

The Role of Error in Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses briefly the types of errors made by second language learners, the causes of these errors, and finally how teachers should correct them.

KEYWORDS: errors, slips, interference, first language (mother tongue/L1), second language (L2), overgeneralization, simplification, fossilization.

Language learning, like any kind of human learning, involves committing errors. In the past, language teachers considered errors committed by their students as something undesirable, which they diligently sought to prevent from occurring. During the past fifteen years, however, researchers in the field of applied linguistics came to view errors as evidence for a creative process in language learning in which learners employ hypothesis testing and various strategies in learning a second language.

This paper is very much significant in its subject matter of the research. It aims to provide the knowledge about the different errors committed by the learners and also highlights the causes and reasons behind those errors. Error analysis is basically the linguistics analysis and it throws light on the different underlying processes that are involved in the very complex phenomenon of language learning. It is the major area of applied linguistics and tries to resolve the problems and issues related to the second and foreign language learning as well as teaching and it offers practical solutions for the language related problems. The paper is also an attempt in providing different strategies to the language practitioners and teachers for making their teaching effective. It also highlights the importance of using the meaningful material for language teaching. It provides the learners an opportunity of self-correcting by making them aware of their mistakes. The study also tries to find out the reasons behind the poor performance of these students in language learning area. Thus, by keeping in mind all these points it can be said that the present study can be of highly significant in its nature.

Making mistakes plays an important and useful part in language learning because it allows learners to experiment with language and measure their success in communicating. This unit focuses on the kinds of mistakes learners make when they speak or write a foreign language, why they make these mistakes and the part that mistakes play in language learning.

Mistakes are often categorized into **errors** and **slips**. **Errors** occur when learners try to say something that is beyond their current level of knowledge or language **processing** (working on the language unconsciously to try to understand and learn it). Usually, because they are still processing or do not know this part of the language, learners cannot correct errors themselves because they do not understand what is wrong.

Slips are the result of tiredness, worry or other temporary emotions or circumstances. We make them because we are not concentrating on what we are saying or writing. They are not a result of incomplete language processing or a lack of knowledge. They happen simply because our attention is somewhere else at that

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moment. These kinds of mistakes can be corrected by learners themselves, once they realise they have made them.

There are two main reasons why second language learners make errors. The first reason is influence from the learner's **first language (mother tongue/L1)** on the second language (**L2**). This is called **interference** or transfer. Learners may use sound patterns, **lexis** or **grammatical structures** from their own language in English.

Types of Errors

Researchers in the field of applied linguistics usually distinguish between two types of errors: performance errors and competence errors. Performance errors are those errors made by learners when they are tired or hurried. Normally, this type of error is not serious and can be overcome with little effort by the learner.

Competence errors, on the other hand, are more serious than performance errors since competence errors reflect inadequate learning. In this connection, it is important to note that researchers distinguish between mistakes which are lapses in performance and errors which reflect inadequate competence. Other researchers distinguish between local and global errors. Local errors do not hinder communication and understanding the meaning of an utterance. Global errors, on the other hand, are more serious than local errors because global errors interfere with communication and disrupt the meaning of utterances. Local errors involve noun and verb inflections, and the use of articles, prepositions, and auxiliaries. Global errors, for example, involve wrong word order in a sentence.

Causes of Errors

There are mainly two major sources of errors in second language learning. The first source is interference from the native language while the second source can be attributed to intralingual and developmental factors. The native language of learners plays a significant role in learning a second language. Errors due to the influence of the native language are called interlingual errors. Interlingual errors are also called transfer or interference errors. Intralingual and developmental errors are due to the difficulty of the second/target language. Intralingual and developmental factors include the following:

1. Simplification: Learners often choose simple forms and constructions instead of more complex ones. An example of simplification might involve the use of simple present instead of the present perfect continuous.
2. Overgeneralization: This is the use of one form or construction in one context and extending its application to other contexts where it should not apply. Examples of overgeneralization include the use of *comed* and *goed* as the past tense forms of *come* and *go* and the omission of the third person singular *s* under the heavy pressure of all other endless forms as in *he go*.

It should be noted that simplification and overgeneralization are used by learners in order to reduce their linguistic burden.

3. Hypercorrection: Sometimes the zealous efforts of teachers in correcting their students' errors induce the students to make errors in otherwise correct forms. Stenson (1978) calls this type of error "induced errors."
4. Faulty teaching: Sometimes it happens that learners' errors are teacher-induced ones, i.e., caused by the teacher, teaching materials, or the order of presentation. This factor is closely related to hypercorrection above. Also, it is interesting to note that some teachers are even influenced by their pupils' errors in the course of long teaching.
5. Fossilization: Some errors, specially errors in pronunciation, persist for long periods and become quite difficult to get rid of. Examples of fossilized errors in Arab ESL learners are the lack of distinction between

IpI and Ibl in English and the insertion of the resumptive pronoun in English relative clauses produced by these learners.

6. Avoidance: Some syntactic structures are difficult to produce by some learners. Consequently, these learners avoid these structures and use instead simpler structures. Arab ESL learners avoid the passive voice while Japanese learners avoid relativization in English.

7. Inadequate learning: This is mainly caused by ignorance of rule restrictions or under differentiation and incomplete learning. An example is omission of the third person singular *s* as in: *He want*.

8. False concepts hypothesized: Many learners' errors can be attributed to wrong hypotheses formed by these learners about the target language. For example, some learners think that *is* is the marker of the present tense. So, they produce: *He is talk to the teacher*. Similarly, they think that *was* is the past tense marker. Hence they say: *It was happened last night*.

Error Treatment

Teachers cannot and should not correct all errors committed by their students. Besides, the frequent correction of oral errors disrupts the process of language learning and discourages shy students from communicating in the target language. The following are general guidelines in correcting second language learning errors:

1. Teachers should correct errors affecting intelligibility, i.e., errors that interfere with the general meaning and understandability of utterances. In this connection, teachers should concentrate on correcting global errors more than local errors.
2. High frequency and generality errors should be corrected more often than less frequent errors. For example, the omission of the third person Singular *s* is an error of high frequency and generality.
3. Teachers should put more emphasis on correcting errors affecting a large percentage of their students. This factor is clearly related to the second factor above.
4. Stigmatizing or irritating errors should be paid more attention to. This factor is related to the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning. Pupils who come from lower socioeconomic classes are conscious of and very sensitive to ridicule about their informal variety of language from students from higher socioeconomic classes who speak a more formal and prestigious variety of the language.
5. Finally, errors relevant to a pedagogical focus should receive more attention from the teacher than other errors. For example, if the focus of the lesson is the use of the present perfect tense, the correction of errors involving prepositions, articles, and demonstratives in this lesson should not be emphasized by the teacher because if he/she did, the attention of the students would be distracted from the focus of the lesson which, in this instance, is the use of the present perfect tense.

Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between error analysis and second and foreign language learning. It describes the various strategies that learners use in the process of language learning. It also explores how error analysis has its impact in understanding the language learning process and describes the difficulties that learners face in the process of language learning and helps the teachers in designing different remedies for supporting the learners' learning. The division of categories of error analysis gives teachers ideas and knowledge about the weak areas of learner's language and helps them in focusing on those points, particularly. It provides the deeper insight in different areas of language.

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