3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Interlanguage and Learner Language: What is Interlanguage?

Teaching English language requires teachers to understand the different process or stages that the learners are going through to be able to help them. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain “second language learners do not learn language simply through imitation and practice” (p. 78). This is the case that I described in the previous section with my students; they produce sentences or structures that are not exactly the same as what they have been taught or have heard. These authors add that these new sentences are based on “developing systems with their own evolving rules and patterns, not as imperfect versions of the target language” (p.78).

The view of learner language as a process can be traced back to the late 1960’s and early 1970’s when researchers and teachers started to become more interested in the language produced by the learners, rather than the target language or the mother tongue which had been the focus of previous studies in second language learning (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Before this time, it was believed that learner language was simply an incorrect version of the target language. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis proposed by Lado in 1957 considered that language errors originated in transfer from the learner’s first language. However, after a number of studies (Helmut Zoble, 1980; Kellman, 1986 in Lightbown and Spada, 2006), it was seen that many aspects of learner language cannot be explained by these theories, and new approaches to analyzing language errors emerged.

Pit Corder in 1967 was the first to focus attention on the importance of studying learner’s errors, as it became evident that they did not all originate in the learners’ first language. The term
‘interlanguage’ was coined in 1972 by Selinker, to refer to the language produced by the learners. Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain that the idea of interlanguage is founded upon the assumption that a second language learner, at any particular moment in his learning sequence, is using a language system which is neither the L1, nor the L2. It is a third language, with its own grammar, its own lexicon and so on. The rules used by the learner are to be found in neither his own mother tongue, nor in the target language. This approach became known as ‘error analysis’, and it involved detailed descriptions and analysis of the kinds of errors second language learners make. According to James (1998), the distinctiveness of the interlanguage hypothesis lies in its insistence on being wholly descriptive and avoiding comparison, as in Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

Furthermore, Lightbown and Spada (2006) mention that “analysis of a learner’s interlanguage shows that it has some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages, some characteristics of the second language, and other characteristics, such as the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes, that seem to be general and to occur in all or most interlanguage systems” (p. 81). They further explain that interlanguages are systematic, but also dynamic and that they continually evolve as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language. This path is not necessarily smooth and even because learners have bursts of progress, and then seem to reach a point in which they stay for a while before something new stimulates further progress. Selinker (1972) also coined the term “fossilization” which refers to the fact that some features in a learner’s language may stop changing. This may be especially true for learners whose exposure to the second language does not include instruction or the kind of feedback that would help them recognize differences.
between their interlanguage and the target language. In this regard, great importance lies in identifying those errors and working with learners to overcome these and avoid fossilization.

In sum, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2009) mention that interlanguage theory has evolved considerably over the years but the main premises remain largely the same.

1. A learner’s interlanguage consists primarily of implicit linguistic knowledge (i.e. there is no awareness of the rules that comprise an interlanguage).
2. A learner’s interlanguage knowledge constitutes a system in the same sense that a native speaker’s grammar is a system. The system accounts for the regularities that are apparent in the learner’s use of the L2.
3. A learner’s interlanguage is permeable (i.e. because 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-generalization).
4. A learner’s interlanguage is transitional. The learner restructures his or her interlanguage grammar over time. Thus development involves the learner passing through a series of stages.
5. A learner’s interlanguage is variable. At any one stage of development the learner will employ different forms for the same grammatical structure. This variability may be random in part (i.e. there is free variation) but it is largely systematic in the sense that it is possible to identify the probabilities with which the different forms will occur in accordance with such factors as the addressee and the availability of time to plan utterances.
6. A learner’s interlanguage is the product of general learning strategies. One such strategy is L1 transfer but other strategies are intralingual (for example, strategies such as over generalization and simplification).

7. A learner may supplement his or her interlanguage by means of communication strategies (for example, paraphrase or requests for assistance) to compensate for gaps in or difficulty in accessing L2 knowledge while performing.

8. A learner’s interlanguage may fossilize (i.e. the learner may stop developing and thus fail to achieve a full native speaker grammar).

(Ellis and Barkhuizen 2009, p. 54-55)

3.2 Developmental Sequence of Interlanguage: What is Learner Language? How does it develop?

The concept of interlanguage and learner language not only recognizes errors that are an acceptable part of the process, it intends to analyze and describe these errors and to understand the factors that take the learner from one stage to the next. How does the learner proceed from one interlanguage stage to the next?

Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain that generally speaking this is done by using the different strategies that learners build up mental grammars of the L2. As these grammars are provisional heuristic constructions, the rules can be seen as hypotheses. At any one time, the interlanguage may include several competing hypotheses, so that the speaker's language is, in fact, variable, as he tries out first one and then another. This process continues until he is sure that he is using the correct form. In addition to this, learner language is constantly evolving and
there is not set moment when it starts. Corder (1967) explains that the learner begins not with his own L1, but with a highly simplified version of it, which is, as it were, a memory of one of the early stages of L1 learning. This 'stripped down' or basic system gives the learner his first hypotheses - some linguists claim that it may be universal - that is, that these are the rules that are at the basis of all languages. The learner then builds up from the stripped down form to greater complexity. This way the language building process proceeds. The learner practices and tries language forms, which allow him to move through interlanguage correcting his errors and constructing correct forms of language.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) also explain that the cognitive development of adult or adolescent second language learners, in contrast to that of children, is more stable and it will depend greatly on the individual. They further explain that adult second language learners have knowledge of the structure of another language, and although the first language may differ from learner to learner, there are many developmental sequences that are similar in the developing interlanguage of learners from different backgrounds. The types of errors that learners make can be an indication of the sequence in their language development. Norrish (1983) explains that a learner transfers elements of his first language to the target language, and this, of course, instead of helping, in some cases it might interfere in the learning of the target language. So then, the errors that are made by the learners of a foreign language could be used as evidence of the linguistic organization of the learner’s native language. An analysis of the learner’s errors gives us evidence of his competence in the foreign language.

3.3. Error Analysis: What are the different types of errors? How is Error Analysis conducted?
The object of error analysis is to systematically discover and describe different kinds of errors made by learners of a language in an effort to understand how learners process second language data (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). However, before we can understand Error Analysis it is important to first have a clear definition of what is considered an ‘error’. Corder (1974) makes a distinction between errors and mistakes. Errors arise because of gaps in the learner’s L2 knowledge, and mistakes occur because of the difficulty of processing forms that are not yet fully mastered. His view is that errors should be the focus of Error Analysis.

Norrish (1983) distinguishes different types of anomalous language behavior: the error, the mistake and the lapse. The error is “a systematic deviation, when a learner has not learned something and consistently gets it wrong” (Norrish, 1983, p. 7). He explains that when children are acquiring their own language, they consistently make the same error. In the same way, when a learner of English as a second language makes an error systematically, it is because he has not learned the correct form. A common example is using the infinitive with “to” after the verb “must” (eg I must to go to the shops). Suppose that the learner knows the verbs want (+ to), need (+ to) and perhaps ought (+ to); by analogy he then produces must (+ to). Until he has been told otherwise, or until he notices that native speakers do not produce this form, he will say or write this quite consistently.

Norrish (1983) further explains that once a learner has noticed or been taught that in English the verb “must” does not follow the same pattern as some of the other modal verbs, there may well be a period during which he produces “he must go” and “he must to go”. Sometimes he will use one form and sometimes the other, quite inconsistently. This inconsistent deviation
we shall call a mistake: sometimes the learner “gets it right” but sometimes he makes a mistake and uses the wrong form.

Finally, there is another type of wrong usage which is neither mistake nor an error and can happen to anyone at any time. This is a lapse, which may be due to lack of concentration, shortness of memory, fatigue, etc. Norrish (1983) indicates that a lapse bears little relation to whether or not a given form in the language has been learned or is in the process of being learned. Native speakers suffer lapses in the same way as learners of the language.

This is an important classification to be aware of because many teachers may feel that there is another type of common “mistake”: a careless slip, caused by the learner’s inattentiveness in class. In fact, by referring to any kind of unacceptable or inappropriate form as “careless” we are pre-judging the cause and blaming the learner for it. We must admit that classrooms are not always populated by the ideal, motivated, attentive students we would hope for. But can we call a learner careless who produces the following utterance: “That is the man that I saw him last Friday” after he has worked at sentences demonstrating relative clauses. There are many possible explanations for this deviation and we are denying ourselves the chance of valuable insights into what is going on in the learner’s mind if we ascribe this behavior to simple carelessness.

James (1998) points out that there is a need to define if the aim is grammaticality or acceptability. A grammatical error is considered a ‘breach of the rule of the code’ (Corder, 1971); and can be identified more easily if we know what ‘code’ is being applied. James also classifies grammatical errors into overt and covert errors. An overt error can be detected by analyzing the sentence in which it occurs. An error is covert when it becomes apparent when a
larger stretch of discourse is considered. *Acceptability* represents another aim of error analysis. In this case, the analysis is more dependent on the subjective evaluation of the researcher and is often based on sociolinguistic (stylistic) rather than grammatical judgment.

### 3.4 Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) is defined by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2009) as “a set of procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining learner errors (p. 51).” Ellis explains that according to Corder (1967), learner errors are significant in three ways:

1. They serve as a pedagogical purpose by showing teachers what learners have learned, and what they have not yet mastered;
2. They serve a research purpose by providing evidence about how languages are learned;
3. They service a learning purpose by acting as devices by which learners can discover the rules of the target language; for example, by obtaining feedback on their errors.

(Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2009, p.51)

Moreover, the following steps are identified by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2009) for conducting Error Analysis, taking into account Corder (1974):

1. Collection of sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors

5. Error evaluation (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 57)

Furthermore, Error Analysis according to Corder’s concept (1974) also has the following six characteristics:

1. When there is a collection of a sample of learner language, the researcher is provided of the information needed so that he knows in what way the sample that is collected influences the nature and distribution of the errors that were observed.

2. The identification of errors prepares a reconstruction of the sample as would have been produced by the learner’s native speaker counterpart. It is also assumed that every utterance/sentence produced by the learner is erroneous and systematically eliminate those that an initial comparison with the native speaker sample shows to be well-formed. The utterances/sentences remaining contain errors. The parts of each learner utterance/sentence that differ from the reconstructed version are identified.

3. When focusing on the error description, Corder (1974) writes “the description of errors is essentially a comparative process, the data being the original erroneous utterances and the reconstructed utterance” (p. 128). In this sense, the description of learner errors involves specifying how the forms produced by the learner differ from those produced by the learner’s native-speaker counterparts.

4. Explaining errors involves determining their sources in order to establish why they were made. Here, again Corder (1974) says that it is useful to distinguish errors and mistakes. The former arise because there are gaps in the learner’s L2 knowledge; the latter occur because
of the difficulty of processing forms that are not yet fully mastered. Corder is of the view that error analysis should focus attention on errors.

5. Error evaluation involves determining the gravity of different errors with a view to decide which ones should receive instruction. Planning for error evaluation study involves the following steps:

a. Select the errors to be evaluated and these may be presented in complete sentences or in a continuous text.

b. Decide on the criterion on which the errors are to be judged.

c. Prepare the error evaluation instrument, consisting of the instructions, the erroneous sentences or text, and a method for evaluating the errors. Common methods used involve ranking the list of erroneous sentences.

d. Choose the judges and it is best to have at least two.

3.5. What are the Possible Causes for Learner’s Error?

As we saw in the stages that must be followed in Error analysis, after collecting and identifying the learner errors, it is also important to describe and explain these according to the possible causes or reasons why they occur. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 61) classify errors according to four principal ways in which learners modify target forms:

1. Omission (for example, omission of copula be in the utterance My sisters very pretty.)
2. Addition (i.e. the present of a form that does not appear in a well-formed utterance) this is sub-categorized into the following:
   a. Regularization (for example, *eated* for *ate*)
   b. Double-marking (for example, *He didn’t came*)
   c. Simple additions (i.e. additions not describable) as regularizations or as double-markings)

3. Misinformation (i.e. the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure)
   a. Regularization (for example, *Do they be happy?*)
   b. Archi-forms (for example, the learner uses *me* as both a subject and an object pronoun)
   c. Alternating forms (for example, *Don’t + v* and *No + v*).

4. Misordering (i.e. Errors characterized by the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance as in *She fights all the time her brother*)

5. Another category proposed by James (1998) is:

   Blends (i.e. errors that reflect the learner’s uncertainty as to which of two forms is required). This can result in over-inclusion as in the sentence *The only one thing I want* which is an amalgam of *The only thing I want* and *The one thing I want.*

Another author, Cowan (2008, p. 42) identifies the following four sources of grammatical errors made by L2 learners.

*Performance Errors*: According to Cowan (2008), some ungrammatical sentences produced by English learners may be caused by the same factors that contribute to errors...
made by native speakers of English, these are called performance errors to indicate that
the error is not due to the speaker’s ignorance of the grammatical rules. Instead, it is a
processing mistake that occurs while a language learner or a native speaker is in the act of
speaking or writing.

*Imperfect Learning:* Cowan (2008) also explains that often English learners simply have
not internalized a rule and-or the restrictions that apply to that rule. A large number of the
recorded errors made with elementary and intermediate proficiency are a reflection of
imperfect learning.

*Overgeneralization:* Overgeneralization occurs when a learner applies a grammar rule to
forms that do not take it. With the past –ed ending, students use it with irregular verbs
(e.g. make-maked, eat-eated, etc.)

Taking into account this theoretical information, in the following section I will present
some of my student’s errors while using the past tense in written form, with the aim of
identifying the possible causes. Following this, in section 5, I will present some possible
solutions and implications for the teaching of the grammatical error I have analyzed in this paper.