Reviewing Error Analysis: the significance of EFL learners' errors and hints for ELT practice

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"The analyses of errors are undoubtedly valuable teaching tools, and the teacher should handle them cautiously and with the awareness that all have their faults …" (Tarone, 1983)

Introduction

In Applied Linguistics *error analysis* studies the types and causes of language errors by analyzing patterns of errors. According to Carl James (1998), "Error Analysis developed out of the belief that errors indicate the learner's stage of language learning and acquisition. The learner is seen as an active participant in the development of hypotheses regarding the rules of the target language just as is a young child learning the first language. Errors are considered to be evidence of the learner's strategy as he or she builds competence in the target language".

In ELT (English Language Teaching), errors help us realize how learners process the foreign language and develop underlying systems of rules. The speech that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners produce is a direct reflection of the rules which they have internalized, that is, of their underlying 'competence' in the foreign language. This assumption, though, is not always justified, since learners may also make errors which don't result from any underlying system but from superficial influences. The purpose of this paper is to review error analysis matters by discussing briefly first the main influences which cause EFL errors and by pinpointing the most significant EFL error types focusing on internal learning processes, while, at the same time, we attempt to explore the relevant error hints for ELT.

EFL errors: two main influences

Two main influences causing errors may be: a. *immediate communication strategies* and b. *performance factors* (Littlewood, 1984:30).

a. It is obviously, not always, possible to determine whether a deviant form is the result of a communication strategy or of an internalized rule. In this case, EFL

learners in order to cope with a communication problem, they may consciously have recourse to a mother tongue system (*transfer*) or use foreign language items which they know are not completely appropriate (*overgeneralization*).

b. At the same time, even when we speak our mother-tongue, we, sometimes, make errors of performance, such as slips of the tongue, or lose track of a complex structure as we utter it, or begin an utterance and abandon it, and so on. These errors are usually called *'lapses'* or *'mistakes'* and are distinguished from the more systematic errors.

In the following paragraphs, we focus on error types mainly classified according to the internal learning processes which are more or less related to the so called *immediate communication strategies*, previously mentioned as a main influence causing EFL learners' errors.

EFL errors: classification focusing on internal learning processes

Generally speaking, language errors can be classified according to: a. linguistic levels (i.e., pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, style), b. form (e.g., omission, insertion, substitution), c. type (systematic errors/errors in competence vs. occasional errors/errors in performance), d. cause (e.g., interference, interlanguage), e. norm vs. system and f. modality (i.e., level of proficiency in speaking, writing, listening speaking).

In the past, Pit Corder (1981) dichotomized between *error* (a failure in competence, a systemic fault) and *mistake* (a flaw in performance in the syntactic or lexical level). Finally, certain kinds of difference between two languages seem to cause greater difficulty than others; this in turn has prompted the concept of 'hierarchy of difficulty'." Richards (1974) had already taken a non-contrastive approach to error analysis by seeing errors as traceable to transfer and interference. He classified errors as being *interlingual*, *intralingual*, and *developmental*. Way before Richards, Lado (1957) had come to the conclusion that interlingual errors were inevitable and resulted from interference. Richards, however, pointed out that errors are due not solely to interference, but to the structure of English, which is new to the learner, and to the strategies used to teach and to learn. Richards and others equated intralingual errors with developmental errors, i.e. errors which illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language.

In the present paper, we will focus on error types due to the internal learning processes. To begin with, if an EFL learner is taking part in formal instruction, some errors will be a direct result of misunderstanding caused by faulty teaching or materials. For example, the distinction between two forms may not be clearly explained and as a consequence the learner usually confuses them. Alternatively, one form or pattern may be overemphasized or overpractised, so that the learner produces it in inappropriate contexts. As an example of this, as it is quoted in William Littlewood, Jack Richards (1971) suggests that many teachers or materials place special emphasis on the present continuous form in English; it is a special instance of *overgeneralization* errors.

According to the relevant literature, by looking at the kinds of errors that EFL learners make, we have evidence for <u>three</u> main internal learning processes: a. *transfer of rules* from the mother-tongue, b. *redundancy reduction* by omitting elements and c. *overgeneralization* of foreign language rules.

a. Transfer of rules

In the first kind of error due to transfer of rules from the mother-tongue causing the so called 'interference', existing habits or rules prevent correct speech from becoming established. Transfer errors are 'interlingual' since they come from the interaction between the first and second or foreign language. In the case of transfer, EFL learners use their previous mother-tongue experience as a means of organizing the foreign language data. So, both of them are seen as expressions of the same underlying strategy of applying previous knowledge to the foreign language learning task; they can also both be seen as forms of the second main kind of error, also called 'simplification'.

b. Redundancy reduction

This is a tendency by EFL learners, to eliminate many items, either by ignorance or intensively, which are redundant to conveying the intended message. For instance, in the case of a learner of English language as foreign we may meet utterances, such as: "No understand", "Is man", etc. It is rather a simplified code of communication or reduced language systems used by foreign language learners especially in earlier stages of the learning process.

c. Overgeneralization

In the foreign language rules (and where belongs the majority of 'intralingual' errors) the learner while trying constructing rules which predict how the different items will behave, sometimes, his/her predictions are wrong, probably for one of <u>two</u> main reasons: a. an exception to the general rule or because b. a new category and rule must be constructed. In either case, the learner's initial error is due to overgeneralization of the rule which causes the wrong prediction. In the case of overgeneralization, it is his/her previous knowledge of the foreign language that the learner uses.

In fact, it may be part of the normal psychological reality of foreign language learning that the three above processes, *transfer of rules, redundancy reduction* and *overgeneralization*, work together and reinforce each other (Littlewood, 1984:30). Though, some errors will probably never disappear entirely even at later stages of foreign language learning. Such errors are often described as 'fossilised', meaning that they have become permanent features of the learner's speech. Obvious examples are the pronunciation errors which form part of the 'foreign accent'. It is also here dominant the role of the mother-tongue since it may influence learning in determining which errors fossilize. A further suggestion is that fossilization is most likely to occur when a learner realizes (subconsciously) that the error does not hinder him/her in satisfying his or her communicative needs.

The crucial question rising at this point and asking for answer is: *How should teachers deal with EFL learners' errors in ELT practice?*

EFL errors: hints for ELT practice

In the traditional EFL learning and teaching, errors are frequently corrected and the teacher usually thinks the errors as a thorn in his/her flesh, because the focus of classroom instruction is laid on accuracy.

However, in fact, errors should be considered natural products in EFL learning which reflect the modes of learners' developing EFL system. In other words, errors should no longer be treated as the thorns in the teachers' flesh that need immediate picking. It is significant that the EFL teachers realize that not all errors need to be corrected right after they are made. For example, some errors are infrequent and may be 'slips', which do not bar the communication either in an oral form or in a written form. These errors mostly can not be corrected. In order to help EFL learners make

progress, for persistent errors, especially those shared by most learners, teachers should correct them consistently in various ways. In monolingual classes, for example, most learners usually make the same errors. You may play 'an error of the week' game. Choose an error which most learners make, tell them what it is and write the correct version on a piece of paper on the wall. This raises the learners' consciousness about this particular error. They then have to try not to make this error all week. The learner who succeeds in this game-like attempt can choose the 'error of the week' for the next week.

Additionally, in dealing with learners' errors, one teacher may suggest correcting them as soon as they appear, another might emphasize ignoring them, and another would say to find ways to help learners on the basis of these errors. The first two suggestions may lead to a debate which appears unlikely to help learners in learning grammar in those countries that pay considerable attention to this problematic aspect of language teaching.

As EFL teachers, we realize that some errors found in our learners' output are more serious than others. What may be less obvious, though, is that our judgement of learner error can yield linguistic insights, and that sharpening our error-analysis skills might improve the quality of our error feedback. That is, making errors is an inevitable and necessary part of EFL learning. It is only through making errors, and hearing the correct forms, that EFL learners can develop their own understanding of how English works. It is thus important that learners have as much opportunity as possible to produce language and, with the focus on using English creatively (rather than simply repeating language), the number of errors that learners make will inevitably rise. Teachers, thus, need to think carefully about how they will respond to these errors.

For instance, on hearing an incorrect form, you have to decide what to do about it: *Should we correct it immediately? Leave it to form the basis of a remedial lesson? Offer it to the student for self-correction? Correct it "surreptitiously"? Or ignore it completely?* "Not correcting errors sounds scandalous even irresponsible to some language educators and many learners, so teachers may think they are doing the right thing by not correcting immediately and frequently" (Wu, 1990). But from the learners' point of view, they may assume that those teachers do not know English well enough to give appropriate feedback. One's decision of what and when to correct

will therefore depend on a number of variables, and one's decisions may differ from group to group, or learner to learner.

Last but not least, the process of absorbing a new language structure takes considerable time. EFL teachers cannot, therefore, expect that simply correcting an error will produce immediate results. Some errors can remain even up to very advanced levels (such as the 's' in 'she lives', 'he goes', etc.). A strong emphasis on error correction cannot be expected to produce learners who make few errors. In fact, an over-emphasis on error correction is likely to be counter-productive as learners become deterred from using - and experimenting with - new language and vocabulary items. But learners do need to have their errors pointed out to them. The key is to limit correction to a small number of points at a time and to judge when the right moment for correction is.

In any case, there are obvious advantages for teachers in conducting their own error analysis research: they can find out why their learners are making errors and then plan appropriate remedial lessons. From my own experience, too much error correction could frustrate EFL learners and even overwhelm their motivation and interest in EFL learning. Therefore, it is really necessary for teachers to consider the practical situation of learners and teachers' own linguistic background, and then conduct the correction in 'good timing' using 'appropriate' correction strategies and adjusting their lesson planning accordingly.

Conclusion

Taking all the above into consideration, it becomes evident that errors themselves are the 'product' of learning from which we can make inferences about the whole learning process. All the three, *transfer of rules, redundancy reduction* and *overgeneralization*, represent aspects of the same underlying learning strategy in order for an EFL learner to make sense of new experience, to be able to speak English as a foreign language. What is significant here is that learners' errors need not be seen as signs of failure by the EFL teachers. On the contrary, they are the clearest evidence for the learners' developing systems and can offer us insights into how they process the data of the 'new' language. Also, not surprisingly, it is often not possible to attribute a particular error unambiguously to one single cause, but it is possible to deal with EFL errors effectively and creatively adopting the most appropriate ELT approaches.

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