

The error in the Second Language Acquisition

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Making errors is the most natural thing in the world and it is evidently attached to the human being. But, how do we define error? There are different definitions of the word and as Ellis explains “learners make errors in both comprehension and production, the first being rather scantily investigated. Children learning their first language (L1), adult native speakers, second language learners; they all make errors which have a different name according to the group committing the error. Children’s errors have been seen as “transitional forms”, the native speakers’ ones are called “slips of the tongue” and the second language (L2) errors are considered “unwanted forms” (George, 1972)”.

According to Lennon (1991) an error is “a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speakers counterparts”. In the second language teaching/learning process the error has always been regarded as something negative which must be avoided. As a consequence, teachers have always adopted a repressive attitude towards it. On one hand, it was considered to be a sign of inadequacy of the teaching techniques and on the other hand it was seen as a natural result of the fact that since by nature we cannot avoid making errors we should accept the reality and try to deal with them. Fortunately, little by little the error has been seen from a different point of view being made obvious that we can learn from our mistakes.

One of the most generally known approaches concerning the error throughout human history is to consider it a negative effect or result, even worth to be punished.

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Different societies have regarded error as indicating failure and obstructing progress. Punishing the error has always occurred along with teaching and learning processes and has always been used as an instrument of power and a teaching strategy. At all times has the error been systematically persecuted and even in our days despite the numerous protesting voices. The idea of the error as an effect to be avoided has been especially supported by behaviourism, being considered an obstacle to language learning. The behaviourists viewed error as a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure and they believed that when they occur they are to be remedied by provision of correct forms; that is to say, use of intensive drilling and over-teaching. Although Behaviourism may be strongly criticised as a conception it has represented considerable progress as far as error treatment is concerned, placing emphasis on the different characteristics of the different subjects and eliminating hard punishment.

A quite different conception from the behaviouristic one is the one that affirms that without error there is no progress. What the error-as-progress conception is based on is Chomsky's idea that a child generates language through innate universal structures. So, using this symbolic code one can have access to different pieces of knowledge not as something mechanically learned but as mentally constructed through try and error. The idea is now that the second language learners form hypotheses about the rules to be formed in the target language and then test them out against input data and modify them accordingly. This is how the error promotes progress and improvement in learning. The behaviourists' model is now substituted by the mentalists' one and thanks to this new conception the error is finally seen as something positive and not as a problem.

The third approach concerning error is the one considering error to be the result of the social-cognitive interaction. This means that the error implicitly carries a social norm as well as a cognitive process. The error or mistake also carries a social and cultural component which makes it different in different societies.

An outline of the recent evolution of conceptions, ideas and research on this area helps us to conceive how and why language teaching nowadays has come to focus on the learner and the learning process. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, errors occur as a result of interference when the learners transfer native language habits into the L2. It was also believed that interference takes place whenever there is a difference between native mother tongue and the target language. A hypothesis based on Lado's suggestion in linguistic across cultures where he states "in the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease all difficulties in foreign language learning" (Lado, 1957).

Lado underlined the tight relation between Contrastive analysis and language teaching; although it constitutes an important contribution to language teaching, to date Contrastive Analysis is just one more among a number of analyses. In fact, it limits itself to providing us with didactic information. The most important contribution of this kind of analysis is the delimitation of second language structures which obstruct learning. Based on this information it is possible to make decisions concerning teaching. In fact, it is the knowledge of the difficulties resulting from the difference between first language structures and target language ones which permits the development of efficient strategies to face error.

The error analysis supplanted Contrastive Analysis and became a recognised part of Applied Linguistics owing to the work of Corder (1967) who saw it from a different point of view :

A learner's errors then, provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using...they are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed...Second, they provide the researchers with evidence of how language is learned or acquired...Thirdly they are indispensable to the learner himself because he can regard the making of error as a device used in order to learn.

The Error Analysis is concerned with the same problems as Contrastive Analysis but from an opposing point of view. In Error Analysis, the error has been defined as a deviation from the norm of the target language and a distinction has been made between errors and mistakes. The error is what takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge whereas the mistake comes up when learners fail to perform their competence. Errors have been further divided into overt and covert (Corder, 1971), errors of correctness and appropriateness, as far as identification of error is concerned, and into presystematic, systematic and postsystematic regarding their description (Corder, 1974).

In general, L2 acquisition research tackled with the error sources which might be psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, epistemic or residing in the discourse structures. Richards (1971), when trying to identify the causes of competence errors he came up with three types of errors: interference errors, which reflect the use of elements from one language to the other, intralingual errors, subdivided into errors due to overgeneralization, or to ignorance of rules restriction, which is incomplete application of the rules, or finally due to the false concept hypothesis, which demonstrate the general characteristics of rule learning and third developmental errors when the learner builds hypothesis about the target language based on limited experience.

Another division was made by Dulay and Burt in 1974 according to which there are three types of error: the developmental ones which are based on the identity hypothesis are similar to the errors made in L1 acquisition, interference errors and unique errors which cannot fall into either of the above mentioned categories. Error Analysis was criticised for its weaknesses in the methodological procedures and its limited scope. It has been claimed that the Error Analysis has not succeeded in providing a complete view of language acquisition describing it as exclusively a collection of errors.

Schachter, Celce-Murcia(1977) criticised Error Analysis on the grounds of its focusing on errors, of the fact that researchers are denied access to the whole picture and of failing to account for all the areas of the L2 in which learners have difficulties. Nevertheless, despite the constructive criticism the Error Analysis has been very important in the sense that it has given the error respectability and it has made obvious that the errors are a positive element in language learning.

It is well known, that in the last years the approach to language learning has changed substantially. Nowadays, language teaching basically focuses on the communicative competence. The communicative approach is different than the previous teaching methods even where error correction is concerned. In Communication Language Teaching there is a minimal focus on form. Including a lack of emphasis on error correction. If it occurs it is likely to be meaning focused. Through errors the teachers can get improvement in learning. The errors can be used in order to help teachers evaluate the students' cognitive development.

One way in which a teacher can make the error come up, when he suspects that it causes a student's not progressing as he should, is to organise his material in such a way that there is more possibility that the error will be produced. As a result, the student will realise on his own what the cause of his difficulties is.

A different approach would be that the teacher reduces the possibility of error making so that the student may get over his difficulties. To be able to apply error correction one should take into account the student's age and the teaching subjects among other things. To treat the error the teachers should consider the three phases of its treatment: localization, identification and correction. Many times teachers just care for the localisation of the errors without moving on to the identification of the type of the error made or its cause. It is of great importance to try to find out why the error is made, because not all types of error must be treated in the same way.

It is not just the teacher that should correct the students, they should actually be motivated to do so themselves. How can that be? It is possible if the student knows

how to make the right questions. The teacher's role is to help the students become conscious of their errors and give them incentive to try and find for themselves why they have made the error and how they could avoid repeating it. Chaudron (1977) speaking about feedback as oral correction asks the following questions:

Should learners errors be corrected? The answer to this question should follow from evidence of the effectiveness of error correction, a difficult phenomenon to demonstrate.

When should they be corrected? The general tendencies vary according to the instructional focus when focus is on form corrections occur more frequently. On the other hand when focus is on the communicative competence teachers tend to correct those errors which seem to obstruct communication. Which errors should be corrected? According to Hendrickson errors which impair communication significantly, errors that have stigmatizing effects on the listener or the reader. And those which occur frequently in students' speech and writing.

In the language classroom the teacher tends to correct the errors automatically and usually regards all hesitation on part of the student as a request for help. It seems that a delay in the correction would allow the learner a greater opportunity of self-correction and would help the development of autonomous control processes, which are characteristic of the competence in communication of the mother language and which are considered to be essential in the socialisation of the second language. The routine correction on part of the teacher actually runs the risk of making the learner depended on correction by others. Moreover, the correction of an error by the teacher as self correction of a problem of perception would reduce the risk of hurting the student's self-esteem and would imitate the conditions of acquisition found in a natural setting.

Allwright (1988) argues: "to focus on the teacher treatment of learners' error is to adapt a rather narrow focus because it means concentrating on what might be called the potential crisis points in the process...It is a much broader view point because it attempts to deal with the classroom context in which occur as well as with the errors themselves and secondly because it attempts to take into account the social nature of this context in terms of a complexity of relationships between teacher and learners."

After all the research and theories over the year we must admit that no definite conclusions have come up and there is a lot yet to be done in this field. However, it is finally generally accepted that error making is a necessary part of learning and language teachers should use the errors with a view to having better results in the classroom. And as Arthur pointed out it may be the case that the errors made by

second language learner are from their own perspective not error at all. They are consistent with systematic rules of the learners' own interlanguage. (in Tarone, 1977).

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