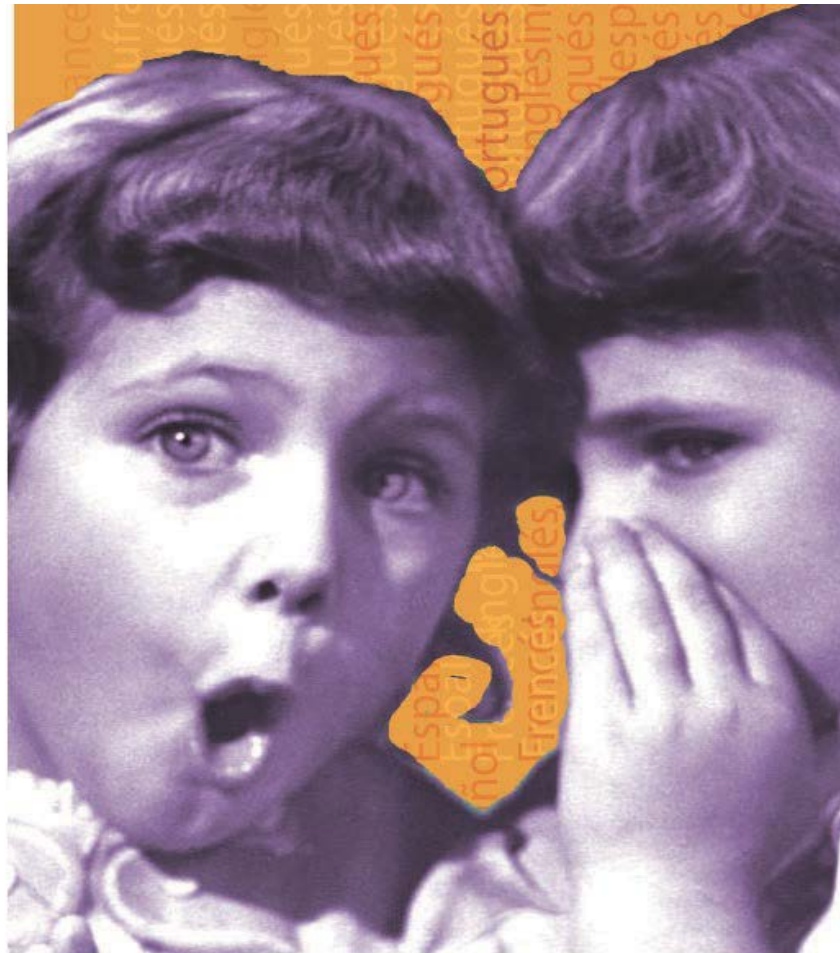


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Didáctica de la Fonética de las Lenguas Extranjeras

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDENTS' ERRORS IN PHONEMIC TRANSCRIPTIONS

Prof. Diana Martínez Salatín

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the errors made in phonemic transcriptions by firstyear students at Teacher Training College 'Olga Cossettini'. The aims are also to identify the kinds of errors they produced, to track down the reasons why students made these errors, and to establish an affiliation between these errors and the ones students made in diction. For this study, twenty-five (25) students engaged in this procedure. They were around 19 – 20 years old at the time the research was carried out and they belonged to a group with five contact hours of Phonology on a weekly basis. The learner language selected for this study was twofold: written productions consisted of transcriptions done in class both as practice or for assessment purposes; and oral productions consisted of instances in which students had to read out a short text (figure 1) and their diction performance was being assessed by means of a grid (figure 2). Data were collected during the year 2001 following three different steps.

The nature of the reading process

To understand the nature of the basic differences between the techniques used by slower readers and the more effective techniques used by efficient readers, we must first understand the nature of the reading process. If you stand at a window overlooking a busy road and watch a car pass you from left to right, your eyes will appear to move smoothly because they are focused on the car. If, however, you wait until there is no traffic and try to follow an imaginary car as it moves from left to right anyone who watches your eyes while you do this will tell you that they move in a series of small jerks. This is what happens when you read. As your eyes move from left to right along the line of print, they make a series of small jerky movements, stopping momentarily on each word or group of words. These pauses are called 'fixations' and each one lasts for about a third of a second.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Phase 1: At the beginning of the year, students were asked to do silent reading of a text (figure 1) and immediately afterwards they had to read it in a loud voice. A record of students' diction mistakes and difficulties was kept. In this way, the first part in the grid (figure 2) was completed.

Phase 2: By mid term, students were asked to transcribe this same text in class. This transcription was not counted as part of their formal assessment as anxiety may have played a role if students had been told that the transcription counted as a separate mark. Then, students had to prepare the passage for diction. Finally, students read it for a second time. The second line in the grid was filled in with the notes on students' difficulties.

Phase 3: By the end of the year, students read the text for a third time. Samples of students' transcriptions done as extra practice were collected so as to gather a much more significant number of data.

The reason why the analysis was carried out longitudinally was to obtain information about students' difficulties and improvements at different moments during the year. Phase 1 when students lacked formal knowledge about the English sound system. Phase 2 when they were gradually getting in touch with it and becoming more conscious about their own performance. Phase 3 taking place when students had gathered quite a significant bulk of information and experience about their pronunciation and the desired level they needed to reach.

Once all these data were collected, diction mistakes were analysed and confronted to the ones students made in transcriptions. The sounds that proved difficult for students to produce, and, ultimately, to acquire in diction were: /t - d - b - v - dʒ - θ - ʒ - i - æ/. These errors were mainly encountered in Phases 1 & 2. Gradually, these errors were overcome. For some students, already when they were in phase 2, while for some others in phase 3.

Regarding transcription errors, these were the instances encountered. The table below shows in the first column what students wrote in their transcriptions (enclosed in slashes //). It is interesting to notice that some are actually sound symbols, while others are, in fact, letters of the Roman Alphabet (which are enclosed in angle brackets < >). The third column includes the sounds students were supposed to have used. Finally, the last one provides examples of the words in which the mistakes pointed out were found.

What students wrote	The correct phonetic symbol	Example			
/j - g/	/dʒ/	jerky manag <u>er</u>	instead of	/s/	effi <u>ci</u> ent
/ɜ:/	/ɜ:/	word		/r/	je <u>r</u> ky
/e/	/ɜ:/	u <u>nd</u> erstand		<x>	thi <u>rd</u>
/ð/	/d/	re <u>ad</u> ing		/w/	fi <u>r</u> ms
				<c>	fixa <u>t</u> ions
					/ks/
				/k - s/	det <u>e</u> ctors
					co <u>m</u> pany
					con <u>ce</u> rt
				/k/	kn <u>o</u> wn
			<c>	/k/	co <u>m</u> e

In our present study 'an error can be defined as a deviation from the norms of the target language.'(Ellis 1995). In our particular case, regarding diction errors, we considered faulty pronunciation that which does not comply with RP (Received Pronunciation) accent. When referring to transcription mistakes the standard born in mind was that set by the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). In order to account for the errors students

made in transcriptions and their connection with diction errors, we resorted to three different second-language acquisition (SLA) paradigms:

- Contrastive Analysis Hypotheses (CAH)
- Markedness Differential Hypotheses (MDH)
- Interlanguage (ILG)

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

In order to account for learners' errors linguists have based their analysis on the differences between the learner's native language and the target language by comparing and contrasting the two languages. In this way, they were able to discover points of contrast and differences from which errors in the foreign or second language stem. The CAH is a theory based on the behaviouristic and structuralists approaches as the SLA process is seen as the development of a new set of habits. The school of thought in Psychology popular at that time (1930s–1950s), known as behaviourism, holds that objectively observable behaviour is the only acceptable means of data analysis. Therefore, learning consists of habits constructed through stimulus-response associations. Language transfer is, then, 'the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired.' (Odlin 1989). It was all a matter of finding those 'interfering' elements and mastering those contrasts. Therefore, when no interference was found, then there was no difficulty, which means that learners made no errors.

In the 1940s, Fries proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which was later refined by Lado. He talks about success in a learner's second language proficiency 'as a matter of the similarities and differences between the native and the target language.' (Cook 2001). This is to say, those aspects which are the same both in the native and target language are more easily acquired than those which are not. The latter are the ones students have to master in order to acquire the target language more efficiently. It was also pointed out that the difficulties in learning a second language derive from the characteristics of the L1. Therefore, the influence of the L1 habits on the L2 facilitates or hinders the learning of the L2. 'The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign

language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are.’ (Lado 1957).

Applying CAH

If we compare the two systems: the Roman alphabet and the English Phonetic System- we would arrive at the following taxonomy:

Roman Alphabet	Phonetic Alphabet
a	ɑ:
b	b
c	---
d	d
e	e
f	f

g	g
h	h
i	ii - i
j	j
k	k
l	l
m	m
n	n
o	---
oo	oo - o
p	p
q	---
r	r
s	s
t	t
u	uu - u
v	v
w	w
x	---
y	---
z	z

Out of this comparison, we can deduce that the phonetic symbols which will be difficult for students to acquire are those which are different from the letters in the Roman alphabet. Among these, we can mention most of the English diphthongs and vowel sounds, and the following consonantal sounds: /dʒ - tʃ - ð - θ - ʒ - ʃ/. Actually, CAH can only account for transcription errors in themselves, without showing any relationship with diction errors. When students start tackling with the acquisition of transcription methods, they have to face an entirely new system –the phonetic symbols, which is precisely the main source of errors in transcriptions. There are different sources of interference that students encounter when giving their first steps in transcribing. First and foremost, students’ native language, Spanish, is a phonemic language while English is not. Therefore, students tend to apply this characteristic when transcribing texts. They believe there is one to one correspondence between sounds and spelling. In addition to this, students are acquiring a new system: the phonetic symbols. The source of interference in this case is the Roman alphabet. Students use the same symbols – letters- in order to transcribe sounds. The reason being that most phonetic symbols look alike the letters in the alphabet. Therefore, in this case, we can make use of the CAH-moderateversion statement, which justifies this hindrance students encounter: ‘interference can actually be greater when items to be learned are more similar to existing items than when items are entirely new and unrelated to existing items.’ (Brown 1994). As most phonetic symbols

used for English are identical to letters of English spelling, students overgeneralise 'to the extent that minimal differences are overlooked, remembering those differences which are salient and more prominent.' (Brown 1994).

By comparing the two systems, we would obtain those sounds which are difficult to acquire when transcribing. If we compare these difficult sounds with diction errors, we would see that most of them coincide. Though there are other phonetic symbols, which look like letters in the Roman alphabet, which stand as problematic sounds to produce in diction. We are referring to the alveolar plosives /t, d/, the lenis labio-velar fricative /v/, and the labio-velar semivowel /w/. Therefore, CAH cannot account for these difficulties. In order to account for these errors we can make use of a concept which has been developed in SLA research which can help us to establish this affiliation between errors in transcriptions with those in diction. 'One of the strongest claims in recent research on transfer is that the transferability of different features depends on their degree of markedness'. (Ellis 1995).

Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH)

While structuralists working with CA theory saw language acquisition as a set of habits, Chomsky claimed that children are born with a special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system. This language acquisition device (LAD) can be described as an imaginary black box somewhere in the brain, containing the principles which are universal to all human languages. Universal Grammar (UG) is considered to consist of a set of principles, which are common to all languages. What children have to learn are the ways in which their own language uses these principles and the variations on those principles which may exist in a particular language. Therefore, by working within the UG framework, many of the substitutions cannot be explained by CA because they are not due to transfer from the native language. Researchers argue that these substitutions occur because second language learners try to work out rules – L2 learning is a process of creative construction, where learners construct and test different hypotheses. As a consequence, L1 – L2 differences are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain errors in a learning process.

One of the drawbacks of CA was its failure to predict the level of difficulty or order of acquisition. Fred Eckman, then, proposed the theory called Markedness Differential Hypotheses (MDH). In this way, he tried to rescue CA by adding the dimension of markedness. His method could give an explanation for the different degrees of difficulty in acquiring a second language and could explain some facts that the CAH could not explain: errors which occurred that were not due to L1, and the fact that some errors did not occur as they had been predicted. As a result, Eckman presented the following: “The areas of difficulty that a language learner will have can be predicted on the basis of a systematic comparison of the grammars of the NL, the TL, and the markedness relations stated in universal grammar.” (Eckman 1977).

The concept of markedness derives from language typology- the study of different types of language carried out in order to identify those properties that are universal. This key concept

‘refers to the general idea that some linguistic features may be more ‘basic’ or ‘natural’ than others’ (Ellis 1997), or, that ‘forms in a language that are unmarked are more basic or neutral, more universal, and more frequent than forms which are marked, those being more specific, less frequent, and more limited.’ (Cook 2001). Eckman (1977) explains how this is determined: ‘If the presence of a structure p in a language implies the presence of some other structure, q, but the presence of q in some language does not imply the presence of p, then structure p is marked relative to structure q, and structure q is unmarked relative to structure p.’” In



other words, ‘those features that are universal or present in most languages are unmarked, while those that are specific to a particular language or found in only a few languages are marked.’(Ellis 1995). This theory also claims that those differences which are not marked will cause no difficulty. It is in this respect that MDH can explain why some differences are not sources of difficulty, which CAH was not able to do.

Applying MDH

Phonetics implies the learning of an entirely new system: sounds and their realisations into symbols. It is this that stands as a barrier in the learning process. The dichotomy between spelling and phonetic symbols represents the main source of interference when tackling transcriptions. Is it possible to find any logical explanation for the reason why

some symbols are easily acquired and the reason why some others prove difficult to apply when transcribing? It is then that, in order to find an answer to this question, MDH can assist us in interpreting these transcription errors. MDH was applied in the analysis of transcription errors and once this was carried out, the analysis was confronted to the diction errors found. An interesting coincidence manifested which revealed that transcription errors bring to light diction difficulties. Let us explain how the MDH was applied in this analysis.

As the CAH, the MDH is also based on the differences between the TL and the NL, though the latter considers these differences not sufficient for predicting errors. Thus, it exposes the concept of markedness to account for difficulties in acquiring a language. In our study, we should re-signify some terms. Instead of talking about NL, we will refer to the Roman alphabet system. Instead of referring to the TL, we will mention the English sound system instead. Therefore, by applying this theory, we can say that, in this particular context, the unmarked items are the phonetic symbols which look or take the same grapheme as letters in the Roman alphabet. As spelling and sound symbol coincide, there is no source of difficulty in transcriptions. Consequently, these sounds do not represent a difficulty in diction either. Among these sounds we have: /t, d, n, m, l, p, f, v, s, z, g, r/. While marked items are those phonetic symbols which do not look like letters in the Roman alphabet.

Spelling and sound symbol do not coincide, which is the source of difficulty in transcriptions. In addition to this, these sounds –among which we have: /dʒ - tʃ - ʒ - ʒ:/ are realised by more than one letter or letters combination (graphemes) in spelling. The degree of difficulty will correspond to the degree of markedness.

When confronting these data with the ones obtained

when assessing diction, it was found that those sounds students had problems in articulating and acquiring were exactly the same as those which caused difficulty for students to recognise when transcribing. Nevertheless, an apparent fissure looms up in our reasoning when referring to unmarked items. The sounds /t, d, v, b, w/ by following our hypothesis stand as sound easy to acquire both in transcriptions and in diction. This is obviously not the case since Spanishspeaking students present a tremendous difficulty in acquiring these sounds. Hyldenstam’s reformulation of MDH justifies this. He states that ‘when unmarked categories in an area exist in both L1 and L2, no acquisition

UNMARKED ITEMS	MARKED ITEMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phonetic symbols which look or take the same grapheme as letters in the Roman Alphabet. Therefore, spelling and sound symbols coincide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phonetic symbols which do not look like letters in the Roman alphabet:
<p>↓</p> <p>SPELLING = SOUND SYMBOL</p> <p>/t, d, n, m, l, p, f, v, s, z, g, r/</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>SPELLING ≠ SOUND SYMBOL</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No source of difficulty in transcriptions. Thus, no source of difficulty in diction. Except for: /t, d, v, w/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These sounds are realised by more than one type of grapheme in spelling.
<p>↓</p> <p>Hyldenstam's reformulation of MDH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The unmarked category will be transferred. 	<p>↓</p> <p>Source of difficulty in transcriptions as well as in diction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The degree of markedness will correspond to the degree of difficulty.

problems will occur. However, when an area in the L1 is unmarked but the same area in the L2 is marked, the unmarked category will be transferred.’ (Eckman 1977). Thus, /t, d, v, b, w/ are unmarked items –phonetic symbols which take the same grapheme as letters in the Roman alphabet, but they are ‘marked’ in diction –sounds which are difficult to acquire. Therefore, the unmarked category is transferred generating difficulties for students. Through this interpretation, we can see that errors students make in transcriptions are not random. They reveal students’ potential difficulties in diction. We are able to notice the strong link that there exists between the student’s use of phonetic symbols in transcriptions and the student’s competence in diction.

We need to focus on what learners got ‘wrong’ because the making of errors stands as an interesting point to analyse so as to find out why learners make these errors. It is useful for teachers so as to know how students learn; though the most important reason is that the making of errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors they made. Corder (1981) puts forward this idea in a very precise manner: “.... the making of errors is an inevitable and indeed necessary part of the learning process.” We need to view mistakes in a different light- not as something negative that has to be discarded and frowned upon, but as meaningful data which constitute the natural product of the acquisition of a new system (say a foreign language, or as in this case, the phonological system of a foreign language).The systematic nature of students’ errors demonstrated that learners were actively involved in constructing their own rules.

Interlanguage

Prior to the introduction of the concept of interlanguage, linguists attempted, through contrastive analysis between native languages and target languages, to predict and describe learners’ errors in terms of interference –the projection or transfer of habits of the first language onto that of the foreign language to be learned. However, whereas language transfer could account for some errors, it was noticed that a great many errors did not bear a resemblance to either the native language or to the foreign language being learned. Larry Selinker, an American linguist, postulated the existence of a system somewhere between the native language (NL) and the language to be learned (TL). He termed this system ‘interlanguage’. When analysing it we are plunging into the discussion

of the mental processes responsible for L2 acquisition. He defined it as a: 'separate linguistic system based on observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm' (Selinker 1972). This concept incorporates elements from mentalist theories of linguistics and elements from cognitive psychology. Therefore, Larry Selinker identified language transfer not as 'interference' but as a cognitive process because L2 learners make strategic use of their L1 in the process of learning the L2, and in the process of understanding and producing messages in the L2. This concept implies that the learner's grammar is permeable. That is, the grammar is open to influence from the outside (through the input). It is also influenced from the inside (e.g.: omission, overgeneralisation, transfer errors, this is to say, errors which derive from internal processes). It also shows that the learner's grammar is transitional. Learners change their grammar by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the system. Therefore, it results in an interlanguage continuum, which means that learners construct a series of mental grammars or interlanguages as they gradually increase the complexity of their L2 knowledge. Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages. The different kinds of errors learners produce reflect different learning strategies. But we should also take into account that the learner's grammar is likely to fossilise. An example of this is backsliding, which consists of the production of errors representing an earlier stage of development.

Applying Interlanguage theory

We can say that interlanguage is systematic- as learners draw on the rules they have constructed; and subject to rapid change- as the interlanguage continuum consists of a series of overlapping grammars, in which, each grammar shares some rules with the previously constructed grammar, but also contains some new or revised rules. In this sense, a rule has the status of a hypothesis. Each grammar or interlanguage is likely to be characterised by its competing rules, and, as Corder refers to this, there will be 'several concurrent hypotheses, leading to a set of coexistent approximative systems'. This is what accounts for systematic variability in learner performance. In this way, the interlanguage continuum is characterised by 'complexification' rather than simplification: each grammar the learner builds is more complex than the one that preceded it. It follows that

L2 acquisition is a recreation rather than a restructuring continuum. Therefore the starting point is a simple, reduced system of the L1, which is gradually complexified. Below are some examples of this in-between system found in the transcriptions analysed in this piece, which are produced by learners so as to cope with and enhance their learning process.

At the beginning of the year, students present a noticeable influence of their L1 both in transcriptions and in diction (L1 interference). In transcriptions, it is mainly shown by the use of letters instead of phonetic symbols as we can see by the way students transcribed the following words: jerky /jɜ:rki -jerki / - firms /fɜ:rmz/ - detectors /dɪtɛktəz/ - come /cʌm/ - fixations /fɪxɛɪʃənz/ - third /θɪrd/ - known /knəʊn/ - company /cʌmpəni/ - manager /mænɪgə/. These examples clearly show that learners are making valuable attempts at learning the phonetic system. What takes place in these cases is that the learner, though trying to make use of the phonetic system he is learning, he still relies on the principle which applies to his mother tongue: spelling and pronunciation closely linked. This L1 interference is showing us the progress the learner is making.

Another instance of spelling greatly influencing the rendering of phonetic symbols is the use of capital letters in transcriptions. This clearly shows that it becomes especially hard for students to get away with the influence of their L1 system. Another example which shows that students are making sense of a system which looks rather chaotic for them – acquiring the phonetic alphabet- is the one of inventing symbols, or reproducing symbols in a pretty deviant form hindering the understanding of the transcription of certain words. It is particularly interesting, as well, to come across errors in transcriptions which reflect defective pronunciation: understand /ʌnðəstænd/ - suddenly /sʌðənlɪ/ – reading /ri:ðɪŋ/ – efficient /əfɪsənt/. It becomes fundamental to make students aware of this error. Though, more importantly, to make them aware of the nature of the error: L1 interference.

5) Another source of error for Spanish students is that of noticing the different vowels in English and being able to use them accordingly in transcriptions. Therefore, at earlier stages, students present considerable difficulties in getting vowels right. Evidently, the fact that in Spanish we only have five vowels while in English they have twelve accounts for this difficulty. Working with vowels contrasts and making students pronounce the words the way they have transcribed them can help them become aware of the different articulations. 6) Another type of error is using the weak vowels in stressed syllables or in one-syllable content words.

These are some instances. Though the order in which they occurred should be the subject of further research as the data collected for this piece are not exhaustive enough so as to arrive to solid conclusions. Notwithstanding, we have placed them in this order basing ourselves on what we perceived students find difficult to overcome at different stages in their learning process. By applying Selinker and Corder's investigation, we may ascribe some value to these mistakes. If we stay where we are –knowing that these errors reveal diction difficulties- this study would just stand as an empirical approach without disclosing the potential value it has for the teaching of Phonology. Transfer from one system to the other helps us account for the reason why the errors are produced by students. Though, it does not contribute to reveal the real value these errors have: students are developing their 'transcription' interlanguages, which, ultimately, shows that students are learning.

When correcting students' transcriptions at an advanced stage in the year, in some cases we still encounter mistakes which correspond to earlier stages of development. Apparently, acquisition of transcription methods may also follow a U-shape course of development, where students 'display a high level of accuracy only to apparently regress later before finally once again performing in accordance with target language norms.' (Ellis 1997). This phenomenon suggests the idea of students going backwards only to leap forward. The reason why this takes place is that learners reorganise their existing knowledge in order to accommodate new knowledge. This stage is known as restructuring.

The process described above stands as a useful parameter for teachers so as not to feel discouraged when their students seem to be moving backwards. On the contrary, they are giving hints at how well they are progressing. Nevertheless, as teachers we should always be on the alert: many learners stop developing while still short of their target language competence. In this case, we can refer to fossilization, which in our research it primarily applies when students invent phonetic symbols, or when their rendering of the IPA phonetic symbols is not the best one; and students keep on using the defective forms sometimes to the detriment of understanding their production.

To sum up, learners' errors are systematic and they reflect the stage of development that a learner has reached. The different stages of development in transcription interlanguage were somehow shown in the above list of students' errors. Though the data that has to be

collected in order to provide a more thorough identification of errors at different stages should be more extensive. This may very well be the subject for future research.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Let us see now what teaching implications can be pinned down from our research with the ultimate goal of improving methodology and fostering our students' learning.

- Detecting errors in transcriptions stands as a clear instance for teachers to help their trainees in becoming more eligible in their speech.
- In class, teachers together with students should reflect upon the nature of these transcription errors, with teachers promoting awareness raising and a questioning attitude in students. Corder (1981) says: 'Making a learner try to discover the right form could often be more instructive to both learner and teacher.'
- Nevertheless, teachers are not advised to prescribe solutions. On the contrary, they should treat each case in particular. This could be done by carrying out a very simple confrontation between this student's transcription errors with diction errors; and also by keeping personal monitoring progress notes of students' competences.
- Students should receive relevant feedback when defective forms appear. The teachers' job in this case would be preventing students from internalising these errors so that they do not become fossilised revealing themselves as mistakes in students' productions to come.
- Learners should also become autonomous in their learning, and this can be achieved by allowing students to do peer correction in class on a regular basis.
- It is particularly significant that the teaching approach followed be learner-oriented with the teacher as a professional guide in this learning process.
- 'Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages. The different kinds of errors learners produce reflect different learning strategies.' (Ellis 1997). As teachers, we should foster the development of learning strategies in our students as a means through which they can enhance their learning process.

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