



Learning From Learners: Constructing Evaluation and Feedback Methodology from Error Analysis

Rumana Siddique
University of Dhaka

Abstract

Errors function as important links between teachers and students. In the attempt to teach a language it is vital for the teacher to be aware of *how* language is learnt. The process of language learning is currently recognized to be a creative construction process. Errors are a vital source of information in the language teaching process since they provide information about the language learning process by indicating the learner's innate strategies of learning. This is what is currently termed 'Error Analysis' (EA). This paper discusses the significance of errors in second language acquisition. It attempts to elucidate both the theoretical and practical aspects of error analysis and is correspondingly divided into two parts. The first part of the paper focuses on the theoretical concepts, utility and limitations of Error Analysis. The second section concentrates on evaluation and feedback methodology by presenting a set of recommendations on error correction policy for teachers based on both EA research and the paper writer's contentions.

Research suggests that the assessment process has the greatest single influence over the way students orientate themselves to learning. Cortrell (2001) argues that students will generally take a strategic approach to gaining good marks even if this is in conflict with their learning aims or the stated objectives of the course. If a piece of work is returned graded with constructive feedback regarding the grading students will naturally seek strategic ways of improving grades based on feedback explaining their errors. Thus errors function as

important links between teachers and students. In the attempt to *teach* a language it is vital for the teacher to be aware of *how* language is learnt. The process of language learning is currently recognized to be a creative construction process. It is a process whereby the learner advances through systematic stages of acquisition of a language by using logical and creative methods, such as hypothesis testing and trial and error, to investigate and arrive at an understanding of the systems of the new language.

Errors are a vital source of information in the language teaching process since they provide information about the language learning process by indicating the learner's innate strategies of learning. The identification, analysis and classification of errors are part of the methodology of the Psycholinguistic investigation of language learning. This is what is currently termed 'Error Analysis' (EA). Error Analysis has become an established methodology of research to investigate the language learning process in order to construct appropriate teaching strategies for second language learners.

This paper discusses the significance of errors in L2 acquisition. It attempts to elucidate both the theoretical and practical aspects of error analysis and is correspondingly divided into two parts. The first part of the paper focuses on the theoretical concepts, utility and limitations of Error Analysis. The second section concentrates on evaluation and feedback methodology by presenting a set of recommendations on error correction policy for teachers based on both EA research and the paper writer's contentions.

Error Analysis: Concept, Utility and Limitations

Studies on the speech and writing of learners or "learner language" (James 1990) have revealed that in the process of language learning, second language learners' construct a separate system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language. Selinker (1972) coined the term *interlanguage* to describe the learner's second language system that is constructed at any given stage in his development. Learner's errors are indicative of this system. Corder (1981), and others point out that though this system is not the right system, it should not necessarily be treated as an imperfect system; it is such only insofar as native speakers compare their own knowledge of the language to that of the learners. Second language learning systems should be viewed as variable, dynamic approximate systems. As Ellis (1985) points out, errors are an important source of information about second language learning, because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorize and reproduce target language

rules in their own utterances. Errors also indicate that learners construct their own rules on the basis of input data and that, in some instances at least, these rules differ from those of the target language.

The most influential researcher on EA seems to be S.Pit Corder who from the late 60's presented a series of papers on the creative aspects of language learning, starting with his seminal paper on the significance of learner's errors (1967). Corder viewed errors as highly systematic, serving as 'windows' to the learner's progress in the second language. Error Analysis has indeed provided significant insights into the L2 acquisition process. This, in turn, has inspired major changes in teaching practices, often termed as the EA movement. One of its most contentious contributions has been the finding that the majority of the grammatical errors second language learners make do not reflect the learner's mother tongue; instead, they are more similar to those made by young children in the L1 learning process. Corder (1981) points to this parallel saying: "The making of errors then is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language"(11). This discovery had its greatest significance because it offered an alternative to the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis (CA) approach to errors, and plausible explanations for learner's errors that could not be explained or predicted by the Contrastive Analysis or Behaviorist Theory.

CA attempted to predict learner errors by identifying the linguistic difference between their L1 and the target language, based on the assumption that errors occurred primarily as a result of interference when the learner transferred native language habits into the L2. CA hypothesis began to face problems when researchers found that the number of errors, which could undoubtedly be attributed to contrasting principles between the L1 and L2, were in fact a very small percentage of all errors. Lococo (1975) for example, reported from the corpus she studied that errors attributable to L1/L2 contrast were no more than 25 percent of the total number of non-native forms produced by the learners she studied.

In the 70's EA superseded and became distinct from CA because of its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources and not just those resulting from negative transfer of the native language. Error Analysis provided a theoretical framework for explaining the role played by errors in the process of second language acquisition. The theoretical justification for CA rested on the Behaviorist Learning theory of second language acquisition and its approach to errors. This approach considered errors as undesirable since they were evidence of non-learning

or of the inability of learning to overcome interference from the native language. It was generally agreed among the Behaviorist theorists that errors should be avoided, and CA subsequently saw no use for errors or their identification and opted for prevention of errors as most important to the learning process.

Corder's perspective (1967), for the first time, highlighted the creative aspect of errors. The subsequent interest and research in the field of EA resulted in a change of perspective and elevated the status of errors from 'unwanted forms' (George 1972) produced by lazy and unmotivated language learners to valuable indicators of learning and teaching guides. The positive modern view of errors that has evolved subsequently perceives them as dynamic parts of the circular progression in learning. Nickel (1970; cf. also 1973) claims that through this circular corrective function of errors, the relatively rapid progress in the learning of a language can be explained. This is similar to Corder's assertion that errors are learning strategies that provide teachers insights into learners' progress.

Following on from the work of Corder, errors have been recognized by scholars as having great significance for teachers, researchers and learners themselves. For teachers who undertake a systematic analysis of errors, they indicate how far the learner has progressed towards the goal and consequently what remains for him to learn (Corder 1981). For teachers and curriculum developers alike, errors indicate 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 (Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982).

For the researcher they provide evidence of how language is learnt or acquired and what strategies or procedures a learner employs in his/her discovery of a language (Corder 1981). Errors provide data from which inferences about the nature of the language can be made (Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982). They are used as a base for theory construction and classroom practice and have also made a significant contribution to the theoretical consciousness-raising of applied linguistics and language practitioners (Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982). Finally, and most significantly, errors are indispensable to learners, who use them as a device of language learning, and as a way of testing their hypothesis about the language (Corder 1967).

What exactly, then, does Error Analysis entail? Corder (1974) suggests the following steps after collection of a corpus of learner language:

I Identifying errors,

- II describing them,
- III explaining the errors, and
- IV evaluating them.

While EA research has contributed much to reveal the complexity of acquisition behavior, it is itself not free from complexity and limitations. There have been a number of critiques of EA (Bell 1974; Schachter and Celce Muria 1977; Long and Sato 1984; Vans Els et.al 1984). The criticism has been levelled at the limitations in both scope and methodology. In this respect, Ellis (1985) asserts EA stands as a limited tool for investigating second language acquisition.

The scope of EA itself is limited, because it provides only a partial picture from the parts of the language that the L2 learner produces. Corder (1971) identified the importance of examining the totality of the learner's productions. Hammarberg (1974) contends that Error Analysis can, at the very least, be considered to have a place, "as a partial and preliminary source of information at an initial stage of investigation" (34). Also it examines learner language only at a single point in time since most studies are cross-sectional in nature. Little attention has been paid to separating the errors made by learners at different stages of development. Thus by not revealing much about the developmental route learners take, we get only a static view of L2 acquisition. EA can be used in longitudinal studies of L2 learners, as in the study by Chamot (1973). Corder (1981) argues convincingly that only longitudinal studies can answer certain theoretical questions.

The strategy of learners revealing only what they wish, and concealing what they do not want to show ties in with the issue of *avoidance*. Schachter (1974) revealed from research that error analysis fails to account for the strategy of avoidance. A learner who for one reason or another avoids a particular sound, word, structure or discourse category may be assumed incorrectly to have no difficulty therewith. Subsequent studies by Kleinmann (1978), Kellerman (1977), Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) testify to the prevalence of avoidance in L2 acquisition. Corder (1981) makes the point that the textual data produced by the learner must be supplemented with intuitional data and that systematic methods of investigating these must be devised. Such techniques will, in effect, "enable us to elicit information about the learner's interlanguage that he is not required to reveal by the ordinary tasks we set him or which he does not care to reveal to us voluntarily" (59).

Many problems have also arisen in the process of identifying errors, as well as in categorizing them. During the process of error identification a distinction between error and *mistake* must be made. In this regard, it may be pointed out that often the very definition of error poses a problem. Considering error to be defined as a systematic deviation from the norms of the target language reflecting the learner's transitional (interlanguage) competence, (Corder 1981; Ellis 1994), brings into the question, which variety of the target language should be considered the norm? Also, the distinction between errors as failures of competence and mistakes as slips of performance (which are of no significance to the process of learning), involves some complexity (Corder 1967). Apart from the difficulty of making this distinction, the distinction also assumes that competence is homogenous. But in reality, learners' errors are not systematic in any simple way. This variability in competence thus must be taken into account.

Another problem that arises in the identification process is the issue of, what Corder identified (1972; 1981) as, 'overt' and 'covert' errors. Corder states that "Purely superficial formal correctness is no guarantee of absence of error" (21), adding significantly that, "Every sentence is to be regarded as idiosyncratic until shown to be otherwise" (21). Thus the crucial methodological implication is that we must carefully study what the learner intended to say, for that is what provides us with a means of determining whether an error is in fact present or not. These various distinctions are indicative of the complexity involved in recognizing errors.

The process of the description of errors constitutes comparison of learners' idiosyncratic utterances with reconstructions of those utterances in the target language. The description of errors, like their identification, is problematic. Even if the error is easily identifiable, it is often difficult to decide which is the best target language (reconstruction) version. Descriptive taxonomies have been commonly based on:

- Linguistic categories which classify errors according to, either or both, the language component or the particular linguistic constituent the error affects.
- Surface strategy; this 'highlights the way surface strategies are altered' (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982: 150) by means of such operations as omissions, additions and regularizations.
- Comparative analysis; this is based on comparison between L2 errors and

developmental ones, as well as interlingual, and unique/ambiguous errors.

- Communicative effect; this focuses on errors from the perspective of their effect on the listener or reader i.e. whether they affect comprehension or not. This category includes global and local errors.

Although these taxonomies may have pedagogic application, they generally provide little information on the L2 acquisition process.

In this respect, Corder's framework (1974), based as it is, on the systematicity of errors, is more enlightening. He divides errors into pre-systematic, systematic and post-systematic errors. However, identification of these kinds of errors requires interviewing the learner. Thus this taxonomy assumes that researchers have access to the learners and that the latter are capable of explaining their errors. Reliance on the learner as informant has been criticized on the grounds that their retrospective accounts cannot be considered to be reliable (Van Els et al.1984) and that the assumption that they possess the metalingual knowledge to explain their performance does not always hold.

Explanation of errors to account for why they were made is the most important stage of EA for SLA research as it involves an attempt to establish the process responsible for L2 acquisition (Ellis 1985). The source of an error may be psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, epistemic, or may reside in the discourse structure (Taylor1986). SLA research has, however, generally only attended to psycholinguistics. Richards (1971) identified three sources of competence errors: interference, and intralingual, and developmental. Lott (1983) further subdivided transfer errors into: overextension of analogy, transfer of structure, interlingual/intralingual errors. Intralingual errors, on the other hand, have been subdivided into: overgeneralization errors, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized. Detailed explanations of these divisions are beyond the limited scope of this paper, but suffice to say that these distinctions are not clear-cut as it is not easy to distinguish transfer and intralingual errors and even more difficult to identify the different types of intralingual errors. This is another of the methodological weaknesses of EA.

Like all other stages of EA the evaluation of errors also poses a variety of problems. There are no distinct criteria for judging error and responses are subjective and are also influenced by the context in which they are made. Based on the considerations discussed above, we can conclude that it is obvious from

the complexities that are integral to the EA process that it is impossible to identify errors 100% accurately. Also, research on error correction methods is not at all conclusive on the most effective techniques for error correction. Nonetheless, it has been conclusively indicated that students generally expect and want errors to be corrected (Cathcart and Orsen 1976). Students are often desperate to make sense of requirements. Constructive feedback on errors helps students to know what they can do to perform better, while EA research helps teachers find out why students are making errors and plan remedial lessons accordingly.

Evaluation and Feedback Methodology: Recommendations for Error Correction Policy

The preceding discussion establishes the value of Error Analysis and correction systems. The lessons learned from EA suggest that approaching error correction carefully and constructively is beneficial for both teachers and students in the long term. Teachers should ideally formulate or adopt a set of guidelines for error correction. This systematic framework or "Error Correction Policy" will provide students constructive and appropriate feedback, while teachers will have a consistent framework to work on. This section of the paper compiles a set of recommendations that teachers might find useful in constructing their own policies.

- A reference log of individual/general learner errors is useful both in the short-term and long-term. Teachers should maintain a log of error types and frequency.
- It is important to distinguish between error and mistake. Teachers must also be careful to make students aware of the difference between major and minor errors.
- Teachers should be aware that simple provision of the correct form might not be the most effective method of correction since mere repetition of a correct form does not prove that the learner has learnt the system (Corder 1981).
- Teachers should carefully study the sample to determine what the learner intended to say so that the presence of covert errors are not overlooked (Corder 1981).
- Teachers should not consider the errors in isolation but relate them to the context from which they are taken while correcting. Also individual differences should be considered, such as levels of competence, input etc.

- Teachers should contemplate carefully which errors are worthy of correction and feedback with respect to the importance of the error to the current pedagogical focus on the lesson. Errors that are global in nature should be corrected promptly and systematically while mistakes and local errors might be overlooked or left for consideration at a later stage in the learner's learning period (Hendrickson 1980, Hanzeli 1975).
- Feedback should be given with careful consideration as to whether it will improve performance, since correction of every error is not only time consuming, but also does not guarantee improvement. It might even be detrimental as being marked down for each minor error affects confidence of learners and may even result in loss of ability to use the language. Also, teachers could try to perceive whether negative feedback might elicit correct performance.
- Teachers must be sensitive to students' preferences and individual needs in deciding how and when to give feedback (Holley and King 1971). Moreover they should choose the appropriate technique from a range according to student need: self-correction, script correction; written comments and footnotes; and oral, or class explanation through illustration.
- It is important to not concentrate just on error critique but make an effort to give positive feedback on achievements by offering praise where due (Allwright 1975). One key to successful learning lies in the feedback that a learner receives from others (Long 1977). Teachers must try to give incentive to stimulate effort, reinforcement to promote maintenance of the response, and information to contribute to changes (Annet 1969).
- Finally, teachers must always maintain a positive non-threatening attitude towards student errors. It is vital to always keep in mind that the teacher's task is to value learners, prize their attempts to communicate, and then to provide optimal feedback for the system to evolve in successful stages until learners are communicating meaningfully and unambiguously in the second language.

Integration of theory, practice and introspection, on the teacher's part is essential for an effective evaluation system. Teachers who attempt to fulfill theoretical recommendations derived from EA in their teaching practices must reflect on issues such as diagnosing student problems, providing useful and varied feedback methods and reflecting on their own understanding, attitudes, and

limitations while making decisions about student work. Lindblom-Ylance and Lonka (2000) state that, "To achieve a qualitative change in their mental models of their own teaching, teachers must also become conscious of their own teaching *in relation to their students*"(19). They also add that this consciousness must include knowledge of their students' skills. EA research reiterates the need for critically reflective teaching methodology. EA has made a significant contribution to the theoretical consciousness-raising of both applied linguistics and language practitioners.

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