

The use of error analysis in Spanish language teaching for Russian-speaking students.

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We are using here the term 'error analysis' to refer to a specific kind of activity in the classroom, that is, to the observation of errors normally made by learners of a foreign language in order to use the results of that observation for reinforcement of the teaching contents and procedures, giving special attention to those aspects of the learner's interlanguage (cf. Selinker, 1972) which require some kind of remedial work. This is not the commonly accepted definition of 'error analysis' in language teaching, but it is close to it. Normally, error analysis refers to some kind of study of the types and causes of language errors. However we are not interested here in analysing errors made by native speakers under natural speech conditions. Rather, we are interested in analysing errors made in the production and/or comprehension of a foreign language by a learner. Many times, these errors are caused by some sort of interference from their first language or another second language, and these are the errors that we are going to examine here, errors caused by interference. These errors are very recurring in the interlanguage of the learners, can be traced to their original source, and can be specifically treated if the teacher has knowledge of the language that created the interference.

Connected with the idea of linguistic interference is the concept of 'transfer'. When we learn a new language, we continually make use of the linguistic knowledge that we already have. Sometimes, we deal with some structure or unit that is similar to those of our first language. Then, the result is that there is no error and that we make the right guess. In addition, if there is reinforcement (from the teacher, from other speakers...) there may also be learning. This is called 'positive transfer'. However, there are also cases in which this guess proves to be wrong. The structure or unit was not similar in the two languages and then the learner makes an error. This is called 'negative transfer'. If it is not corrected, that is, if the learner at some point of his/her learning does not perceive it as an error, this feature can become permanent in his/her interlanguage and may eventually fossilize. That is why it is so important to pay attention to errors, tracing their cause, because if they are systematic instances of negative transfer, they should be corrected. This does not necessarily mean that we need to correct them at all times, but it is important for the learner to become aware of the error at some stage of

his/her learning, and this can be done by means of remedial exercises.

Thus, a possible sequence for action would be (1) to examine the performance of the learner, (2) identify all cases of errors due to negative transfer and (3) write specific sets of exercises designed for remedial work of those errors. This, as mentioned, is a possible sequence, but there are other ways to proceed. Remedial work can be integrated in explanations and in other exercises not directly related to the errors. Also, an experienced teacher can simply do remedial work integrating correction of identified errors within the normal development of the lessons and activities. In any case, what is really important is that these errors should be identified and that they should be corrected, no matter how.

Transfer can be conscious or unconscious, which means that sometimes the learner knows he/she is using something from a different language, and sometimes not. The degree of consciousness of the errors made can help in making the correction more reflexive and effective for the learner, but it is not a determining factor, since all errors can be corrected.

In this paper some examples of interference in Russian-speaker learners will be shown, in order to illustrate the possibilities of error analysis in the teaching of Spanish language to Russian learners.

We start with a well-known example. A recurrent error that sometimes appears, even in advanced learners, is the omission of the verbs *ser* or *estar*. This obviously has to do with the omission of the corresponding verb in Russian. It does not seem to be a very complicated error to correct and the fact is that it easily corrects itself. More complicated is the distinction between uses of *ser* and uses of *estar*, but this will not be discussed here because it is complicated for any learner of Spanish, not only for Russians. Another well-known, important, source of errors is the use of the article in its different forms. Its discussion requires a very detailed treatment, which will be omitted here. Instead, we can turn to some errors that are also related to syntax and lexis, in order to make some useful generalizations.

A typical area of confusion for learners of Spanish is always the use of reflexive pronouns with verbs. This concerns expressions with the use of the *reflexive passive* (Sp. “*pasiva refleja*”), some verbs used “reflexively”, and pronominal verbs. The reflexive passive is a very characteristic resource of the Spanish language, which allows us to express the passive voice by means of the expression VERB + Personal Pronoun (e.g. “Se venden casas”, Engl. 'Houses are being sold'). In Spanish it is also possible to use the standard passive structure (i.e., in our example, “Las casas son vendidas” or, better, “Las casas están siendo vendidas”). However, in many cases, as in our example, this option gives us

very unnatural sentences. The possibility to express the passive voice with reflexive pronouns is not unusual at all. This will not be discussed in depth here, but it is something that happens in many languages, as is the case in Russian with many reflexive verbs. In Spanish we have many examples that mirror their Russian equivalents: *dirigir(se)*, *esconder(se)*, *salvar(se)*, *protejer(se)*, *librar(se) de*, *reflejar(se)*, *alegrar(se)*, *enfadar(se)*, *interesar(se)*, etc. This fact may produce sometimes interference errors (e.g. the expression **contenerse en [содержаться в]*, which does not exist in Spanish), and these errors, of course, should be corrected. There is also another group of verbs in which the reflexive pronoun expresses an action that one carries out on oneself. Some examples: *ponerse la ropa*, *lavarse las manos*. In these cases, confusions arise and anomalous uses can be heard, like **“pongo la ropa”* (instead of *“me pongo la ropa”*), **“lavo las manos”*, etc. More complicated is the situation with pronominal verbs for which there is no clear logical reason to use the pronoun. For instance, in Spanish we say things like *“el libro se cae de la mesa”*, and a typical Russian error is to say instead **“el libro cae de la mesa”*. Expressions like *saltarse las reglas*, *volverse*, *ponerse bien* may create problems if they are not learned and remembered well. In some other cases, in Spanish we do not use reflexive pronouns where you would expect a reflexive verb in Russian: *“La reunión empieza”* o *“la reunión acaba”*. It is not possible to say *“la reunión se empieza”* . *“La reunión se acaba”* is possible, but is slightly different from *“la reunión acaba”*, which is the normal expression in this case.

However, the most striking error for Spanish ears that a Russian learner can make is to say things like **“tú no puedes portarse mal”* o **“tú no puedes sentirse mal”*. This is a very characteristically Russian mistake. In Spanish, as in many other languages, reflexive pronouns change according to person and number. In Russian they do not in the expressions in which there are independent reflexive pronouns (that is, in cases like *“я плохо себя чувствую”* and *“он плохо себя ведет”*). These errors should be corrected because they sound very unnatural in Spanish. Nevertheless, remedial work for this type of error, mainly through the repetition of many drills and completion of sentences with missing pronouns, takes time. This structure seems to be very deeply entrenched in the mental grammar of Russian speakers.

Verbs also pose the problem of which prepositions we should use with which verb. This creates problems for learners of any language, because in different languages we have prepositions (postpositions sometimes) or particles that are equivalent in meaning but which in some cases do not correspond in their use to what we can expect from the experience in our native language. Expressions like *diverger de*, *comenzar con*, *cuidar de*, *arrepentirse de*, *acusar a alguien de*, *convencer(se) de*,

necesitar de, alegrarse de use different prepositions in Russian, and may create errors. Often we hear things like *“este chico va en pantalones vaqueros”, whereas in standard Spanish we say “este chico va con pantalones vaqueros”. Here the teacher's awareness of which expressions may create these problems is very useful, because special exercises can be designed specifically to revise these cases.

A typical error made by Russian speakers when learning Spanish is confusing the verb *enseñar* with the verb *aprender* and vice versa. This is due to the fact that in Russian, the verbs *учить(ся)* and *научить(ся)* behave in a way different from a syntactic point of view. To summarize the point, we can say that, whereas in Spanish the structure is something like

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|----------------------------------|---|
| (a) V (something) (to someone) | Verb <i>enseñar</i> : “Enseñar (algo) (a alguien)” |
| (b) V (something) (from someone) | Verb <i>aprender</i> : “Aprender (algo) (de alguien)” |

in Russian, apart from these two structures, we also have

- (c) V (someone) (to something)

and in all of them we can use the verbs *учить(ся)* and *научить(ся)*.

The possibility of having only one verb for (a) and (b) is not unknown in Romance languages. We have it in French with the verb *apprendre*. But this possibility does not exist in Spanish. In Spanish, we use *enseñar* for (a), *aprender* for (b), and there is no verb with the complementation structure of (c). The remedial work for this kind of error needs first a concise and clear explanation of what is the complementation pattern for each of the two verbs and what their meanings are and, once more, exercises with many drills and gaps in which we fill in forms of one or another of these verbs. It is very important to make it clear that these two verbs can never be synonymous.

Another error concerning lexis and syntax is the bad usage of verbs *venir* and *llegar* (as well as some others concerning movement from one point to another, such as *traer*, for example). Related to this, there is some confusion of *venir* with *ir*. The problem is that in Russian, the usage of points of arrival and departure for these verbs of movement shows certain degree of relativity (as happens in English). In Spanish, *ir* always goes from the speaker's location and *venir* always goes to the speaker's location. *Venir* and *llegar* are never synonymous (although in some sentences they can have close

meanings). *Venir* emphasises the whole process of going to the speaker's location, whereas *llegar* only focuses on the final moment. It is relatively easy to write sentences in which we have to fill the blanks with one of these verbs and use them as exercises for remedial work.

To close, we can also comment some grammatical errors concerning verb tenses. First, an error which is very pervasive and very subtle in the use of the past tense. Many Russian students utter sentences like the following: “María ¿llamaba esta mañana?”, “¿Veías la televisión esta mañana?”. They are grammatically correct but pragmatically they sound strange, because this is not the way to say these things in Spanish. In these cases we normally use perfective forms. That is, if the period is assumed to be near in time (the same day, for instance), we say things like “María ¿ha llamado esta mañana?”, “¿Has visto la televisión esta mañana?”. If the actions took place farther in the past, we say “María ¿llamó ayer?”, “¿Viste ayer la televisión?”. The remedial work needs, once again, explanation of problematic cases, drills and completion of sentences.

We will not mention here the problems with the Spanish subjunctive, because they are very generalized among Spanish-language learners, but they should not be disregarded, either.

Also concerning grammatical tenses we have the use of the future in the protasis of conditional sentences. The future tense is never used in Spanish in these constructions. We can hear “Si vendrás lo haremos” or, more frequently, “Cuando vendrás lo haremos”. The right sentences are “Si vienes lo haremos” (with present indicative) and “Cuando vengas lo haremos” (with present subjunctive). In Russian, as in French, the future is used in the protases of these constructions, but in Spanish, this is not possible. Once more, remedial work requires explanation (specially important is the explanation of the three main types of conditionals), drills and completion of sentences.

Reference

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