

Situating Error in Second Language Learning Context

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Abstract

In second language learning, like other forms of learning, learners most times go through the process of trial and error. Hence, it is obvious that error is inevitable in learning a second or foreign language, and this has given rise to the study of learners' errors as a way of determining the level of individual learners' progress. The study of error also helps in identifying sources of error in the language learner. Consequently, this paper aims to discuss error and situate it in a second language learning situation, bringing to fore meaning and identification of sources of errors, issues of interlanguage, error analysis, and application of error analysis in language teaching. The study concludes, holding on to the view that error is not totally inhibitive; it is rather more of a developmental outcome.

Keywords: Error, Error analysis, Interlanguage, Error Sources, Categories of Error

Introduction

It was around the 1970s that Error Analysis (EA) became a recognizable part of Applied Linguistics, and this development owes much to the works of Corder (1967). Before the 1970s, linguistics observed learners' errors, but not much attention was drawn to their role in second language acquisition. Corder further explained who makes it possible to understand to whom information about errors would be helpful (teachers, researchers, and students) and how. Since errors seem an inevitable and necessary part of language learning, there is a rise of interest for EA.

EA is a branch of Applied Linguistics that is necessary for the compilation and analysis of errors made by second language learners. It aims at investigating aspects of second language acquisition. As mentioned above, EA was first used as a way of studying a second language in the 1960s. Corder's (1967) seminal paper shifted researchers' attention from the teaching perspective to the learning perspective. According to Brown (1987), language learning, like any other human learning, is a process that involves the making of mistakes. It, therefore, follows that in order to understand the process of second language learning, the errors a learner makes in the process of constructing a new system of language should be carefully analyzed. Brown (1987) maintains that the fact that learners do make errors and these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learners led to a surge of study of learner's errors called 'error analysis'.

In discussing errors, Corder (1967) introduced concepts such as:

- It is the learner who decides what the input is. The teacher can offer a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.
- Keeping the above in mind, learners' needs should be considered when teachers/linguists plan their syllabuses. Before Corder's work, syllabuses were based on linguistic theories and not on learners' needs.
- The learner's built-in syllabus is more efficient than the teacher's syllabus. Corder thinks that if such an in-built syllabus exists, then learners' errors would confirm its existence.
- Distinguish between systematic and non-systematic error. Non-systematic errors occur in one's native language. Corder refers to this as 'mistake' and maintains that they are not significant to the process of language learning. He keeps the term 'error' for the systematic ones, which occur in the second language.

Definition and Sources of Error

Corder (1973) posits that errors are deviances due to deficient competence (awareness of the language, which may or may not be conscious). On the other hand, Corder refers to mistakes as a performance error, that is, failure to make use of a known system. Furthermore, because errors are due to deficient competence, they tend to be systematic and not self-correctable, while mistakes, which are due to performances deficiencies and can arise from lack of attention, anxiety, or even slip of memory, are not systematic and can be self-correctable (Corder, 1973). Brown (2000) maintains that an error is a distinguishable departure from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner.

In discussing the sources of error, Corder (1967) introduced the distinction between errors (incompetence) and mistakes (in performance). Consequently, in the 1970s, researchers started examining learners' competence errors and tried to explain them. Richard (1971) identifies sources of competence error: L1 transfer results in interference errors; incorrect use of language rules gives rise to intralingual errors; construction of faulty hypothesis in second language results in developmental errors.

Dulay & Burt (1974) proposed the following three categories of errors: developmental, interference, and unique. Stenson (1974) proposed another category, induced errors, which result from incorrect instruction of the language. Huang (2002) maintains that the rules that a learner formulates are proved correct if the form he produces is acceptable in the target language but need not be revised if the form is unacceptable. Thus, the letter appears as an error in the learner's speech. Huang (2002) further maintains that by applying this interpretation of the learning process to second language learning, it is found that there is one substantial difference from the first language learning situation. Huang also observed that the child learning a first language is exposed to one language only and can make his hypothesis about the rule structure on the basis of that language and whatever innate notions of language he may have. Hence, when a learner is faced with the task of acquiring a second language, he also has to establish the rule of the language. Like the native speakers, the learner can use the rules wrongly, and this results in an error of performance, which may be like those made in the learner's mother tongue.

Unlike the first language learner who has an alternative source of hypothesis, his grammar-forming mechanism has already mastered the rules of one language, and what he knows about the structure of that language is readily available to assist in the formulation of hypothesis about the structure of the second language. The individual's knowledge of his mother tongue becomes part of the evidence to be considered in trying to determine what rules of the new language are. Thus, using this knowledge, the speaker makes errors which are the results of L1 interference.

In the later works of Richard (1974), he identifies six sources of error, namely: interference, overgeneralization, performance error, markers of transitional competence, strategies of communication and assimilation, and teacher-induced errors. Richard and Sampson (1974) advocate the study of learner's approximate systems and identify seven factors characterizing second language learner system: language transfer, interlingual interference, sociolinguistic situation, modality, age, a succession of approximative systems, and universal hierarchy of difficulty. Schuman and Stanson (1974), in an introduction to their compilation, state three major reasons for errors: incomplete acquisition of the target grammar, exigencies of the learning/teaching situation, and errors due to normal problems of language performance, such as the difficulties, both inter and intralingual ones, which are normally expected.

Brown (1980) posits four sources of errors:

- Interlingual transfer. In the early stages, the native language is the only linguistic system the learner can draw upon; thus, interference is inevitable.
- Intralingual transfer. More intralingual transfer-generalization within a second language would occur once a learner has acquired parts of the new system.
- Context of learning. This involves misleading explanations from the teacher, faulty presentation of a structure in a textbook, improperly contextualized pattern, confusing vocabulary items because of contiguous presentation, inappropriately formal forms of language- “bookish language.”
- Communication strategies. In order to get the message over, a learner may use some techniques like word coinage, circumlocution, false cognates, and prefabricated patterns, which can all be sources of error.

Selinker (1972) observes a learner’s interlanguage and assumes that there is a latent psychological structure in the brain of the learner, which is activated when he attempts to learn a second language. He also identifies the problem of fossilization in terms of the learner’s native language, interlanguage, and target language. Selinker (1972), in describing the phenomena discussed above, attributes five reasons to the process of learning a second language.

- Language transfer. The output is described as a result of the interaction with the learner’s mother tongue.
- Transfer of training. The output is explained in terms of the type of training to learn the learner's language.
- Strategies of second language learning. The association the learner makes with the material explains the output.
- Strategies of second language communication. The output is described by the learner's association with communication with native speakers of the target language.
- Overgeneralization of target language linguistic materials. The output is explained by the overgeneralization the learner makes of syntactic rules and semantic aspects of the target language.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage, over the years, has become the focal point of error analysis. The term ‘interlanguage’ adopted by Selinker (1972) from ‘*interlingual*’ refers to the separateness of a second language learner’s system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language. Some other terms have been coined to delineate the legitimacy of a learner’s second language system. Nemser (1971) used the term *approximative system*; Corder (1971) called it ‘*idiosyncratic dialect*’ or ‘language learner’s language. Though each of these terms emphasizes a particular notion, they share the concept that second language learners form their own self-contained, independent linguistic systems (Fang & Jang, 2007). It is noteworthy that this system is neither that of the native language nor the system of the target language but falls between the two. Fang and Jiang (2007) posit that the most important feature of interlanguage is that it has its own legitimate system where learners are no longer looked on as producers of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes, but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition creatively acting upon their linguistic environment. Furthermore, this is dynamic and based on the best attempt of learners to produce order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. Fang and Jiang (2007) also maintain that interlanguage is a linguistic system that reflects the psychological process of learning a language. It is believed that the most obvious way to analyze interlanguage is to study the speech and writing of learners or what is referred to as *learner language*. A salient point raised by these authors is that learner language, the observation of the learner output conveys certain generalizations on how a second language is learned.

Following our discussion above, it is observed that error is a developmental outcome. Before Corder’s (1971) work, interference errors were regarded as inhibitory. Therefore, Corder pointed out that they can be facilitative and provide information about one’s learning strategies. Inference between first language and second language

is observed in children as well as in adults. In an adult, it is more pronounced and increases continuously as a monolingual person gets older, and the structures of his first language get stronger and impose themselves more and more on any other language the adult wishes to learn. On the other hand, as regards children, interference features will not become permanent unless the child does not have sufficient exposure to a second language. If there is sufficient exposure, then interference features can be easily eliminated instead of reaching a point where they can no longer be corrected (as often happens with phonetic features). However, there is no reason for worry if interference persists more than expected. The teacher should know that a child who is acquiring a second language will subconsciously invent structures influenced by the knowledge he already possesses. These hypotheses he forms may constitute errors. Though these errors are entirely natural, we should not expect the child to acquire second language structures immediately. In the case of the influence of the first language on accent, it is discovered that the ear acts as a filter, and after a critical age, it only accepts sounds that belong to one's native language. Thus, learners of a second or foreign language will only use the sound existing in their native language when producing second language sounds, which may often obstruct communication.

Literature Review

This section reviews some empirical studies whose results are relevant to the present study, especially in areas of corrective feedback. Beuningen (2010) carried out a study on the effectiveness of giving written corrective feedback to learners' error. She maintains that while raising learners' consciousness of some linguistic features, corrective feedback helps learners to observe the gaps between their own interlanguage output and that of the target language. She concludes that in giving learners chance to observe the gaps in their developing second language systems, examine interlanguage hypotheses and be involved in metalinguistic reflections, corrective feedback has the ability to enhance second language acquisition and also lead to accuracy development.

Carroll and Swain (1993) examined the effects of negative feedback on second language acquisition in the acquisition of the English dative alternation. Their aim was to ascertain whether corrective feedback would help learners to acquire the appropriate rule-constraints for an often overtly generalized rules. Their 100 participants were put into different groups based on the type of feedback they would receive when they commit errors. Their study revealed that all treatment group performed far better than the control group. It was observed that both implicit and explicit types of corrective feedback were beneficial and facilitated learning. Furthermore, giving explicit metalinguistic information was of great help instead of just telling a learner about a mistake he made, or just proffering the correct form.

Application of EA in Language Teaching

In the area of language teaching, the study of error plays an important role. In analyzing error, we can obtain information about a language learned; errors reflect the learner's internal constructs, which according to Selinker (1972), constitute an independent language system he referred to as '*interlanguage*.' It also shows the amount of knowledge a learner has of a language. Furthermore, the analysis of errors allows the observation of actual learner output and gives second language acquisition researchers the possibility to explain how learning progresses. Ellis (2003) maintains that analysis of error provides the researcher with a methodology to study learner language. EA shows those areas of the language that teachers need to focus on. That is to say that, by analyzing errors, important suggestions for language method design can be made; this can include syllabuses and materials.

Corder (1967) states the usefulness of EA, positing them in three respects: to the researcher or linguist, to the language teacher, and to the learner himself. Analysis of learner's errors provides insights into the nature of language, especially the innate nature of the learner's systems, and provides more insights into language teaching and learning. He also maintains that concrete conclusions can be drawn from the result of the analyses

regarding how a second or foreign language can be more effectively taught and learned, or how existing methods of teaching and learning can be improved.

In a study conducted by Chiang (1981), it was observed that high frequencies of errors found in the composition indicate the inability of the students to master the writing component of the language. Chiang's study also states other pedagogical implications:

- Making use of the hierarchy of difficulty. Hierarchies of difficulty are basically established in terms of frequencies of errors of different classes and subclasses. In the ESL/EFL classroom, much more benefit can be derived from the results achieved in error analysis because the teacher can have a clear idea regarding where the main problems of his students lie and what should be placed more emphasis in teaching.
- It is making use of contrastive observation. Usually, this (contrastive analysis) is done to illustrate the possible interference from one language (L1) to another (L2), and often the kind of interference pertains to word order and lexical selection. However, with due effort, the language teacher might easily find from the rest corpus of student's production those correlated features between the two languages which facilitates rather than hinder learning, that is, the positive transfer. This not only helps the students but also makes easier the task of learning.
- The usefulness and need of remedial programmes. When the result of error analyses shows high frequencies of errors, remedial programmes of some kind are necessary.
- The development of error-based teaching materials and syllabuses for use in the composition class. Patterns of errors can be built up into a classified inventory of errors together with the most revealing examples in the corpus.
- Implications for individualized instruction. Since one of the general trends in TESL, and in education in general, is towards individualization of instruction, the error analysis practice is perhaps one of the most effective means of understanding the individualities of the learner.
- Understanding the strategies of the learner. Understanding students' learning strategies, the teacher will be in a better position to teach.
- Implication for teaching methodology. As observed, many of the composition classes are based on the sole philosophy that 'that the more the students write, the better they write.' After the error analysis, this needs to be slightly modified- "The more a student is guided to write, the better he writes."

In handling errors, the focus is on correction and improvement. Correction involves the process or the result of bringing a piece of learner's writing to a grammatically unambiguous level. Corder (1967) elaborated in Carol's (1971) work, showing that the most efficient way to teach a student the correct linguistic form is to let him test various hypotheses and eventually find the right form. It is believed to be useful to always perform an error analysis based on written texts administered by the teacher, but without informing the students of the purpose of the test. On that basis, self-correction is preferable to correction by the teacher, especially if the teacher corrects in a severe or intimidating way. Self-correction is even more efficient when it is done with the help of students' classmates. The younger the students, the greater the cooperation among them, and the less aggressive or intimidating the correction. It is noteworthy to say that it is useless, if not harmful, to treat errors as if they were diseases or pathological situations which must be eliminated, especially if this treatment becomes discouraging, as occurs when teachers lose their patience because of students' numerous errors.

The correction of error as soon as it occurs is not recommended. This position is justified by the fact that the linguistic message the child tries to produce is a sequence of elements that are interdependent; immediate corrections which interrupt this message tend to produce negative consequences, even to the less sensitive students. Such consequences include anxiety, fear of making an error, the development of avoidance strategies, reduced motivation for participation in the classroom, lack of interest in learning, reduced will for self-

correction, and lack of trust towards the teacher. Esser (1984) also made a similar point. He maintains that repetitive and immediate corrections may cause sensitive children to develop aggressive behaviour towards their classmates or teacher. Thus, corrections must not be applied by the teacher unless errors obstruct communication. This is the main criterion for error correction (obstruction of communication).

Freimuth, quoted in Huang (2002), proposed criteria for error correction in the classroom. These criteria include exposure, seriousness, and students' needs.

- i. Exposure. Here, when a child creates language (for example, when he tries to express an idea by using a linguistic form he has not yet acquired), he will most likely make an error; correcting these errors will be ineffective because the learner is not aware of them. Thus, error correction would result in the acquisition of the correct form only if the learner has been previously exposed to that particular language form.
- ii. Seriousness. The teacher must determine the gravity of an error before deciding whether he should correct it or not. The error must impede communication before it should be considered an error that necessitates correction. Some errors occur due to learners' nervousness in the classroom due to their stress or pressure of having to produce a linguistic form accurately in a second language. These errors can occur even with familiar structures; in this case, they are not of serious nature and are similar to what Corder calls 'mistake.' Freimuth further suggests a hierarchy of error (according to seriousness) to help teachers decide which errors should be corrected – errors that significantly impair communication are at the top of the list, followed by errors that occur frequently, errors that reflect misunderstanding or incomplete acquisition of the current classroom focus, and errors that have a high stigmatization effect on the listeners. He also clarifies what can cause stigmatization: profound pronunciation errors or errors of familiar forms.
- iii. Students' needs. Each student is different and thus may react differently to error correction. The teacher must perform two main tasks: first, assess some specific character traits of students, such as self-confidence and language acquisition capability. Self-confident, capable students can profit from minor corrections while struggling students should receive corrections only on minor errors. The teacher's second task is to listen to the learner's second language utterance in order to determine where errors come from (that is, which linguistic forms cause students difficulty), their frequency, and their gravity. Then, the teacher can combine the outcome of these tasks and decide on correction techniques for individual students.

Porte, cited in Huang (2002), stresses the importance of self-correction and points that many students do not know the difference between errors and mistakes. She points out that it is important students know how to identify an error in order to avoid it in the future. She agrees with Corder (1967) that it is more efficient for learners to correct themselves than be corrected by the teacher.

Conclusion

Obviously, Corder's (1967) concepts directed the researcher's attention to specific areas of error analysis: they help linguists realize that although errors sometimes obstruct communication, they can often facilitate second language acquisition. They also played a significant role in training teachers and helping them identify and classify students' errors, as well as helping them construct correction techniques.

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