

# Reflecting on the Nature and Causes of Errors in Second Language Learning and their Classroom Implications

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## ABSTRACT

Second/Foreign language learning is a complex process. People who learn a language other than their home language often commit errors because they learn in an unnatural way. Scholars mention that some errors originate from mother tongue interferences and this phenomenon results in interlingual errors. Other errors are made as a result of the unfamiliarity with the target language when learners are trying to cope with the new language, internalising some concepts. Scholars also highlight those errors can be stabilised and even fossilised. Stabilised errors are errors that can be corrected provided learners have enough exposure to the new language. Nevertheless, errors' fossilisation impacts on the whole language process as learners never know the correct way of using it. The present paper reviews the most common errors and their causes and discusses them from a theoretical standpoint. It also analyses contextual factors that have an impact on errors. Next, the paper emphasises the role of teachers in boosting effective language use among second language learners. Finally, it offers recommendations on how second language errors can be dealt with to promote learning.

## 1. Introduction

Errors are defined as “a systematic deviation when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong” (Songxaba & Sincuba 2019, p. 2). These authors add that this deviation occurs many times. For Fauziati (2011), learners' errors are inherent in humans and cannot be avoided. Chkotua (2012) indicates that errors are integral parts of the whole learning process. Sari (2016) considers errors as unavoidable and a necessary part of learning and they prove that learning is happening. The phrase “humans are learning beings” (Vavilova & Broadbent 2019, p. 529) implies that learning has a human nature and is not exempt from errors. Briefly, errors are necessary ingredients for of the learning process.

Errors also occur during the language learning process. Indeed, people who embark on learning a language which is different from their mother tongue are likely to make many errors. Tulis et al. (2016) state that errors can improve knowledge and acquisition when learners deal with them in an effective way. Khansir (2012) holds that errors play an essential part in learning a language. Errors are a source from which derive the methods used by a language learner to learn a target language rather than being considered as deviations (Fauziati, 2011) from the normal use of that language. In the language learning process, errors are thus viewed as a good

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way of acquiring skills a particular language. Given the fact that errors play an important role in language learning, they have attracted many researches including those on foreign language acquisition (Khansir, 2012).

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the nature and factors influencing error production and discuss their classroom implications, as well as teachers' role in promoting learners' language fluency and accuracy. The present article intends to present views on different types and causes of errors and corresponding analyses. It also explores theories on errors in second/foreign language learning and factors which can exacerbate the situation of errors in the process of second language learning. Finally, responsibilities of language teachers in effectively dealing with errors are suggested.

## **2. Types of Common Errors in Second/Foreign Language Learning**

There are two distinguished types of errors, namely *local* and *global errors* (Amara 2015). The author indicates that local errors are those that do not hinder communication of messages while global errors do. He adds that global errors do not allow the language learners from understanding the message. Evidently, the error in *\*my parents has gone to the market* is a local one because the message can be understood in spite of the errors concerning subject-verb agreement. Conversely, the error in *\*I was investigated the causes of the accident two times* is global as the information is quite confusing. People may not know whether it is I who investigated the causes of the accident or whether I was investigated by someone. Erdoğan (2005) puts errors in four categories. The first one is 'omitting a necessary element' as in *\*A strange thing happen to me yesterday*. In this sentence the 'ed' in 'happen' is omitted. The second category concerns 'adding an element' which was not necessary like *\*The books is here*. In this sentence the morpheme of the plural 's' in books has been added unnecessarily, making the sentence odd. The third category is about selecting an 'incorrect element' as in the sentence *\*My friend is oldest than me*. In this sentence 'oldest' instead of 'older' is used. The final category is 'disordering elements' or a spelling error like *\*fignisicant* for 'significant'. The sentence with 'fignisicant' is not clear because the so called word does not exist in English.

## **3. Causes of Errors in Second Language Learning**

There are two causes of error in a second language learning. These are inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors. Songxaba & Sincuba (2019) classify errors as inter-lingual or intra-lingual. Errors resulting from a learners' first language are referred to as inter-lingual while those related to the target language are called intra-lingual (Songxaba & Sincuba, 2019); Carrió-Pastor & Mestre (2013).

### *3.1. Inter-Lingual Errors/ First Language Induced Errors*

Some errors committed have been attributed to the first language. Such errors resulting from a learners' first language are referred to as inter-lingual (Carrió-Pastor & Mestre, 2013). Some scholars highlight the effects of interferences from the first language on learning a second language. For instance, Khansir (2012) attributes learners' errors to mother tongue interferences. Dissington (2018) states that both the acquisition and use of second language vocabulary are greatly influenced by first language. In this regard, there can be a negative transfer especially when the second language is completely different from the first language (Khansir 2012). Heydari (2012) mentions that elements from first language are used while speaking or writing and this results in inter-lingual errors. These differences can result in error production if they are not catered for carefully. It is important to mention that learners' educational backgrounds do play a great role in the way they perform in a language. For example, someone who has benefitted from lots of exposure to the second language from an

early age will certainly produce fewer errors as compared to a person whose exposure was very limited or lacking.

### *3.2. Intra-Lingual Errors/Development Errors*

Unlike interference errors which are caused by the first language, intra-lingual errors are attributable to the target language itself. Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) contend that intra-language errors originate from ignorance, misusing language rules and falsely hypothesising concepts. Scholars have mentioned different types of intra-lingual errors.

The first distinction is ‘simplification’. Errors belonging to this category consist of misusing words or grammatical structures (Heydari, 2012). With simplification, the language learners may prefer simple forms over complex ones. For example, instead of saying ‘Karl is going to the market’, the learner can say ‘\*Karl goes to the market’. Amara (2015) considers this type of errors ‘incomplete application of the rule’ in which the language learner fails to apply the rule as it is and produce a simplified structure. He gave an example of ‘You like to sing?’ instead of ‘Do you like to sing?’ It can be assumed that simplification like the one in this sentence is caused by little effort to learning from the learners to engage in the learning process, which may prevent them from retaining some basics of the second language grammar.

The second class of errors is ‘overgeneralisation’ in which the learner deviates from the correct use of a language structure and applies another structure (Heydari, 2012). One example of this kind is ‘\*Mary teached the English class’ instead of ‘Mary taught the English class’. Amara (2015) called errors of this type ‘analogical errors’. It is important to note that overgeneralisation frequently happens to second language learners especially at the beginning of their learning process before they internalise different forms of the language structures.

The third type of errors is ‘induced errors’. Errors of this kind are due to teachers’ overcorrection or false instruction of the language (Heydari, 2012) or “teacher’s presentation of the material” (Amara 2015, p. 60). We can give an example of teachers who always produce [de] instead of [the]. As a result, the teachers’ utterances cause learners to produce the sound in all words containing the cluster ‘th’. For example, the learner can say, \*de pen, \*dis month, \*dat house instead of [the] pen, [this] month and [that] house. Consequently, learners produce utterances with that error because it is the way they were taught.

The fourth category of errors is ‘false hypothesis of concepts’ (Amara, 2015). In this category a student can say ‘\*I was studied English at high school’; the learner can also say, ‘I was travelled’ instead of ‘I travelled’, believing that *was* is always used as an indication of the past. Errors of this category prevail both in written and spoken expression among students. Sometimes sentences like this can be confused with the passive forms. The fifth category of errors is caused by ‘ignorance of rule restrictions’ (Amara, 2015) or ‘inadequate learning’. In this situation language learners ignore some rules. As a result, a second language learner can say, ‘He made me to go rest’ instead of ‘He asked/wanted me to go and rest’ (Amara, 2015).

The fifth category is ‘fossilisation. Fossilisation was first referred to as the “permanent inability to master the target language in most foreign and second language learners” (Tajeddin & Tabatabaeian, 2017). Fossilisation results in the fact that learners’ performance remains below the standard level despite their effort to be as competent as native speakers of a language (Tajeddin & Tabatabaeian, 2017). Similarly, fossilisation is viewed as an attainment in a second language learning which is below the native speaker standard (Vavilova & Broadbent, 2019). For Tajeddin & Tabatabaeian, 2017), fossilised forms of errors happen because they have been internalised before the acquisition of native-like features. In addition, a perfect grammar of a target language cannot be attained by non-native speakers of that language and that instead, errors remain permanent features of their interlanguage (Fauziati, 2011). This

scenario may result from the absence of correction or lack of exposure to genuine material in the target language. Being fossilised means that errors are *permanent* and cannot disappear despite the amount of exposure in the target language (Fauziati, 2011). Indeed, fossilisation stands for the absence of a good command of the second language in spite of frequent exposure to it, motivation and practice (Vavilova & Broadbent, 2019).

Errors fossilisation has raised a lot of views among scholars. For example, Fauziati (2011) considers fossilisation as an integral part in the development of the second language learning. A learner or a teacher cannot escape from it without language practice (Rao, 2018). The process is believed to start with stabilization. In this process, errors become stable in the language learner before they become permanent. While fossilised errors do not vanish despite the amount of language input presented to the learner, stabilised errors stop existing at some time in the process. This aspect makes fossilization different from stabilization (Fauziati, 2011).

#### **4. Contextual Factors Impacting on Errors In EFL/ ESL**

Some factors that are related to the learners' environmental and educational background may exert influence on learning. To explain contextual factors, Khansir (2012) gave an example of a language learner who can produce a sentence containing 'must (+ to)'. As long as the learner is not taught how to use this modal verb correctly or fails to realise that native speakers do not produce this form, he will make this error quite consistently. Second language earners will, hence, produce consistent forms as long as they are effectively presented various material in the language. This shows the ultimate importance of favourable contextual factors in second language learning.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) describe three types of environmental factors to which language learners are exposed. These factors are natural interaction, traditional acquisition and communicative teaching environments. For these writers, language learners naturally acquire the language on condition that they are frequently engaged in discussions, interactions and conversations wherein they share experience and negotiate meanings in this target language. Within such particular environment, stabilised errors cannot be fossilised but will rather be destabilised. This context is different from the situation in which second language learners would be prescribed language structures and vocabulary following the traditional language acquisition approach. It has been demonstrated that not giving space to learners to practice the language will lead to error fossilization.

Errors in the second language can persist due to inappropriate learning environment. We imagine what would happen in a language class or learning institution if reading materials were absent or not exploited appropriately. The end result would be for students to keep interferences from their first language as they are not presented some clues specific to the target language. The same would apply to the situation in which only few weekly hours are allotted to the language class. It would be up to the language learners to have an extra time to find more about the language and put it into practice to supplement their inputs from the classroom. If the learners were not active and did not feel responsible for their learning by engaging themselves in reading, listening and speaking, errors would be permanent. Furthermore, errors in the second language learning would be fossilised if learners did not get exemplary models in the language. In this regard, learners' failure in language learning results from the lack of enough language exposure (Stefánsson, 2013). Learners can benefit from genuine language exposure while communicating with native speakers, practicing listening and reading various materials. Finally, the absence or lack of enough effective exploitation of different materials in the language coupled with the lack of practice would lead to errors' fossilisation and overgeneralization of the rules in the target language.

Apart from the above-mentioned factors other causes can intervene in language learning. Stefánsson (2013) states that learning a language is significantly easier for young learners. However, they accord much weight to motivation and exposure and recommend that exposure in the language be availed and motivation be established from the beginning of language learning without any age consideration. Motivation shows how learners are involved in learning and their attitude towards this process and determines their success in second language acquisition (Stefánsson, 2013). By the same token, Gump (2015) considers motivation as a motive for a student to learn a language while and a factor contributing to the amount of the content for the language acquisition. For Stefánsson (2013), the school system, the quality of the language program, classroom environment, materials and the curriculum is prominent factors to motivation and success in second language learning; therefore, language teachers' assistance in arousing learners' motivation is needed.

### **5. The Place of Errors in Second/Foreign Language Learning Theories**

The impact of the first language on the production of errors in second language learning has been highlighted in some learning theories. The first well-known theory of second language learning is behaviourism. This theory regards learning as a result of the acquisition of a set of new language patterns. According to Budiman (2017, p. 102), "Behaviourism theory views that learning is changing the behavior of students, from being able to produce oral or written product". This implies that the end product of second language learning is to ensure the language learner produces correct utterances. According to the theory, humans are born without any language perception and that language is learnt through the environment. The theory considers human mind as a 'black box' (Petersen 2014) or tabula-rasa (Budiman, 2017) which means that everything has to be learnt from the language teacher. For behaviourism mother tongue does interfere with second language learning. Wood (2017) highlights that errors originate from first language habits. Considering language learning as a habit formation in which old habits impede on the acquisition of the new ones, the theory posits that errors should be prevented (Sari, 2016).

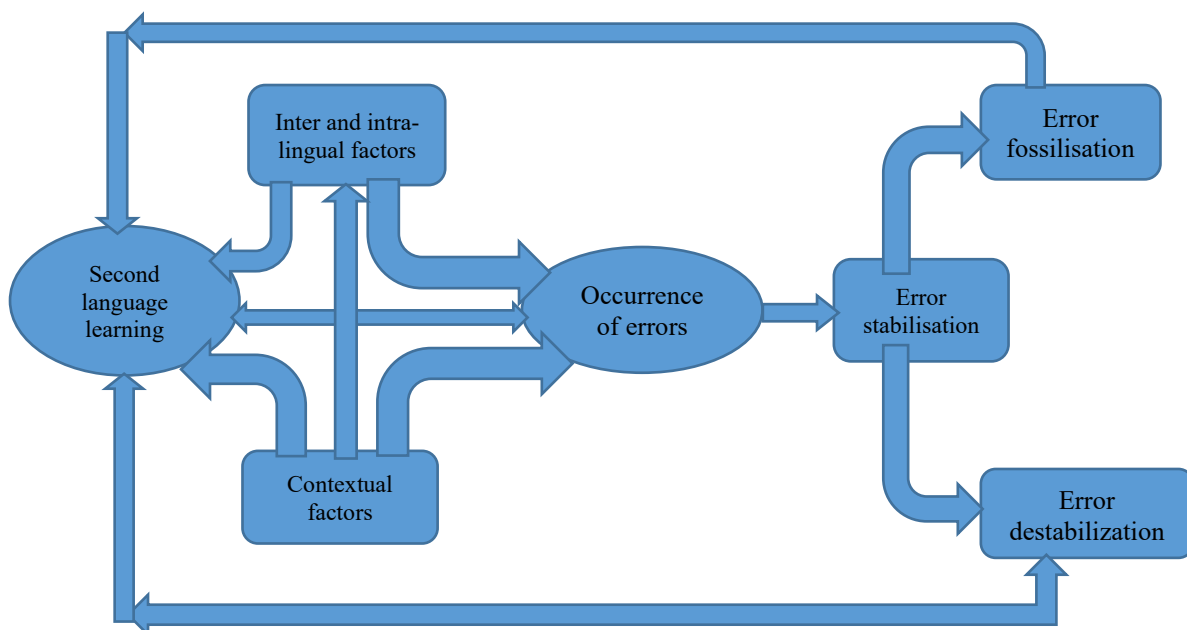
Another language learning theory is contrastive analysis. It came as a contradiction of behaviorism theory of language learning. As its appellation states, it is a theory according to which learners' errors committed while learning a second language are attributed to interferences from their native language (Salehi & Bahrami, 2018; Al-Khresheh, 2016). Additionally, talking about this theory, Salehi and Bahrami (2018) characterises language learning as the existence of errors resulting from one's first language. For him, the native language exerts an influence on the second language development. The negative impact of the process is development error leading to overgeneralisation. The theory corroborates the existence or errors caused by first language interferences also called *inter-lingual errors*.

Finally, there is the Error Analysis (EA). This is an approach holding that there are cognitive processes learners make use of while recognising or coding the target language input (Erdogan, 2005 as cited in Al-Khresheh, 2016). Contrary to contrastive analysis, error analysis considers errors as a result of not only learners' first language (inter-lingual) but also as interference from the target language itself. Sari (2016, p. 90) highlighted that "students may make mistake in the target language...since they do not know the target language very well, they have difficulties in using it". Thus, instead of relying on one cause of errors, the approach looks at the two causes, intra-lingual and interference from the first language (Al-Khresheh, 2016). This is consistent with Brown' position. He states that learners' errors originate from considering the target language as similar to their first language (inter-lingual errors) and from the negative transfer of items within the target language (intra-lingual errors) (Sari, 2016).

Error analysis has become a starting point to improving learning performance in the classroom. In fact, it has been the most reliable as it has received much admiration from different scholars. For Salehi and Ava (2018), error analysis is a process which observes, analyses and classifies how learners use their language as compared to how they use the target language. In addition, Sari (2016) considers error analysis as an invaluable strategy that can help to identify the language needs learners still have by giving information about the missing aspects to get them competent. He author affirms that learners' errors are essential devices for the learners to learn. He further indicates that EA is an effective feedback which can help to review the teaching approach Sari (2016). Therefore, once error analysis is carried out in the classroom, it may help the language teacher to identify the nature of errors and plan remedial teaching.

## 6. Errors Implication in ESL/EFL Classroom

The following figure is an overview of overall contributing factors to errors and their effects on second language learning.



*Figure 1: Causes of errors and their effects on ESL/EFL learning (as suggested by authors)*

As presented in the above figure, both inter-lingual and intra-lingual factors affect second language learning, inducing the learner in errors that are respectively related to first language or second language interferences. Different scholars have highlighted the importance of errors in second language learning. For example, Khansir and Pakdel (2018) consider errors as essential features in second/foreign language learning. Papangkorn (2015) also maintains that errors are key indicators of learners' progress in the process of second language. As shown in the Figure 1, there is a constant change of the learning process characterised by the double-sided arrow between error occurrence and second language learning. In addition, contextual factors play a twofold role. In fact, once they are favourable, they positively impact on second language learning and negatively in opposite conditions. At the same time, they affect the way both inter and intra-lingual errors that occur in second/foreign language learning are made and dealt with. As contextual factors embrace all the classroom, pedagogical, institutional and student characteristics, they can contribute to the status of errors made by learners, making them stabilised. At this stage, there can be two possibilities: once contextual factors are favourable, errors can be destabilised and then contribute to second language acquisition in a positive way. Otherwise, they hinder the process when errors become fossilised.

Figure 1 is a product of the inspiration the researchers got from Stefánsson's point of view that errors in a language are not fossilised. For him, they are just stabilized temporarily at that particular period of the learning course (Stefánsson, 2013). He believes that activities like adequate input, feedback, frequent exposure, explicit grammar explanation, and the opportunity to practice the target language improve learners' linguistic skills in the target language and contribute to the way errors are destabilised (Stefánsson, 2013). Therefore, the absence of all these aspects of the language learning context induce errors' fossilisation. It is important to mention that stabilisation and fossilisation affect language learning differently. Once stabilised errors are aroused in learners (destabilisation stage), they immediately help them to get more language input and performance. Conversely, errors' fossilisation hinders the achievement of linguistic competence necessary learners' future careers (Dissington, 2018) and negatively affects second language learning.

### **7. The Role of Teachers of Second/Foreign Language Vis-À-Vis Errors Occurrence in Language Learning**

One of the language teachers' tasks is to increase students' motivation in learning the language. Indeed, once students are highly motivated, learning can take place. Motivation, is both a condition for and a result of effective learning (Ushida, 2005). Talking about the role of motivation, Saranraj et al. (2016) stress that motivation is an essential factor in L2 achievement. These views imply that motivation is both a cornerstone and an outcome for successful language learning. Carrió-Pastor and Mestre (2013) distinguish types of motivation as integrative and instrumental. The integrative form of motivation is indicated by attitudes which favour the target language and the wish to be part of the linguistic community of that language. Talking about motivation in speaking, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) state that an integrative attitude towards native speakers of a language makes learners enthusiastic about the pronunciation and accent of the language. They continue to say that learners do not improve in learning different aspects of the language when they have a different view about the language. The instrumental aspect of motivation is associated with the benefits given after any achievement in the target language.

Scholars have highlighted that for language learning to be more effective, learners should have an integrative motivation. For example, Ushida (2005, pp. 50-51) hypothesises that "L2 learners with positive attitudes to the target culture and people will learn the target language more effectively than those who do not have such positive attitudes" Therefore, it is language teachers' responsibility to instil the motivation for language learning into their students. Once motivated, they become lifelong language learners. This corroborates Serin (2016, p.194)'s assertion that "Motivation has paramount influence on students' achievement for that reason teachers should create learning communities in which students strive for accomplishment". Motivation determines the way people prefer to do a given activity as well as the time and effort they spend on it on it (Csizer & Karmos, 2014). We can say that if language learners are motivated, they apply the language in everyday life and become confident with using it.

The second responsibility of the language teacher is to engage learners in frequent interactions using the language and inculcate in them a sense of autonomy. Class interactions facilitate learning in that "When working interactively with others, students learn to inquire, share ideas, clarify differences, problem-solve, and construct new understandings" (Chiriac, 2014, p.2). We believe that once students are engaged in regular interactions in class, they improve on their learning. Teachers should therefore try their best to ensure that factors that favour language acquisition are in place. Cao (2014) declares that environmental factors like topic, task type, teacher and students' participation, teaching style, and class interactional pattern; individual factors such as self-confidence, personality, emotion, and perceived opportunity to

communicate; and language proficiency favour class interactions and allow students to learn from each other. As the less knowledgeable students are supported by their peers, they acquire more about language production and use; thus, errors in language can be addressed through peer interactions. When students are engaged in interactions, they become autonomous in language learning process. With autonomy, they make use of available resources and practice the language more frequently. As they learn a lot about language, they will be aware of their errors and learn how to correct some of them. In fact, learners' lack of awareness of their errors in a language leads to permanently using incorrect forms of the target language (Tajeddin & Tabatabaein, 2017). These authors call upon learners to notice their errors. As they state, the more forms learners notice, the fewer errors they tend to produce. It can be concluded that raising learners' awareness of erroneous forms can result in fewer fossilized forms.

The third role of ESL/EFL teachers is to provide feedback to students' errors. This is because with the feedback, students will be aware of the correct language form or expression to use. Asmiyah and Fitriah (2019) explain that the lack of feedback creates confusion among students and prevents them from understanding and using English as a second language effectively. These authors affirm that feedback increases students' motivation to learn a language and helps them use the language accurately (Asmiyah, et al., 2020). Conversely, the lack of feedback leads learners to frustration and loss of confidence in their teachers (Ali & Kabir, 2012). Nevertheless, these authors warn that negative feedback and too much correction are likely to take away learners' motivation. This means that language errors should not be neglected in any way; they should be dealt with in a pedagogical way to benefit students. Tavoosy and Jelveh (2019) suggest that teachers should recast the student's error, offering the right word or expression without giving much attention to the error.

The fourth responsibility for language teachers is to avail authentic learning materials. Wallace (1992) as cited in Berardo (2006) mentioned that authentic materials are those that are prepared to serve other purposes rather than teaching. They include newspapers, movies, TV programs, literature, songs and magazines. For Gilmore (2014), authentic materials are extremely useful and they can be used at different learning levels in various ways. Focusing on the importance of authentic materials, Vavilova & Broadbent (2019) state that corpora of second language prevent learners from relying on their teachers by presenting them natural language. Similarly, Guo (2012) holds that authentic materials increase vocabulary and motivation. Al and Al-Rashdi (2014) highlight that with authentic materials, students feel they are taking part in the language community as it is used outside the classroom; hence, they are enjoyable. Hwang (2005) also contends that empirical research report a positive impact of authentic text on learners' listening and reading skills. However, this scholar concurs that language learners get interest in the target language when authentic materials are adapted to their levels.

Finally, language teachers have to adapt teaching and learning to technological and information trends. In fact, in the modern era, there are many ways wherein information is spread via electronic devices such as the internet, the telephone, the radio, and social media. These devices should often characterise the teaching and learning process as both language teachers and learners can make use of them to get useful materials. Using these devices will permit learners to apply the language outside the classroom settings. In this regard, Ngesi et al. (2018) found out that mobile phones are used to write complete sentences, use punctuation marks and correct the spelling. Kern (2014) states that the internet provides a set of text, films, music and teaching materials as well as a platform for communicating with native speakers in a direct way. For Vavilova and Broadbent (2019, p. 529) "online language forums can also serve as a gateway to the world of target language speakers whose speech patterns can be borrowed by L2 learners". These views indicate that language teachers should make use of technological communication devices to help language learners to practice the language.



## 8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Errors in second language learning are of various types and have different causes depending on the learning context. Errors in the language production impede on communication because they can result in ambiguity, confusion and misunderstanding. Consequently, interlocutors in a spoken discourse may not effectively engage in a sound exchange of information. Studies mention that some errors originate from the linguistic differences between the learners' mother tongue and the target/second language to be learnt (inter-lingual factors) while others are due to the target language itself (intra-lingual factors). The current paper has highlighted contextual factors contributing to the frequency and magnitude of errors such as physical/learning and motivational factors. It is of great importance to take into account these factors in language teaching and learning in order to ensure effective communication. This, together with the way language teachers deal with errors, can help students improve their language production throughout the learning process. Khansir and Pakdel (2018) says that errors are a natural and an essential part of the learning process, so he calls upon teachers not to tolerate nor overcorrect them. This means that language teachers have to effectively deal with learners' common errors which are more likely to hamper communication. Likewise, language learners have to feel more concerned with reducing their errors in order to improve the language production. This can be done through exploring different language materials and improving on their language through feedback from their language teachers.

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