

A Study on Errors in the Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The concern in this essay is to tackle the problem of source, cause, and significance of errors in the second language acquisition. A wide range of literature deals with second language acquisition and learning research (Cook, 1991; Clark, 1975; Fromkin, 1973; Richards, 1974; Le Pan, 1999; Levine, 1990; Mohan, 2001; Saville-Troike, 1976; Rivers et al, 1978). In addition, practical support for teaching English as a second or foreign language is available in miscellaneous books and magazines (Haskell, 1984; Lee, 1964; Harmer, 1998; Harrison, 1973; Close, 1962; ELT).The essay is based not only on reading, but also classroom experience and observation. The first chapter deals with different approaches as regards to errors. The second chapter focuses on the different types of errors and their source. All in all, the problem of error control will be emphasized.

This essay is an attempt at a descriptive and reflective enquiry, but the analysis in such a brief space certainly requires considerable compression and omission. The synthesis of my reading, observation and classroom experience gives an insight of source, cause and significance of errors in the second language acquisition. Errors should not be disapproved of. Indeed, errors should not be seen as exemplifiers of 'linguistic sin' rather it is to consider them as an essential condition of learning a second language.

Key words: acquisition, errors, languages, causes, learning, teaching

I. ERROR AND ACQUISITION PROCESS

HOW DO WE ACQUIRE L2?

It is true that, over the years, many different methods and approaches to the teaching and learning of language to and by speakers of other languages, each with its own underlying theoretical basis, have come and gone.

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

A wide range of literature provides a coherent overview of what a communicative approach to language teaching might involve. The communicative approach is well defined in numerous articles in *Selected Articles from the Tesol Newsletter* (Haskell, 1984). Communicative language teaching has had a thoroughly beneficial effect since it reminded teachers that people learn languages not so that they 'know' them, but so that they can communicate (Harmer, 1998: p.32). This approach tolerates errors produced by learners. Traditionally, they were regarded negatively and had to be eradicated. The recent acceptance of errors in learner's language is based on a shift in perspective from the traditional view of how second languages (L2) are acquired. Error provides information about the process of L2 acquisition. Rather than consider a French speaker's production of *In the hotel there are five mens* as simply a failure to learn correct English, we can look upon it as an indication of the actual acquisition in process in action. An error, then, is not something which hinders a learner's progress, but is probably a clue to the active learning process being made by the learner as he or she tries out strategies of communication in the new language.

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

According to this approach, linguistic competence is built up by making errors, in other words by solving problems. By trying things, language is acquired. Errors serve as evidence of the learner's active contribution to acquisition. Indeed, the learner builds up his knowledge of the language by means of hypothesis and testing. The example of *mens* might be seen as a type of creative construction used by the learner in accordance with the general way of making plural forms in English.

THE BEHAVIOURIST LEARNING THEORY

The learner learns L2 by repeating, imitating models, hence low possibility to make errors. According to the structuralist approach, when learners make errors, they are discouraged, therefore they do not get involved in learning. Contrary to the mentalist view, for them, errors are evidence of non-learning.

The behaviourist theory points out two ways of learning a habit, i.e. by imitating and by reinforcement. The learner can be rewarded or punished. A high priority is given to accuracy and the ability to construct correct sentences (Griffiths and Parr, 2001).

ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN ERRORS

THE CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS (CAH)

In order to avoid making errors, attempts were made to predict where they would occur. According to CAH, if we compare languages, we can predict the interferences, so we can prevent learners from making errors. The CAH's goal is to identify areas of difficulty. All errors can be predicted by identifying differences between L1 and L2. CAH focuses on the fact that errors are mostly the result of interference: the performance of learners is always influenced by other languages they know.

ERROR ANALYSIS (EA)

The ESL teacher's problem with errors is fourfold: identify, classify, explain and evaluate. Ravi Sheorey (1986) introduces his study with the following statement:

The Italian saying 'One learns by erring' aptly describes the current view held by many ESL and EFL teachers towards the errors made by their students. Error correction remains important, however, for the ESL composition teacher, because most people, including native speakers, lack the tolerance for written errors that they have for errors in speech (1986:p. 306).

Errors highlight strategies the learner uses to assimilate the rules of L2. For example, generally, learners resort to reduction strategy aimed at learning economy: the French learner, for instance, will generalize 'ed' to form the plural form in English; and he will memorize. The irregular forms, however, he will not pay attention to.

CREATIVE CONSTRUCTION THEORY

According to this theory second language acquisition is a process by which a learner constructs his or her own rule system for the language being learnt. It emphasizes the similarity of learners from different L1 backgrounds and minimizes the importance of interference. An error is a sign that the learner develops his or her grammar.

INTERLANGUAGE

It means the learner's developing second language knowledge. It is a natural route of development for learners: all learners pass through an inter-language continuum. It may have characteristics of the learner's mother tongue, characteristics of L2, and some characteristics of L2 and some characteristics which seem to be very general and tend to occur in all or most inter-language systems. For instance, the Spanish speaker who says in English, *He name is Paolo*, is producing a form which is not used by speakers of English, does not occur in English L1 acquisition by children, and is not found in Spanish. Inter-language is a variable system with rules of its own. Besides, the term inter-language has become the focus of some debate and a lot of research in recent years. The study of the inter-language phenomenon has led to a reassessment of the way L2 acquisition should be perceived: the language of the L2 learner is considered as a type of language in its own right, which may, as it varies and develops, provide us with crucial insights into the very nature of that more general phenomenon called human language.

II. ERRORS AND SOURCES

THE CONCEPT OF SYSTEMATICITY IN THE L2 LEARNING

It means that each learner will make the same type of errors. There is a logic in errors made. Learners go from a simple version to a more elaborate version. In other words, errors are systematic, i.e. there is no randomness in the errors.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF ERRORS: CLASSIFICATION

L1 dependent errors are errors rooted in the mother tongue. For instance, a French speaker who produces *take it from the side inferior* may be trying to use the French adjective inférieur (English= lower) and placing it after the noun, as in French construction. As Harrison (1973: p.20) states, the systems of the mother tongue, in sound and structure, cause special problems to the foreign language teacher and learner.

L1 independent errors are errors which do not result from transfer from the L1, but which reflects the learner's gradual discovery of the L2 system. These errors are similar to those made by children learning their mother tongue.

❖ Systematic errors

Errors are the result of over application of generalization (overgeneralization)

- Subject-verb generalization
- Count-uncount generalization
- ‘ed’ ‘ing’ generalization: the ‘ed’ ‘ing’ inflections are added to everything, producing such oddities as I doed, We comed, I am loving.

The learner resorts to a reduction of the speech to a simpler system. Indeed, the restricted generalization is a helpful device used by the learner but also by the teacher.

- Subject-verb inversion in the interrogative sentence
- Generalization of that (that= invariant clause marker)
- Overgeneralization because of interference between items in the L2. Analogy seems to be a major factor in the misuse of preposition. Errors result from ignorance of rule restriction. Some rule restriction errors can be accounted for in terms of analogy. Others may result from the rote learning of rules.

❖ A-systematic errors

Some generalizations remain hypotheses. Those errors are result of indeterminacy: the learner is unable to give hypothesis the status of rule.

❖ Unsystematic errors

These errors are due to psychological reasons but also caused by physiological factors, for instance slips of the tongue and slips of the ear.

CAUSES OF ERRORS

Causes of errors are many. Some errors may be due to the interference of expressions or structures from the L1 but also from L2. In Chapter 10 “a non contrastive approach to error analysis, J. C. Richards (1974) argues against interference from L1; he minimizes the role of the mother tongue.

Learning strategies linked with development errors are the following:

- Overgeneralization: Richards focuses on the over application of generalization.
- Ignorance of rule restriction: application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. For instance, the sentence *I made her to work* ignores restrictions on the distribution of make.
- Incomplete application of rule: occurrence of structure whose deviances represent the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterance.

III. ERRORS: HOW TO AVOID THEM?

Solutions are various. J.C. Richards argues that it is essential to resort to sub-categorisation in order to avoid making errors. In other words, generalization can be misleading because it is one of the main sources of errors. In order to avoid errors of over-application of restricted generalization, the learner has to bring the latter in one to one correspondence with facts of English. This involves a great deal of sub classification at all syntactic level.

According to William C. Richie (1987: p. 89-90), correction feedback is not effective ‘for errors which are rooted in restricted generalization. Investment of energies in the mere correction of actual errors would not seem to be rewarding.’ His solution to avoid making errors is to deal with the restricted generalization ‘to establish for the learner that a broader generalization is more significant than the forms, that a rule scheme for sub-classes has to be provided for. Corrections of errors or an error-based remedial programme, nor intensive drills of correct forms are not a solution. Yet, versions of audio-lingual method are still common in language teaching. Oral drills can be useful, for instance, to avoid pronunciation error, it is efficient to spend hours in a language laboratory. Nevertheless, its critics point out that individual practice in drilling language patterns has no resemblance to the interactional nature of actual language use. Moreover, it can be boring.

OTHER POINTS OF VIEW

The research carried out by Margaret M. Clark came to the following conclusion:

A greater understanding of the oral language development of children has resulted from an analysis of their errors and self-corrections in speech, so as in reading it is important that in the early oral reading behaviour of children, their errors and self corrections be monitored (1975: p.129)

On the contrary, William C. Richie (1987: p. 62) argues that a course that concentrates too much on the main trouble spots, without due attention to the stars of the foreign language as a whole, will leave the learner with a patchwork of unfruitful, partial generalization.

THE NECESSITY TO RE-EXAMINE THE COMPONENTS IN TEACHING L2

It is important to re-examine teaching materials, teaching techniques, teaching and learning goals. A wide range of support materials are available for teachers (Harmer, 1998; Close, 1962; Haskell, 1984). All this brings about learning economy through a reduction of the second language – simplified generalization: limited vocabulary, limited structure and simplified texts. As regards to teaching technique it is true that teachers sometimes resort to a simplified speech style known as “caretaker speech.” Some of the features of this type of speech are frequent questions. Caretaker speech is also characterized by simple sentence structures and a lot of repetition. The mother tongue is seen as an obstacle to acquisition. Here are some principles proposed by Krashen and Terrell (1983) which they argue are necessary for successful second language acquisition.

1. The teacher always uses the target language.
2. Speech errors which do not interfere with communication are not corrected.

CONCLUSION

At this point, and by way of conclusion, this essay is an attempt at a descriptive and reflective enquiry, but the analysis in such a brief space certainly requires considerable compression and omission. The synthesis of my reading, observation and classroom experience gives an insight of source, cause and significance of errors in the second language acquisition. Errors should not be seen as exemplifiers of ‘linguistic sin’ rather it is to consider them as an essential condition of learning a second language.

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