

Different Types of Free Variation in the Writing of Sri Lankan ESL Learners

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Abstract

Interlanguage is a concept that denotes the developmental stages of second language learning that occurs when a learner starts to acquire a target language after he/she has started acquiring his/her first language. Teachers of ESL need to be aware of these developmental stages of the learners as he/she deals with the learner-errors in the process of teaching. This article analyses the developmental stages of Sri Lankan ESL learners' interlanguage (errors) adopting qualitative method of inquiry. An undergraduate student has been chosen as a sample, and systematic and free variations (errors) in her writings are analyzed in the light of interlanguage. The study reports some structural errors in detail and enlists some common errors. Though the particular learner conforms to the theory of interlanguage by displaying features of different stages of interlanguage, where the learners are generally considered to be mastering each stage and pass on to the next, she displays a unique phenomena i.e. she is at different stages of the interlanguage continuum at the same time.

Key words: learner errors, free variation, interlanguage, interlanguage continuum, second language learning.

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition learner-errors, learners' developmental stages and the variations in their developmental stages are important concerns. The concept of "interlanguage" is perceived as a continuum between the first language and the target language of the learner. At any point along the continuum of interlanguage, the learners' language is systematic and any difference could be explained by differences in their experience (Larsen Freeman and Michael, 1991). Ellis (1999, p.464) reported that free variation can be held to exist when two or more variants of the same linguistic variable are seen to be used randomly by individuals with regard to all of the following:

1. The same situational context(s).
2. The same illocutionary meanings.
3. The same linguistic context(s).
4. The same discourse context(s) and
5. The same planning conditions.

The objective of the study is to identify and analyze the structural errors commonly occurring among the writing of Sri Lankan ESL learners in the light of the stages of interlanguage as posited by Ellis (1999). The research involves qualitative methodology via documentary evidence and the necessary data were gathered from the specific writing of a particular undergraduate of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The learner considered for analysis is a female student following Bachelor of Business Administration degree programme in her second year of studies at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. She was informed that the collected texts would be used for analysis and her consent was obtained. Selected errors (interlanguage) are to be analyzed based on Ellis's (1999, p.475) proposition on the five stages of learning in detail with relevant theoretical grounding.

Tarone (1994) reported that "Increasing evidence seems to show that learners can produce a significantly more fluent, grammatical, and transfer-free interlanguage in some social contexts than in others" (p.136). Three essays taken for analyses from the student are to be studied in this light. The essays entitled as 'Advantages and disadvantages of using mobile phones' (transcribed as text I) and 'The opportunities for the course of AAT' (transcribed as text II) were written by the student as learner-initiated topics and she felt that she had first-hand experience with regard to themes of these articles. Transcribed text III, i.e. the article on 'The leadership training for the university students is important', which was written by her based on the information gathered from her friends who attended the leadership training for the university freshmen as she could not attend it, has more errors than the other two. This proves that the lack of first hand social experiences leads to more interlanguage characteristics than the social contexts in which she had her direct experience in relation to the texts I and II (she is a regular user of mobile phones and she follows a professional course in accounting called AAT). All the essays were take-home assignments.

2. Data Analysis of the Learner's Errors

Ellis (1999, 475) modified the four sequential stages in the acquisition of grammatical rules proposed by Towell, et al. (1993) (cited in Ellis, 1999) into five stages. They are non-linguistic stage, acquisition stage, replacement stage, interlanguage stage and completion stage. Four stages of the particular learner's acquisition of ESL are analyzed with theoretical grounding. The particular student could not be seen as having reached the completion stage, as she is still making mistakes.

2.1. Acquisition Stage (Free Variation 1)

The learner used –er as the suffix of the following words; calenderer, calculater (refer to highlight number 1 in text I). At the same time, she used the correct spelling for the word 'reminder'. This shows that the learner is over-generalizing the spelling for these words. This belongs to the Acquisition Stage in the development of a grammatical sub-system. Ellis (1999) posited "Learners operate an overgeneralization strategy, selecting one form and using it in contexts that in target-language use would require two forms" (p.475). Reason for this overgeneralization strategy is that the learner transcribes the sounds of those words she heard without considering the different forms of spelling in English (-ar and -or). This stage is prior to the "Replacement" stage which is characterized by free variation.

Another similar and significant free feature variable of the particular learner is the usage of simple present tense for third person plural. The learner writes "Every year about three lakhs students sits..." (refer to highlight number 2 in text III) once and in another context she writes correctly as " But approximately twenty three thousand students get university..." (refer to highlight number 3 in text III). This is also an example of over generalization strategy. This strategy may have been used due to two reasons; the learner has noticed that she makes mistakes for the present tense form of third person singular in her usual writing and because of her psychological processing of L2 in which she intended to avoid such mistakes. Therefore, this is an instance of interplay of language processing, psychological and meta-linguistic processing at the acquisition stage.

2.2. Replacement Stage (Free Variation 2)

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Ellis posited, by referring to Towell, et al. (1993), that the replacement stage is where “learners allow an alternate form into their interlanguage but are unable to determine the functional differences between the two forms”. According to Ellis (1999) this phase is “characterized by free variation” (p.475). Earlier he had defined free variation as “the variation apparent in the haphazard use of two or more alternate forms which exist within the learner’s interlanguage” (Ellis, 1985, p.75). The unpredictability of variants at the same context would characterize the free variation stage. The learner has haphazardly used inanimate third person singular subject with its verb -it is- and the possessive form of inanimate third person singular ‘its’. She wrote “Its help to communicate...” (highlight number 4) in an instance and in another she wrote “It is help to...” (highlight number 5) in the same article about the mobile phones and in another article about the leadership training she wrote “Its helps to...” (number 6) . This learner has not stabilized her understanding of different forms like (it is), (its) and (it’s) which mean different things in English. This free variation in the writing is due to the non systematicity in English; possessive forms get apostrophe (belonging to father= father’s) but ‘belonging to it’ loses its apostrophe (Its). Though this seems to be a haphazard use of items, this phenomenon belongs to “the sources other than the linguistic environment that govern variation, such as social factors relating to the Native Language” (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p.227). As possessives are not expressed in a similar fashion in her L1 (Tamil in the case of the particular learner) it is very difficult to master the new linguistic item from English. In Tamil, the possessive would be expressed not by an apostrophe but by adding the suffixes /athu/ or /udaiya/ in written language and /intai/ in spoken Jaffna Tamil to the particular word. Thus, she struggles to use the new linguistic item according to the system of the target language. This is because the “(...) learners first internalize new linguistic items, they do not know precisely what functions they realize in the target language” (Ellis, 1985, p.81).

Similarly at the syntax level, Tamil learners have difficulty in using the passive forms. In Tamil the word that indicates passive voice /paddathu/ immediately follows the main verb and there is no helping verb in Tamil. In English, where the learner tries to express the new syntactical item, the learner has to add a ‘be’ verb, which is an indicator of passive form, in front of the main verb and has to use the past participle form of the main verb. Corder (1978b), as cited by Ellis (1985), suggested that “when learners experience difficulty in communicating an

idea because they lack the necessary target language resources, they will resort to their L1 to make up the insufficiency” (p.37). Thus, the mistakes of the learner have to be understood in this light. Since the forwarding the ‘be’ verb and the usage of past participle for passive voice are not found in the learner’s L1, she tries to simplify her TL output. She wrote “The Association of Accounting Technicians of Sri Lanka established in December 1987.” (highlight number 7) in one instance and in another she correctly wrote as “AAT-SL was admitted as an Associate member...” (highlight number 8). This alternate usage of syntactic structure for passive voice exemplifies the free variation where the L1 has an impact on the TL output.

2.3. Interlanguage Stage (Systematic Variation)

This phenomenon has been exemplified by the particular learner’s alternate usage of main verb in different illocutionary contexts. In an instance, she wrote “Students must to wake up at 5 a.m. and participate in exercises” (highlight 9) where she meant students have to wake up or are compelled to wake up at 5 a.m. The illocutionary meaning here is that the students are compelled to get up early in the morning as there is somebody imposing the rule. In another sentence, (though the linguistic context is the same) where the illocutionary context is different, she wrote “So every university students must participate this leadership training” (highlight 10). This sentence is a concluding statement of the writer where she recommends the leadership training programme to every university student and it is not imposed by someone else but recommended by the writer. This illustrates that this particular Sri Lankan learner exemplifies being at the systematic variation stage since she conforms to the claim of Ellis (1985) which reads as “systematic variation is due to different linguistic contexts which induces different forms even though in the target language they require the same form”(p.83). Though Ellis insisted the different *linguistic* contexts, I have applied his ideas with a slight difference, i.e. in illocutionary contexts, to analyze the writing. This proves the existence of the learner’s systematicity of IL variations. When a TL usage requires the same form in different contexts, illocutionary contexts in this case, the learner uses a different form instead.

2.4 Common Errors

Some more errors of the learner are enlisted here for better understanding of the interlanguage of the learners. They could be categorized in the following manners. These errors are usually observed in the writing of the other ESL learners in the University of Jaffna.

a) Writing the words separately instead of single word.

Example: Now a days, Everywhere, Every one, Some one

b) Avoiding the auxiliary verb 'be'.

Examples: This certificate essential for university admission...
students out of the university

This training important to university students in many ways.

c) Errors - singular plural.

Example: many student like this

One of the technological gift is...

d) influence of L1 prepositions.

Example: phones help to us

e) Confusion in spelling silent letters.

Example: Pysical exercises
pychological

3. Findings and Recommendations

The particular learner makes the common errors usually made by many other learners in the same university. The errors could be perceived as systematic variation and free variation and they could be of spelling, vocabulary, and structural.

The learners and teachers of ESL have to be aware of the mistakes made to be able to rectify them. As a teacher of ESL the researcher realized the need to teach the grammatical rules explicitly as well as the need to give sufficient practices to internalize them. This could be implemented through deductive or inductive grammar teaching or like what Ellis (2002) argued as conscious raising practice which is a supplement to communication activities (pp.173-174).

4. Conclusion

It has been established that this particular Sri Lankan learner too behaves in conformity to the interlanguage principles. But there is also a small difference noticed. The particular learner displays that she is at different stages of development of grammatical subsystem simultaneously

instead of mastering each stage and progressing to the next. This is because she learns English as a second language and her interlanguage is characterized by linguistic, illocutionary, psycholinguistic and social contexts of her writing. More data from many similar learners are necessary to generalize this proposition on the interlanguage of Sri Lankan learners. The ESL teachers in Sri Lanka have to offer remedial grammar teaching in order to raise the grammar consciousness of the learners to expedite the passage from the interlanguage stage to completion stage of the interlanguage continuum.

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Appendices

Transcript of Text I

Advantages and disadvantages of using mobile phones.

In the 21st century technology is increasing day by day. One of the technological gift is mobile phone. Now a days mobile phones are every where. Most of people have mobile phones. It is one equipment but we get lots of uses. Mobile phones are having great influence in our life.

We get many advantages and disadvantages of using mobile phones. First we see advantages of using mobile phones. Communication is our major part in our life. Communication with other people is the main use of mobile phones. **Its help to communicate** (4) our relations, friends and co-workers. Through the mobile phones we build up our relationship. Now a days we can use mobile phones not only for just a calls, messages, video games, conference calls, chat, **calender, reminder, calculater** (1) radio, mp3 player ~~and~~ internet facilities and etc.

Majority people have their phone on hand at all times. In our emergency time mobile phones help to us. We can play games, chatting with friends, listen songs, download pictures or films when we are bored. **It is help to us** (5) for keep in touch with a modern world. In economical point of view mobile phones sales take a major part.

~~At the same time~~

Next we see disadvantages of using mobile phones. using mobile phones gives advantages even though at the same time it causes many

Text II

The opportunities for the professional course of AAT

This is the competitive and challenging world. Every one wants to join a good job. But it is not easy to possible. Some one get good results in Advanced level and they go to the university. After finishing their studies they become a graduates. But many students out of the university. Professional courses helps them to get jobs.

There are many different types of professionals. Every field have varities of professional courses such as computer related courses, engineer related courses accounting related courses,

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management related courses and etc. CIMA, CA, ACCA are some accounting related professional courses.

The Association of Accounting Technicians of Sri Lanka established in December 1987 (7). Association of Accounting Technicians of Sri Lanka (AAT-SL) is produce middle level professional Accountants. AAT-SL qualification is the easiest way to get jobs in accounting or management field. After AAT-SL we can enter into chartered accounting. AAT-SL was admitted as an Associate member (8) of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC). AAT – SL was also admitted as the First Associate member of the Confederation of Asian and Pacific Accountants, the leading organization of the accounting bodies in the region.

The examination structure at present consists of three levels namely Foundation, Intermediate and Final Examinations. Examinations are held twice a year in July and January in Sinhala, Tamil and English medium. Many examination centres are in Sri Lanka. Registered Students who have passed the G.C.E A/L...

Text III

The leadership training for the university student is important

Every year about three lakhs students sits for (2) the Advanced level examination. But approximately twenty three thousands students get university (3) admission. They are lucky students in the Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka gives Free education for the students. This is a greatest gift for students.

Since 2010 the government started leadership training programme who have qualified to enter university. This leadership training programme aim is to develop leadership skills and change the undergraduate attitudes. It is develop leadership qualities and positive thinking. The university leadership training programme is not necessary but it is very important training to students. Anyone has medical problem they can avoid the training programme but they should send a request letter to the higher education ministry.

The Higher Education Ministry has spend over Rs.100 million to provide to food, transport, books, caps and T-Shirts to the university entrance students who take part in this programme. A cost of a student is around Rs.50,000. In Starting days training period is tow weeks but now expand to three weeks.

This leadership training program include The Future vision of Sri Lanka, Global Changes, Achieving long term developments, Psysical exercises, First aid, leadership qualities and leadership, team work and presentation skills. The training consists theory and practical discussion including indoor and outdoor activities. The leadership training programme was organized by a special committee university lectures. There was a very positive response from the students because many student like this valuable training programme.

A certificate will be give to every university students participated to the programme. This certificate essential for university admission and Future interviews. This programme provides training to youth in pychological, health, sports, fitness training exercises. **Its helps to** (6) youth solving problem and improving mental and physical conditions.

Students must to wake up at 5 am (9) and participate in exercises. After lectures are followed this. The students should be trained in a team work, presentation skills and creative thinking. Students have to learn about wake up on time, how to do exercises, how to working on time, how to do team work, how to do study well and how to respect others. This training important to university students in many ways. So **every university students** (10) must participate this leadership training.

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