A Review of the Roles of Errors and Error Corrections in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The purposes of this study are to review error roles in English teaching and how to treat errors effectively. Research and studies show that errors provide data about how languages are learned and indicate the nature of the language learning process. Errors, as a valued form of feedback, help teachers evaluate learners' progress and the effectiveness of teaching materials and techniques. Furthermore, they provide teachers and curriculum developers with the information for designing and developing syllabuses or programs. To treat errors effectively, there are many things to take into consideration. The first criterion is reasons to correct errors, which come from both students and teachers. The second is time; it is suggested that teachers should not interrupt immediately while students are having flowing communication. Third, in terms of selection, teachers should correct errors selectively rather than comprehensively. The next point is participation, that is, not only is the teacher in charge of correction, but student participation also plays an important role for long-term productive results and a cooperative atmosphere in class. The final criterion involves various techniques which can be applied directly and indirectly.

1. Introduction

Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes (Brown, 2000). Obviously in language learning, mistakes and errors are things that learners inevitably produce. Researchers came to realize that a learner made errors in the process of constructing a new system of language, which needs to be analyzed carefully since they possibly lead to the understanding of the process of language learning. Corder (1973) points out that learning a new language requires a trial and error approach, and errors are evidence that the learner is testing hypotheses of underlying rules, categories, and systems.

In the past few decades, researchers have proposed many different ideas about and approaches to error correction, from the audiolingual method, which attempted to make errors all but impossible, to a cognitive approach, which involves more communicative activities, an approach in which errors are seen as a necessary and perhaps beneficial strategy of learning (Brown, 2000). There has been a dramatic change in attitude on the part of researchers and teachers toward errors that learners make. Corder (1981, pp. 10-11) points out that a learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he or she is using or has learned at a particular point in the course. Errors are significant in three different ways. First, they are crucial in that they tell the teacher how far towards his or her goals the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for the learner to learn. Secondly, they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned, and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his or her discovery of the language. Thirdly, an error can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn; the learner is testing his or her hypotheses about the nature of the language he or she is learning. The making of errors then is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language.

It appears that an error is not only an inevitable part of the learner's output but also quite a necessary indicator that provides teachers with an insight of the learner's language development which is beneficial for teachers to plan and design class activities and materials.

To have a more comprehensive picture of errors in English teaching and learning, I have reviewed relevant studies to answer the following two main questions.

1. What are error roles in English teaching?
2. How should errors be treated?

2. Theories and Approaches of Errors and Correction

2.1 Contrastive Analysis

In the light of contrastive analysis, it was believed that by comparing the linguistic system of mother tongue and that of the target language, it was possible to predict areas of difficulty and thus error. Lado's study (as cited in Ginsberg, 1997, p. 343) points out that contrastive analysis focuses on the similarities and differences between the learner's native language and the language being learned. Where the native and target languages differ, the contrastive analysis hypothesis predicts the learner will experience difficulty, and where the native and target languages are similar, the hypothesis asserts that the learner will find no difficulty.

However, it was found that, contrary to expectations, not all the areas of difference between two language systems actually resulted in errors. The main problem with contrastive analysis seems to be that while parts of two language systems may or may not

differ, this does not tell much about how a learner will go about the learning task. Nor does it account for the well-attested fact that the same errors are made by first language speakers from very differing language backgrounds. However, contrastive analysis is not entirely without use. For the classroom teacher, a suitable treatment for errors arising from translation from the learners' L1 might, at an intermediate or advanced level, involve pointing out that while in the mother tongue it is possible to say something in a certain way, nevertheless in the target language it is not. But it should be done carefully since it can lead to an analytical teaching style, which as its prime aim seeks to eliminate certain errors rather than to teach communication through the target language (Norris, 1983, p. 28).

2.2 Error Analysis

Since some learners' errors cannot be explained by merely native language interference proposed by contrastive analysis, it gives way to error analysis to account for errors. Richards (as cited in Ginsberg, 1997, p. 354) explains that many L2 errors do not arise from such interference but instead stem from the nature of rule learning. He points out that, in trying to acquire the target language rule system, the learner mislearns these rules, just as a child L1 learner does.

Researchers and teachers of second languages came to realize that the mistakes a person made in this process of constructing a new system of language needed to be analyzed carefully, for they possibly held in them some of the keys to the understanding of the process of second language acquisition. Corder (1981, p. 10) suggests that "A learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using (i.e. has learnt) at a particular point in the course (and it must be repeated that he is using some system, although it is not yet the right system)."

According to Brown (2000), the fact that learners do make errors, and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called error analysis.

Error analysis became distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources, not just those resulting from negative transfer of the native language. Error analysis easily superseded contrastive analysis with more powerful explanations. It explains that only some of the errors a learner makes are attributable to the mother tongue. Learners do not actually make all the errors that contrastive analysis predicted they should, and learners from different language backgrounds tend to make similar errors in learning one target language.

2.3 Interlanguage

While error analysis closely focused on specific languages rather than viewing universal aspects of language, Gass' study (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 219) recommends that researchers pay more attention to linguistic elements that are common to all languages. The language systems of learners may have elements that reflect neither the target language

nor the native language, but are rather a universal feature of some kind. However, there are problems with the search for universal properties of learners' errors as it is not always clear whether the influence is originating from the native language or as part of the systematic progression towards the target language.

Finegan (2004) explains that some researchers view second-language learners as developing a series of interlanguages in their progression towards mastery of the target language. A learner has internalized and applied the interlanguage grammar in their spontaneous utterances of the target language in various ways: by containing rules borrowed from the native language, by containing overgeneralizations, by lacking certain sounds of the target language, etc. A learner language can be viewed as progressing from one interlanguage to another, each one approximating more closely to the target language.

To determine the learner's progress, the performance analysis, looking at total performance, not only deviations but also current forms, allows more individual treatment to be given to students. However, if all the students in a class are making different random mistakes and errors, then there must be something wrong with the teaching plan for the class and the materials. It is much more likely that there will be common errors. The teacher should compare the performance analyses of all the students in the class and then plan remedial work.

2.4 Fossilization

Some language learners may find that some errors are resistant to change over time. Finegan (2004) states that in fossilizing, for various reasons, often related to the kind of motivation a learner has, the language-learning process typically slows down or ceases at some point, and the existing interlanguage stabilizes, with negligible further acquisition (leaving aside new vocabulary). When such stabilizing occurs, the interlanguage may contain rules or other features that differ from those of the target language.

According to Brown (2000), fossilization is a normal and natural stage for many learners, and should not be viewed as some sort of terminal illness, in spite of the forbidding metaphor that suggests an unchangeable situation etched in stone. A better metaphor might be something like "cryogenation"-the process of freezing matter at very low temperatures; this situation could be reversed by giving some warmth.

3. Aspects on Errors

3.1 Attitudes on Errors

Considering general attitudes on errors or mistakes in language learning, many people view them as undesirable, unsuccessful or as an indication of low proficiency, lack of attention, inappropriate teaching or materials, etc. On the other hand, some may find it beneficial for language learning development.

In the last few decades, there has been a dramatic change in attitude on the part of researchers and teachers toward errors that learners make in a language classroom. According to Walz (1982), from the careful, often tedious, drills of the audiolingual method, which attempted to remove all errors, attention has given way to an approach in which errors are seen as a necessary and perhaps a beneficial strategy for learning. Corder (1973) stated that learning a new language requires a trial and error approach, and errors are evidence that the learner is testing hypotheses of underlying rules, categories, and systems.

3.2 Errors and Mistakes

Ellis (2001) pointed out that errors reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; they may occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Errors in this sense cannot be corrected by learners themselves and they will occur consistently because of a lack of knowledge of the target language rule system.

According to Brown (2000), a mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip," in that it is a failure to utilize the known system correctly. Ellis (2001) states that mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows. Mistakes inconsistently happen just because of slipping of the tongue.

However, when teachers examine variability in learner language, it is not so easy. Learners may consistently use a feature like past tense in some contexts and consistently fail to use it in others. Ultimately a clear distinction between an error and a mistake may not be possible.

3.3 Sources of Errors

Brown (2000) classified sources of learners' errors into two main areas which are interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer.

3.3.1 Interlingual Transfer

Interlingual transfer is considered as a significant source of error for all learners. The beginning stages of learning a second language are especially vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the native language, or interference. In these early stages, before the system of the second language is familiar, the native language is the only previous linguistic system upon which the learner can draw. While it is not always clear that an error is the result of transfer from the native language, many such errors are detectable in learner speech. If teachers are fluent or even familiar with a learner's native language, it will potentially aid the teacher in detecting and analyzing such errors.

3.3.2 Intralingual Transfer

Intralingual transfer is considered a major factor in second language learning in that researchers have found that the early stages of language learning are characterized

by a predominance of interference (interlingual transfer), but once learners have begun to acquire parts of the new system, more and more intralingual transfer-generalization within the target language is manifested. As learners progress in the second language, their previous experience begins to include structures within the target language itself. However, the teacher or researcher cannot always be certain of the source of an apparent intralingual error, but repeated systematic observations of a learner's data will often remove the ambiguity of a single observation of an error. Dulay (1982) also points out that the cause of errors results from fatigue and inattention or the lack of knowledge of the rules of the language.

3.4 Error Types

To categorize errors is not an easy task since language learning involves an interaction of learner's internal processing mechanisms and the external environment. The internal process or mind process is quite difficult to observe. However, there is an attempt to scope the area of error study in what is observable. Errors are classified from their surface characteristics and determined simply by comparing language output which is termed descriptive classification of errors. Dulay (1982, pp. 146-173) reviewed the literature in order to present the most useful and commonly used bases for the descriptive classification of errors. These taxonomies are *linguistic category, surface strategy, comparative analysis* and *communicative effect*.

3.4.1 Linguistic Category

Linguistic category classifies errors according to either or both the language component or the particular linguistic constituent the error affects. *Language components* include phonology (pronunciation), syntax and morphology (grammar), semantics and lexicon (meaning and vocabulary), and discourse (style). *Constituents* include the elements that comprise each language component. For example, within syntax one may ask whether the error is in the main or subordinate clause; and within a clause, which constituent is affected, e.g. the noun phrase, the auxiliary, the verb phrase, the preposition, the adverb, the adjectives, and so forth.

Researchers use the linguistic category taxonomy as a reporting tool which organizes the errors they have collected. Politzer and Ramierez (year as cited in Dulay, 1982, pp. 147-148) studied 120 Mexican-American children learning English in the United States, taping their narrative of a short, silent animated cartoon and then classifying observed errors. Their taxonomy for morphology and syntax is a fairly traditional descriptive taxonomy.

Morphology

- Indefinite article incorrect, e.g. misuse of a/an (an little ant)
- Possessive case incorrect, e.g. omission of s' (the man feet)
- Third person singular verb incorrect, e.g. wrong attachment of -s (the apple fall downs.)

- Simple past tense incorrect, e.g. regularization by adding -ed (he putted the cookie there.)
- Past participle incorrect, e.g. omission of -ed (he was call.)
- Comparative adjective/adverb incorrect, e.g. use of more + er (she is more quicker.)

Syntax

- Noun Phrase, e.g. substitution of plurals for singulars (he got some leaf.)
- Verb Phrase, e.g. disagreement of subject and verb person (you be friends.)
- Verb-and-verb construction, e.g. omission of "to" (I go play.)
- Word order, e.g. adjectival modifiers placed after noun (he put it inside his house a little round.)
- Some transformations, e.g. multiple negation (they won't have no fun.)

3.4.2 Surface Strategy

A surface strategy taxonomy highlights the ways surface structures are altered: Learners may omit necessary items or add unnecessary ones; they may misform items or misorder them. Surface strategy reveals and indicates that learners' errors are based on some logic which the learners try to use to produce new language.

Omission errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance. For instance, *grammatical morphemes* which do not contribute much to the meaning of the sentence, as in "I buy some coloring book", where past and plural markers are omitted.

Addition errors are the opposite of omissions. They are characterized by the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance. Three types of addition errors have been observed in the speech of both L1 and L2 learners: double markings, regularizations, and simple additions. These errors are good indicators that some basic rules have been acquired, but that the refinements have not yet been made.

- Double marking a semantic feature—marking two or more items in an utterance when only one marker is required, as in "She didn't wented", where the past tense is marked more than once.
- Regularization errors—those in which a marker that is typically added to a linguistic item is erroneously added to an item of the given class that does not usually take a marker. For example, "sheeps and putted" are both regularizations in which the regular plural and past tense markers –s and –ed respectively, have been added to items which do not take markers as in "That mouse catched him", where the regular past tense marker-ed is used instead of the irregular caught.
- Simple addition—If an addition is not a double marking nor a regularization, it is called a simple addition, the item which should not appear in a well-formed utterance.

Misformation errors are characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure. Three types of misformations have been frequently reported in the literature are 1) regularizations, 2) archi-forms, and 3) alternating forms.

- Regularization—errors that fall under the misformation category in which a regular marker is used in place of an irregular one, as in 'runned' for ran.
- Archi—forms-using one form for the several required, as in the use of the accusative for both nominative and accusative pronouns, e.g. "Them going to town; I know them".
- Alternating forms—using two or more forms in random alternation, as in the random alternation of much and many: "too much dolls"; "many potteries".

Misordering is characterized by a wrong order of words in an acceptable utterance, as in "I don't know who is it", where the placement of "is" erroneously follows the rule for simple questions rather than embedded questions.

3.4.3 Comparative Analysis

The classification of errors in a comparative taxonomy is based on comparisons between the structure of L2 errors and certain other types of constructions. For example, if one were to use a comparative taxonomy to classify the errors of a Korean student learning English, one might compare the structure of the student's errors to that of errors reported for children acquiring English as a first language. The major two error categories in this taxonomy are developmental errors and interlingual errors. Two other categories that have been used in comparative analysis taxonomies which are derived from the first two: ambiguous errors, which are classifiable as either developmental or interlingual, and the other which is neither.

Developmental errors are errors similar to those made by children learning the target language as their first language.

Interlingual errors are those similar in structure to a semantically equivalent phrase or sentence in the learner's native language. It simply refers to L2 errors that reflect native language structure, regardless of the internal processes or external conditions that spawned them.

Ambiguous Errors are those that could be classified equally well as developmental or interlingual.

Other Errors are those that do not fall into any of the categories above.

3.4.4 Communicative Effect

According to the communicative approach, errors that impair successful communication or lead to misunderstanding should be solved with negotiation of meaning. The study of Burt and Kiparsky (1972) collected several thousand English sentences containing errors made by adult EFL learners from all over the world—Germany, Japan, France,

Turkey, Ethiopia, Korea, Thailand and Latin America, as well as by foreign students in the United States. The errors were taken from compositions and letters, many of which were gathered by Peace Corps Volunteers and EFL teachers.

In order to determine the relative importance of various error types to the communicative effect of a sentence, they selected from their collection of ungrammatical sentences those containing two or more errors. They then asked native speakers of English (the company janitor, the car mechanic and shopkeepers) to make judgements about the relative comprehensibility of a sentence as each error was corrected, one at a time or several at a time. For example, the sentence contains three errors: the article *the* is missing in front of English language, *much* is used instead of *many*, and the subject and object are inverted. Burt and Kiparsky (1972) asked their native English-speaking judges to tell them which one was easiest to comprehend. They discovered that errors which significantly hinder communication are of a certain type, while those that do not hinder communication are of another type. They then classified errors into two interesting distinct categories: global and local errors.

Global errors are errors that cause a listener or reader to misunderstand a message or to consider a sentence incomprehensible. They also affect overall sentence organization and significantly hinder communication, such as word order, misplaced sentence connectors, e.g. "English language use many people" (word order).

Local errors are errors that do not significantly hinder communication of a sentence's message or affect single elements in a sentence such as articles, verb inflections, auxiliaries, e.g. "he like to sing".

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) claim that the correction of one global error in a sentence clarifies the intended message more than the correction of several local errors in the same sentence. Furthermore, they state that limiting correction to communicative errors allows a student to increase his or her motivation and self-confidence toward learning the target language.

4. Error Roles and Treatment

4.1 The Roles of Error in English Teaching

According to Dulay (1982, p. 138), studying learners' errors serves two major purposes: (1) it provides data from which inferences about the nature of the language learning process can be made; and (2) it indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language students have most difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to communicate effectively.

Corder's study (as cited in Hendrickson, 1983, pp. 3-4) proposes that not only do language learners necessarily produce errors when communicating in a foreign language, but these errors, if studied systematically, can provide significant insights into how

languages are actually learned. He also adds that "errors provide feedback," telling the teacher something about the effectiveness of teaching materials and teaching techniques, and showing what parts of the syllabus he or she has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable the teacher to decide whether to devote more time to the item he or she has been working on. According to Gower, Phillips, and Walters (1995), by providing ongoing feedback, teachers can help students evaluate their success and progress. More importantly, when giving feedback on spoken or written work, teachers should always be on the lookout for positive points to comment upon. Error correction is one type of important feedback. However, in giving any error correction, teachers need to do it very carefully.

4.2 How Errors Should be Treated

To treat errors, there are many concerns for teachers to take into consideration.

- Why to correct errors? Generally, students expect their teachers to correct their speaking or writing errors in order that their production sounds communicable and understandable. They also need some guidance in recognizing their errors since it may be beyond their language proficiency levels and some errors can lead to fossilization afterwards.

- When to correct? Marking and correcting all errors is considered a too overwhelming and time consuming task for teachers and also discourages and lowers students' confidence and motivation. It is suggested that teachers should not interrupt students too quickly, especially during students' communication.

- Which errors should be corrected? Many researchers have suggested that error correction should be done selectively. Ferris (2002, p. 50) pointed out that selective error-correction strategy helps students learn to make focused passes through their texts to find particular types of errors to which they may be most prone and to master grammatical terms and rules related to those specific errors. In terms of communication, Burt and Kiparsky (1972) proposed that correcting global errors, the major ones that impair communication, seems more productive. In terms of correctability, Truscott (2001) pointed out that discrete and simple units such as lexical or words are correctable rather than syntax which is related to a complex system.

- Who should correct? The persons related in correction can be students who made the errors, peer students and teachers. Obviously, involving students in the process of error correction, self-correction or peer-correction encourages a more co-operative atmosphere in class. Bartram and Walton (2001) pointed out that certain students accept and learn from self-correction and correction by other students much more readily than from the teacher. Teacher correction should be the last resort when students really need assistance or when the factor of time is involved.

- How to correct? The correction techniques involve both direct and indirect methods which depend on the situation. All things considered, no matter what techniques

would be applied, it is suggested that correction should be done in a positive and supportive atmosphere as Gower, Phillips, and Walters (1995) suggest; the important thing is to maintain a co-operative working atmosphere. Students should not feel they are being picked on. Teachers should not 'echo' the errors, even in a mocking, astonished way. Although humor can be beneficial, it tends to reinforce the teacher's superior relationship and inhibit the students' ability to work things out for themselves. It is believed that students learn more effectively if they are guided in such a way that they eventually correct themselves rather than if they are given the correct version of something straight away since a struggle to get it right also helps them to understand why they were wrong.

5. Conclusions

Though it is widely realized among current researchers and teachers that errors have benefits and play important roles in a language class, there are still different opinions that have not been made conclusive yet and are still controversial. To correct or not correct? There are many factors that teachers need to carefully consider. They must make judgements in different situations and use experience to treat errors properly at the right time and purposes. For example, while students are focusing on meaningful communication, it is not the right time to interrupt, but it would be more productive to do error correction while they are having linguistic drills in which they are attentive to the accuracy and teachers should focus on only a few major errors at a time (such as subject-verb agreement or tenses). Research also proposes that, for successful communication, teachers should give attention to global errors rather than local errors. Concerning the person to be involved in correction, it is a kind of collaboration between teachers and students where students can also play roles in correcting their errors by themselves, in pairs, in groups or even in class. Teacher assistance and guidance is needed in case the errors are beyond the student's proficiency level to perform the correction. The collaboration between teachers and learners in a supportive cooperative atmosphere is important to make error correction possible and successful.

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