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Error Analysis in Second Language Learners Descriptive Study of Errors Made by Competitive Exam Aspirants

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Abstract

A comparative study of the results of the usage of Grammar translation method for long period of time has been presented. The frequency of errors made by the participants (Both grammatical and vocabulary) in a given point (for six months) of time is compared and analysed to look for the improvements. By analysing their weekly assessments, the paper proves the inefficiency of this method, for this set of participants. A deductive approach was used to prove the following hypotheses, "The grammar translation method used by the institute should improve the grammatical errors" and "The everyday usage of words should have been improved but the vocabulary level which is expected in the given exam would still have a little effect. "Every participant chosen for the study had to fulfill a particular criterion i.e. they belonged to same ethnic group, and pursued their studies in the same high school with English as a second language. For further studies, they were preparing for a country level competitive exam and were attending the same institute. By controlling every other variable their expertise in English was analyzed through the weekly assessment papers given by them. The statistical analysis of these results shows us that this method is little effective to improve their lexicon rather than helping them improve their grammar.

Keywords: Grammar translation method, interlanguage, second language acquisition

Introduction

Pit Corder Starts his "Significance of Learner's Errors" with the following statement; " the errors (not mistakes) made in both second language learning and child language acquisition provide evidence that a learner uses a definite system of language at every point in his development. This system, or "built-in syllabus," may yield a more efficient sequence than the instructor-generated sequence because it is more meaningful to the learner. By allowing the learner's innate strategies to dictate the language syllabus, rather than imposing upon him preconceived notions of what he ought to learn, a more effective means of language instruction may be achieved." Here Corder has introduced the concept of 'Interlanguage'. This definite system of language at every point of learner's development is interlanguage which is a combination of rules he or she learned from target language as well as some set of rules which were there in their mother tongues. Corder had stated that if we look closely at this form of language we can pinpoint the errors made by the learner and we can develop a unique and effective way of language teaching. He said that even though contrastive analysis was a very effective way of analyzing learner's errors, there are some errors which cannot be accounted by the help of it.

This paper is going to focus on the errors made by students, who have been learning English as a second language in a training institute. All these students are Marwari (A language spoken in Bikaner, Jodhpur and Marwar regions of Rajasthan) speakers. They have been studying the same English teaching institute for over 6 months and have been giving regular weekly assessment tests to test their improvement. In this paper these papers have been analyzed in order to find out the errors and how the teaching techniques used by this institute have helped the students to improve. The primary focus of this institute is to provide an in depth knowledge of English Grammar and Vocabulary. They have focused their teaching materials towards the written aspect of the language and these assessments tests help them to determine that. First of all, five male students, who speak Marwari as their mother tongue were chosen. They studied English in their school life, as a second language and were in the same class throughout their school times. Now they have completed their graduation in different courses. One of them is a B.Sc. Hons. Science Student, three of them did their graduation with a foreign language course. All of these students are now preparing for a common exam in New Delhi. So their primary competence of English language was similar when they started this course.

All the five steps of Error analysis were followed strictly for this paper. The first step, the collection of learner's language, was done by acquiring these assessment tests. For the second step, identification of errors, all these tests were checked with the respective answer sheets and then the errors were marked. Dominantly these papers had two kinds of errors, errors related to vocabulary items and errors related to grammatical elements. By dividing them in these two categories the third step was accomplished. Then for the fourth step the reason behind the failure or the success of this particular teaching method was analyzed and explained. This paper concludes with the evolution of this teaching technique and errors which are most likely to occur because of its application.

There are two major parts of this paper. First of all, analysis of grammatical errors. What are the major kind of grammatical errors these students are producing? And how much are the improved by the help of Grammar translation Method. Since the grammar translation method is basically build up on the fact that grammar rules are the most important factor in language learning the grammatical errors should reduce to the minimum in these last six months. The improvement which these students are showing should be high in percentage in Grammar rules. On the other hand the second part of the paper deals with the errors made in the questions related to vocabulary items of English language. If we factor in the continuous six month's effort put in by the students in order to learn the language we can expect them to master in the vocabulary items used in everyday conversation. But in this particular exam the standard of vocabulary is very high, people generally doesn't use words like 'Bifurcation' in everyday conversation. the increase in vocabulary aspect of language can be seen little less than that in grammar questions. This paper is going to analysis these two hypothesis and check whether these are true for the given way of grammar translation method.

The research question on which this paper is based on is; "How does grammar translation method helps second language acquisition and whether this method has any effect of modern way of teaching?"

The two Hypothesis are ;

1. The grammar translation method used by the institute should improve the grammatical errors in the course of six months.
2. The everyday usage of words should have been improved but the vocabulary level which is expected in the given exam would still have a little effect because of this particular coaching.

We are going to check the validity of this hypothesis in this particular situation.

Methodology

This paper has been divided into parts. In the beginning of the paper a short introduction of the topic has been given, which is followed by the research question and the two major hypothesis which is going to be the base line of this study. Then an in-depth literature review of error analysis has been presented in the next chapter. The fourth part of the paper is the presentation of data which was acquired during this period of time. The data is later explained in with suitable citations. Then the errors made by the students have been analyzed along with possible solutions.

We have checked the above hypothesis in the light of results we found during this paper and analyzed whether this hypothesis are proven true or false with the help of current study.

The paper is concluded by giving us the brief summary of the paper as well as by presenting the results of the current study.

The selection of five students were based on three categories;

1. Their age: Each one of them is 23 years old.
2. Their Education: They have done their schooling together and right now they are studying in the same institute after completing their graduations from different departments.
3. Gender: all these students are male.

Literature Review

Rod Ellis has defined Learner's Errors as ; "Error Analysis is the study of the errors learners make in their speech and writing. It has the longest history of all the methods of analysis of learner language. Error Evaluation is a set of procedures for assessing the relative seriousness of learner's errors.". He has also mentioned that while determining learner's errors interlanguage is a very important factor. He also presented the eight premises of Interlanguage in this context.

1. A learner's interlanguage consists primarily of implicit linguistic knowledge.
2. It constitutes a system in the same sense that a native speaker's grammar is a system. The system accounts for regularities that are apparent in the learner's use of L2.
3. It is permeable. As it is incomplete and unstable it is easily penetrated by new linguistic forms derived both externally from input and internally through such processes as over-generalizations
4. It is transitional.
5. It is variable. At any stage of development the learner will employ different forms for the same grammatical structure.
6. It is the product of general learning strategies.
7. A learner may supplement his/her interlanguage by means of communication strategies to compensate for gaps in or difficulty in accessing L2 knowledge while performing.
8. It may fossilize.

All these premises tell us about a learner's brain works. There have been a lot of work done in this field. People have continuously tried to understand how interlanguage works, what kind of teaching strategies should be used while teaching and how to analyze different errors. Rod Ellis also gave some general steps for error analysis.

The following steps are distinguished in conducting an Error Analysis:

- i. Collection of sample of learner language
- ii. Identification of errors
- iii. Description of errors
- iv. Explanation of errors
- v. Error evaluation

EA Studies in the Past Six Decades: An Overview In 60's:
In 60's we saw the CA at its peak and reactions pouring in immediately after into the seventies. It is aforementioned that the learners' errors play a significant role in the analysis of learners' language as Corder in "The significance of learners' errors" points out that the learners' errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he or she is using (i.e. has learnt) at a particular point in the course. The errors are significant in three different ways.

- i. To the teacher, in that they tell him if he understands a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains to be learnt.
- ii. To the researcher with evidence of how language is learnt/acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of language.
- iii. To the learner himself because we regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. i.e. learner is testing the hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning.

In the course of error analysis the researchers also attempt to find the source and the cause of the errors in the process of learning L2 as Jain in 'Error Analysis: Source, cause and significance' points out that the purpose of EA is not merely to identify and classify the errors made by the students but also to suggest that there is a system in their errors. He also indicates that not all the errors are the result of the transfer of the structure of the learners' native language and points out that the tendency of SL learner to reduce the TL to a simple system is exemplified at all the levels of the syntax i.e. from higher order constituent to the lowest one, from higher and lower order syntactic categories and grammatical relations to grammatical and lexical formatives. In an attempt to find out strategies learners adopt in reducing the TL to a simpler system, Jain(1975:198-199) points out that:

- i. The learners are motivated to reduce structure in L1 that seems to be highest in the areas syntax of the L2 where one system in a particular area is out of a network of intricate system and subsystem.
- ii. Overgeneralization by the L2 learners
- iii. The third strategy of reducing the L2 to a simpler system with serious syntactic consequences is in the area where a deep structure element is used more than one way i.e. overtly marked past tense form of the verb on the surface can signal future time.

In his further remarks he points out that L1 independent source, cause and significance of errors which are based on L1 independent variables i.e. learning strategy, training procedure, text books, sociolinguistic etc. the learners form their own system during their learning processes i.e. asystematic which lies between systematic and unsystematic In an attempt to focus on the nature and different types of errors in LL, Richard, J.C., in "Non-contrastive Approach to EA" points out that there are several types of errors observed in the acquisition of English as an L2, which do not derive from

transfer of another language. He has proposed errors of different nature which are regardless of learners' background such as:

- i. Intra-lingual Errors – Those errors which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.
- ii. Development errors – In these kinds of errors the learners attempt to build up hypothesis from his limited experience of L2 in classroom or textbook. He further illustrates the development errors in terms of
 - Overgeneralization
 - Ignorance of rule construction
 - Incomplete application of rules
 - False hypothesis

We also find an adequate mode of analyzing the errors in the literature of EA i.e. identification of error, description of error and explanation of error of error, as Corder, S.P., has pointed out three processes in the analysis of errors in LL. The first process is 'recognition of idiosyncrasy'. As he considers 'Every sentence is to be regarded as idiosyncratic until shown to be otherwise'. He also points out that a learner's sentence may be superficially well formed i.e. covertly idiosyncratic or overtly idiosyncratic it means superficially illustrated in terms of the rules of TL.

The second process illustrates the methodology of LL description where two languages are described in terms of a common set of categories and relations i.e. bilingual comparison (one in LL & other in TL).

The third process is explanation of errors. In the explanation of errors, Corder sets two objectives: (i) To elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language, (ii) To enable the learners to learn more effectively by exploiting the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes.

In a study to distinguish among TL, source language and learners' language in contact situation, Nemser (1971:55), in 'Approximate System' indicates that language systems represented in a contact situation can be classified in accordance with their functions as follows:

- TL is that in which communication is being attempted; in case of a learner it is the language he is learning, when he uses it.
- The source language is that which acts as a source of interference; it is normally learners' native language.
- An Approximate system is the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the TL. Such approximate systems vary in character in accordance with proficiency level; variation is also introduced by learning experience (including exposure to TL script system), communication function, personal learning features etc. Nemser points out that the mode of learner's language may be structurally organized and that the contact situation should therefore be described not only with reference to MT & TL of the learners (L1 & L2) but with reference to learner system as well.

In 70's EA Focus on Importance and Use of Errors. EA studies in 70s have mainly focused on analysis and studies of errors. Along with playing a significant role in learners' language analysis, the errors of L2 learners also significantly contribute to the language pedagogy as, in "Preface to Error Analysis" of Richards points out that there are three main objectives of EA:

- i. To serve as an important source of corroboration to contrastive linguistic analysis in their claims for predictability of error.
- ii. To permit the formation of rules for the learners' inter-lingual system, thus providing incidentally for the teacher confirmation of what remains to be learnt.
- iii. To chart learners' language development through error study which has psychological linguistic importance i.e. it submits transfer theory to critical observation and provides data on the nature and significance of the obstacles.

While focusing on the different uses of EA, Corder in "The study of learners' language" points out two uses of EA.

- (i) Practical use – it is a feed back to the teacher and teacher and teaching program.
- (ii) Theoretical use – it is a feedback to descriptive and psycholinguistic theory.
- (c) In 80's EA Studies Focus on the Psychology of the Learners

EA studies during 80s have focused on the psychology of the learners. When we talk of psychology in SL learning it reflects the dominating factors in the process of learning L2 such as transfer of L1 features, learners' strategy, overgeneralization etc. As Selinker in "Inter language" has attempted to summarize these factors into five central processes which exist in latent psychological structure of the learners:

- Language transfer
- Transfer of training
- Strategies of L2 learning
- Strategies of L2 communication
- Overgeneralization of L2

Selinker also introduces the concept of fossilization as a mechanism which is assumed to exist in latent psychological structure as mentioned above. These fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and systems which the speakers of a particular language (NL) tend to keep in their IL relative to TL and irrespective of the age of the learners.

As cited in Noth, W. (1979: 62), in "Errors as a discovery procedure in Linguistics" that the relationship between linguistic theory and errors is mutually dependent. He also points out some of the importance of errors in linguistic theory which can be summarized as follows:

- Errors signalize the restrictions underlying the rules of the language system.
- Errors indicate the points where language system is easily subject to disturbances.
- Errors lead to the discovery of new aspects of language use.
- EA is used as a method of verification of hypothesis developed within the framework of linguistic theory.

In 90's EA Studies Focus on Implications of EA and LL for the Interpretation of the Cognitive Hypothesis and Acquisition Studies

In 90s we find implications of EA and LL studies for the interpretation of the cognitive hypothesis and acquisition studies. In order to determine the dominating factors affecting the process of learning, Gass, S. (1980:140), in "An investigation of systematic transfers in L2 learners" points out that there are many cases of errors which cannot be attributed to

learners' native language which prove not to be the areas of difficulty at all for the learners. He indicates three factors which play a significant role in determining the learning processes of L2 learners. These factors are:

- Universal factors
- Specific facts about learner's native language
- Specific facts about L2

In considering the relationship among these factors he indicates that universal principle of language plays the leading role since they are dominant in assigning a relative order to difficulty to certain structures.

The inherent features of words also play an important role in the process of learning a language. As cited in Laufer, B. in "why are some words more difficult?" that there are some intra lexical features that affect the learning of the words. He also points out that some features which are inherent to the words themselves might affect the ease or difficulty with a word that is learnt. These are: phonological, length, grammatical parts of speech, inflectional and derivational complexity. In his further discussion he indicates that these features affect the process of learning when they interact with each other in different ways. He categorizes intra lingual factors which affect vocabulary learning into three parts:

- Facility factors: i.e. unproblematic pronunciation, inflectional regularity, derivational regularity, non idiomaticity etc.
- Difficulty inducing factors i.e. difficult pronunciation, inflectional and derivational complexity idiomaticity etc.
- Non-effective factors-i.e. word length, parts of speech and concreteness/abstractness.

(f) EA Studies in the 2nd Decade of 21st Century. At the end of 20th Century and in the beginning of the second decade of 21st century we continue to work on source of interference in L2 learning, process of L2 learning & grammatical features of LL. One finds more elaborate discussion on the features of L_L and the process of learning/acquisition in the context of cognitive hypothesis.

In 21st Century

The linguists are still emphasizing more on the source of difficulties faced by L₂ learners as well as on the description of the single linguistic aspect of the L_L Errors. We also find an elaborate focus on learning context, learners' need and learning contents, innovation of teaching methods and materials and also socio-cultural, political & economic variables which affect in the process L₂ learning.

Data Representation

During the course of six months these five students have attended English classes thrice a week. Every Sunday they are supposed to write an assessment test. The assessment test contended 207 questions in total.

The following are the data acquired from each individual's various test series.

ERROR ANALYSIS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS DESCRIPTIVE

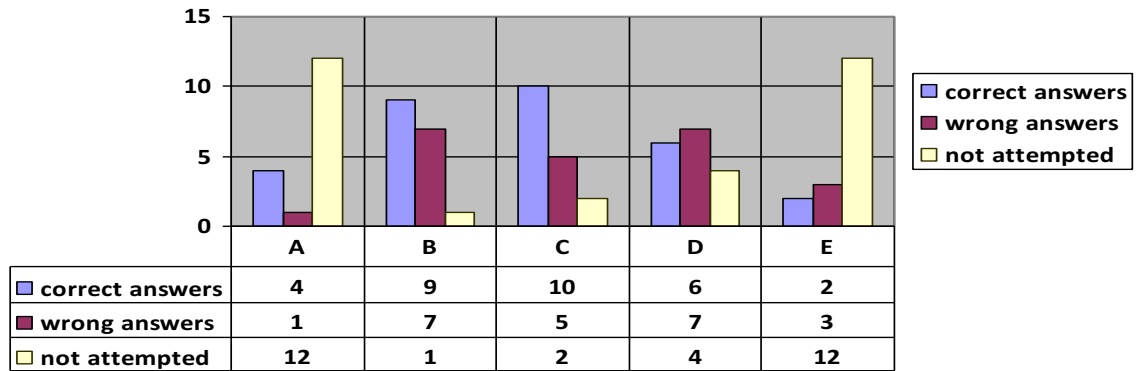


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 1

The participant A and E had 12 non-attempted questions. Number of correct answers was greater for Participant B and C.

The figure 2 shows that number of not-attempted questions decreased for participant A and E but it increased for participant B and C (12, and * respectively)

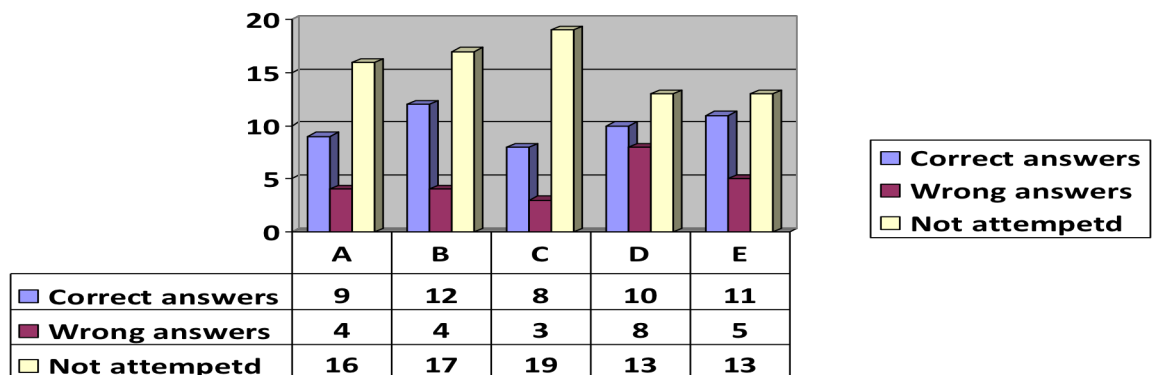


Figure 2 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 2

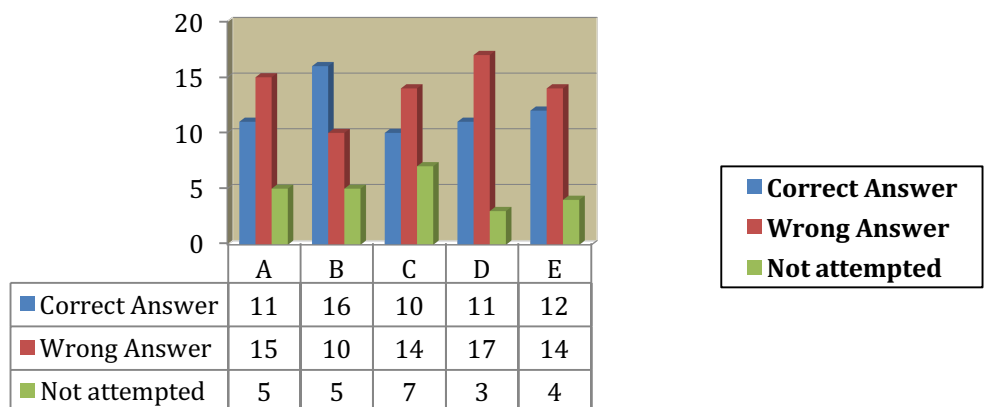


Figure 3 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 3

Figure 3 and \$ shows that the number of wrong answered question has been increased for every participant. This can be taken as a good sign, because this means that they have started developing a new way interlanguage in their minds and they are trying to use it for their answers. Since, the interlanguage consists features from both, L1 and L2, participants are getting wrong answers more.

The number of not-attempted questions has been declined drastically.

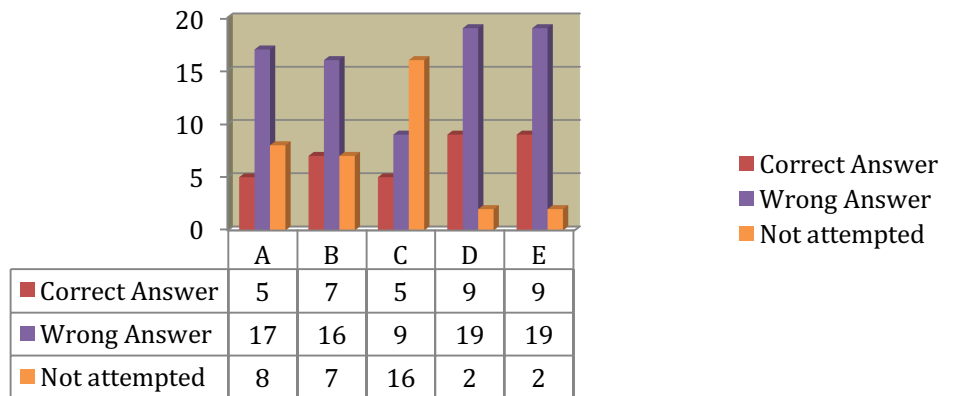


Figure 4 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 4

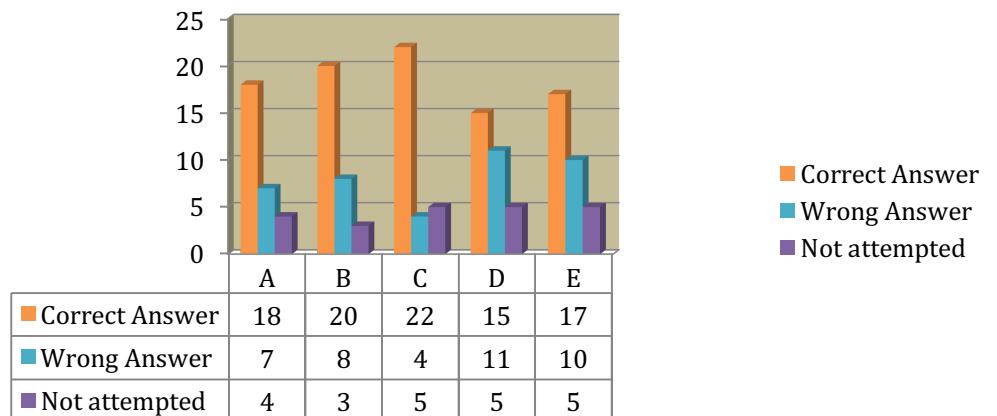


Figure 5 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 5

Figure 5 is an important figure. It can be seen here that; the number of correct answers were way higher than the number or incorrect answers or not- attempted questions. The positive outcomes of this test provide a hope that, probably the method employed in the coaching centers has proven to be effective for the given sets of students.

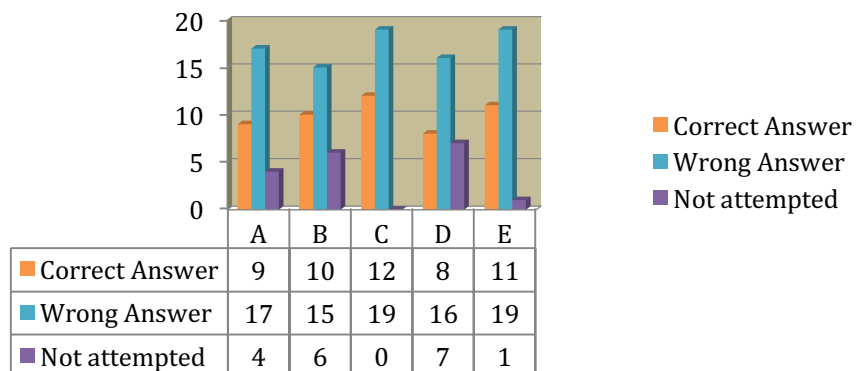


Figure 6 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 6

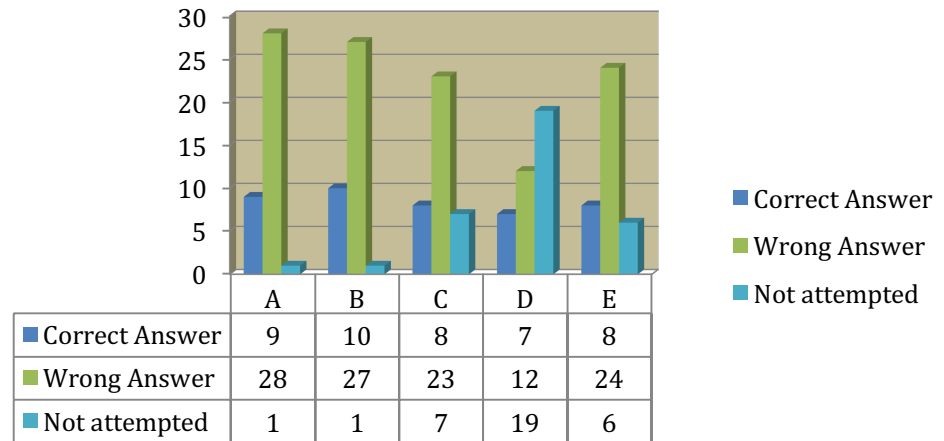


Figure 7 Graphical Representation of data acquired on Test series 7

For test 6 and 7, the overall performance of students went back to the same performance, they showed for test 4. This can indicate two things, One, The method employed for the current experiment has failed or second, the test 5 was considerably easier than the others

In all these above tests, we can see that the graph is touching its peaks for wrong answers. But the percentage of not attempted has been reduced. In the later tests students started answering more questions even though they are majorly answering them wrong. The first bar in each column symbolizes the correct answers given by the students, the second bar is for the wrong answers and the last bar is for the not attempted questions.

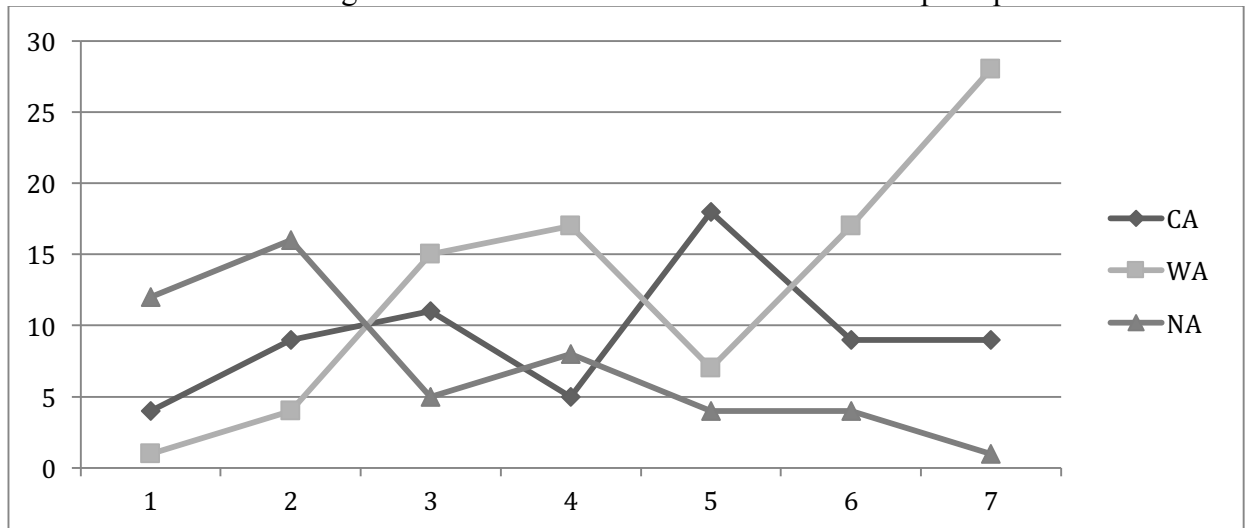


Figure 8 linear representation of Student A's progress in six months

The figure 8 is the linear representation of Student A's progress in six months. The horizontal axis represents different test from the starting of the coaching to most recent one and the vertical axis represents questions attempted by the students. We can see that the number of questions attempted is has increased during this time and so has the errors made by the students.

These questions were also divided according to their category, whether they are grammatical errors or vocabulary based. Out of 207 questions 82 were there to test the vocabulary skills of the students.

Student A made 29 vocabulary related errors. In the beginning he was answering 3 out of 5 questions wrong but in the last three papers vocabulary related errors were reduced to 2 out of 5. Same was true for other students also. Where their grammar related errors increased gradually.

Hypothesis Revisited

In the beginning of this paper we postulated two hypotheses for the course of this study. Now let's check whether these two hypotheses are applicable for current study.

The two Hypothesis are;

1. The grammar translation method used by the institute should improve the grammatical errors in the course of six months.
2. The everyday usage of words should have been improved but the vocabulary level which is expected in the given exam would still have a little effect because of this particular coaching.

We saw that both these hypothesis have been proven wrong in this study. The first one says that the student's knowledge of grammatical rules should improve in this period gradually but we saw that the only thing which was improved was the errors made by the students. And the second hypothesis states that vocabulary level should remain steady during this time, which was also not true. We saw that even though the increased proficiency in English language was not ground breaking but they showed remarkable progress.

Explanation:

The concept of Inter language comes into play here. This study shows us that learner are continuously changing their competence. The continuously changing graphs reflects how a learner's brain is working. The learner is processing new rules every day and which is continuously changing its state of mind. The reason why so many errors were made is possibly the non-stopping change in learner's brain activity. They keep on acquiring rules and adjusting the previous ones, which sometimes leads to overgeneralization, possible interlanguage interferences and resulting into so many errors. Which may be the reason behind so many wrong answers given by the students during the last two three test. They have fossilized a form of interlanguage in their brain and they are trying to cope up with the rules they have preserved. The role of a teacher here is to understand the student's needs. These students do not need more rule bombardment but their existing rules should be double checked. May be more of these assessment exercises along with some classroom interaction and question paper explanation might help this. The method these coaching institutes are using is still following the old tradition of Grammar translation Method which is good for couple of months in the beginning but for the latter half of their training some more methods can be helpful. For example direct method can help them learn more vocabulary.

Conclusion

In this study we saw that students have been experimenting with the rules of language, just like children do. The error analysis of these five students also showed us that how motivation is an essential factor in language learning. Their improvement in vocabulary skills proves this. Even though their grammatical skills were not that developed they have managed to acquire the confidence to produce errors and correct them. The number question they used attempt in the beginning the number of questions they are attempting now proves that they have developed a competence of language (still

incomplete and disoriented) and they are applying that competence in their usage. This trial and error method will also help to achieve positive and negative feedbacks.

The role of their teacher is to see how their progress is going and to come up with more entertaining techniques, now that the acquisition of rules part is over. The rigorous techniques of Grammar translation method should be combined with new forms of teaching in order to obtain more positive results.

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