The English Teacher's Competence in Error Analysis and Its Application in the Classroom

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Abstract

Error analysis is one of the least important areas among the teachers of English in India. Errors are still considered an ailment by majority teachers. Errors are considered as a stepping-stone to perfection only by a few EFL/ESL teachers. We still live in a society where errors in second language acquisition as a punishable offense and our teachers do penalize students with their grading system which lands the readers in a big inhibition towards learning English. This may be one of the prime reasons that many students in India struggle to speak and write fluently in English despite learning the language for a decade and a half. This paper is an attempt to review the perceptions of errors and error analysis by linguists around the world. The objective of this article is to disprove the wrong perception among ESL teachers about errors.

Introduction

Gone are the days when a person could remain complacent with the working knowledge of his mother tongue alone. With population explosion, depleting resources and shrinking of the world as a global village, the need to learn a second language or more languages that could facilitate movement across countries in search of employment or to increase trade has become almost a compulsion.

The problem faced by the second language teacher is the frequent errors committed by the learner in his speaking as well as writing. To train the students in using the second language, the need has come for the teacher to acquire mastery in error analysis. Error analysis is concerned with the compilation, study and analysis of errors made by second language learners. It is a branch

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of applied linguistics which aims at investigating aspects of second language acquisition. Error analysis is a way for linguists, researchers, and educators to identify errors made by second language learners. Error analysis research pursues the path of devising methods and materials to help teachers and learners to aim at **fluency in speaking and correctness in writing.**

Language Learning

Language as a tool of communication has been practiced and mastered by human beings over millennia and language is one aspect which differentiates human beings and animals. The mankind stands divided on the Origin of Language and has been discussing whether language was God's Gift or the result of human effort in the process of evolution. The Lockean assumption of a *"Clean slate"* led to the ***"Behaviorist Theory"*** and this theory dominated language learning in the mid 19th century. Skinner (1957) declared that language is learned through a process of 'habit-formation' and 'verbal behaviour'. The arrival of linguist Chomsky on the scene restored a balance, in that it favoured a pre-programming prior to learning. According to Chomskyan theory children are born with an innate capacity for acquiring language.

Second Language Learning

Carroll J. B. in his book, *"Language Development in Children"* (1960), was one of the first to distinguish "language acquisition" (learning the mother tongue) from foreign or second language learning. He asks whether first language learning is learning at all, or whether it is rather a biological process of growth, or as Chomsky would say*, "genetic maturation"* or *"linguistic competence".*

Error Analysis

S.P. Corder states, in the introduction in his book *"Error Analysis and Interlanguage"(*1982) Oxford University Press, that *"people now believe they had a principled means for accounting for these errors, namely that they were the result of interference in the learning of a second language from the habits of the first language"*. Corder points out that the development of generative linguistics and interest in psycholinguistic research had initiated a shift of emphasis in language teaching from its preoccupation with teaching towards the study of learning. The new interest led naturally to a comparison between first language (LI) and second language (L2) learning, and to the question of whether the apparent differences between the two represent two different processes of learning.

Contrastive Analysis Theory

In the 1950s, American linguist Robert Lado began to study errors systematically and developed theories about errors. Contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system and that a scientific

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and structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe the problems.

Contrastive analysis is helpful in locating those problematic areas and finding out solutions to them. On the whole, contrastive analysis has a prognostic value i.e. to predict the errors, difficulties and problems faced by learners, while learning a second language.

Interlingual Studies

Research (Mackey, 1960, Brown, 1973, Krashen, 1982 and Berko, 1958) in the field of language acquisition has proved that there is a universal order of acquisition despite differing socio-cultural backgrounds of the learners. The order of acquiring proficiency in the first language remains constant in children from all strata of society. It is clear from the various studies in first language that children do not only initiate and reproduce but construct their own rules. The interlingual study tries to prove that the process of learning second language is the same as first language. Corder says that at any point in their learning of a Target Language (TL), learners use a system that can be described in linguistic terms and from which the researcher can discover the learners' *"transitional competence".*

Interlanguage

The term 'Interlanguage' coined by Selinker (1972), was first introduced into the literature in an influential paper published in the International Review of Applied Linguistics in 1972. It is used to denote the *'second' language system that is developed by the learner on the basis of his first language.* This system is what Selinker calls Interlanguage. A number of terms have been coined to describe the perspective which stressed the legitimacy of learners' second language system. Corder (1971) used the term *"idiosyncratic dialect"* or *"learners' language*" (1978) and Nemser (1971) called it *"approximate system*". Interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learners' system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages.

Understanding Errors

The error shall be considered as inevitable in the development of second language learning. Dulay and Burt (1974) are of the view that *"you cannot learn without goofing"* (Stern, 1987: 354). Errors should not be taken as an ailment that needs to be eradicated. On the whole, it is an important tool to diagnose and assess the progress made by the learner. One important implication of the Interlanguage hypothesis is the fact that errors are accepted as inevitable. The Interlanguage hypothesis sees errors as evidence of L2 learners' strategies of learning, rather than as signs of interference or as the persistence of "bad habits" which should be eradicated as quickly as possible through practice, drill and over-learning of the correct forms.

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Error Analysis in the Classroom

The field of error analysis may be defined as dealing with the differences between the way people learning a language speak, and the way adult native speakers of the language use the language. The primary aims of error analyses are (i) to identify types and patterns of errors and (ii) to establish error taxonomies.

Need for Teacher's Mastery of the Two Languages

S.P. Corder argues, "There have been **two schools of thought in respect of learners' errors**. Firstly, the school which maintains that if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present **inadequacy of our teaching techniques**".

He juxtaposes the argument of the other school of thought, "The philosophy of the second school is that **we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts.** Our ingenuity should be concentrated on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred". What may be an embarrassment to the teaching community is the charge of inadequacy. But, Corder defends them saying that in a classroom, **for the learner the "input is 'what goes in', not 'what is available for going in',** and we may reasonably suppose that it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly his intake.

Do Students Learn What They are Taught?

Krashen's natural order hypothesis claims that acquisition does not apply to learned structures and is independent in teaching (Jordan, 2004, p.179). Rod Ellis (1993, p. 4) adds: '…what is taught is not necessarily learned since what is learned is controlled by the learner and not the teacher, not the textbooks, not the syllabus.'

Attitudinal Change in the Teacher

The second language teacher should learn to see errors as learning steps. The traditional thinking of errors as a negative which needs punishment needs to be changed. The student should be allowed to experiment with language in speaking and writing in a non-threatening fun way. Successful communication demands correctness, a certain level of accuracy in the use of language. The demands of accuracy should not deter the student from aiming at fluency. The teacher should develop the art of guiding the student progress through fluency to accuracy. Error correction should support learning and should not be a kind of criticism or punishment.

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Tasks for the Second Language Teacher

The teacher acquiring mastery in error analysis gets an overall knowledge of his students' errors. As foreign language learning is a process of hypothesis and trial, error occurrence is inevitable. So, the teacher should learn to tolerate errors.

Secondly, errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So students' errors are valuable feedbacks. The teacher can prepare remedial activities based on their errors. With the feedback, they make new attempts to achieve the more closely approximate desired goals.

Thirdly, errors are indispensable to the learners themselves, as the making of mistakes is a device the learner employs in order to learn.

In the Classroom

The teacher should be able to identify the reason for the errors of linguistic forms whether they are caused
   a) By the influence of the first language
   b) By misunderstanding a rule
   c) By lack of concentration
   d) Or, by a mixture of these and other factors

The teacher should constantly decide
   ❖ Whether to correct
   ❖ When to correct
   ❖ What to correct, and
   ❖ How to correct

The teacher should exercise patience to

   a) Allow students to identify "slips" and do self-correction
   b) Help students when the error could not be self-corrected
   c) Guide the student has no idea on how to structure the form to convey the idea

The Teacher should encourage students to discover their own errors. Peer correction can help if handled judiciously. The teacher may improvise his own method for the particular class. The teacher should also observe the other influences outside the classrooms and try to gently make the students aware of the mistakes without offending other teachers.

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Motivation

Normally, one finds unwillingness on the part of the learner in learning the second language due to various reasons. Individuals who are motivated will learn another language faster and to a greater degree. Others end up struggling with errors. And, quite clearly, some degree of motivation is involved in initial decisions to learn another language and to maintain learning. Numerous studies have provided statistical evidence that indicates motivation is a predictor of language-learning success. The Second Language Teacher needs to be a master in his subject and also be a great motivator.

Limitations

Certainly, error analysis is significant, but it also has its limitations. First, there is a danger in too much attention to learners' errors and when in the classroom teacher tends to become so preoccupied with noticing errors that the correct utterance in the second language will go unnoticed.

While the diminishing of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency, the ultimate goal of second language learning is the attainment of communicative fluency in a language.

Conclusion

Teachers used to believe that errors were the result of faulty learning, thereby throwing the entire blame on the learner. The current attitude to errors being one of tolerance and expectation, the teacher should expect errors in his learners' use of the second or foreign language; prepare his lessons and adopt classroom techniques so as to help his students to overcome the problem of errors. A tolerant attitude of teachers towards errors helps learners to communicate with confidence.

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