Theoretical Anatomy on ESL Learners' Errors and Rectification Strategies

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Abstract: Making errors assumes an indispensable role for second language learners, and errors tend to be ignored in second language instructions and were regarded deservedly as symbols of failure in language acquisition. However, errors are meaningfully constructed clues for literacy instructions as errors indicate much more than what learners fail to master in a grammatically accurate manner, but demonstrate diverse information like learners' language schemes employed in acquiring certain language features. This paper elementally analyses causes of ESL learners' errors from theoretical perspectives of Contrastive analysis, Error analysis and Interlanguage theory. Error correction strategies are also discussed for instructors to deal with errors in various contexts.

Keywords: error; second language acquisition; rectification strategies

1. Introduction

Making errors is a common and normal phenomenon in a second language learning process, but few language instructors fully comprehend the nature of errors and even hold negative attitudes to errors and fail to adopt appropriate methods to scaffold learners to reflect on their errors. Consequently, every single error is regarded by most teachers as a sign of failure in learning, and corrections or feedback of various forms which are commonly accompanied by criticism is necessitated based on the instructors' contextually situated critiques, which entails the fact that learners often feel frustrated or even lose interest in learning their second language. Bearing current views in mind, this paper attempts to discuss certain aspects of the nature of errors in second language acquisition and to unfold parts analyzing error correction strategies.

2. The role of the error in second language acquisition

As an integral part of language learning, errors are likely to be the most underappreciated factor given the fact that an error is perceived by many teachers as a negative stimulus which strengthens bad habits and is not allowed to occur (Xie & Jiang, 2007). Traditionally, errors are considered as a sign of failure in understanding what has been taught, and are followed incidentally by teachers' criticism or peers' ridicules. However, an error in the language learning process is of undeniable importance and sheds light on the implications for second language teaching and learning. According to Gorbet (1974), errors are evidences of the language system of a learner's choice, and errors in the second language is a sign for learning instead of failure. A learner's error thus can show the language system that is being used or the rules employed to solve linguistic problems or respond to certain language stimulus. It is summarized that errors are meaningful in three ways: Firstly, through analyzing errors, overall information about how learners has progressed towards the goal of language learning and what still remains for learners to learn will be clear to teachers who can device remedial devices accordingly. Secondly, analyzing errors provides clues for researchers to determine how second language is acquired. Thirdly, learners can see how well they have performed in acquiring a certain aspect of the target language, and then they are able to self correct and adjust their learning strategies correspondingly (Mutema & Mariko, 2012).

3. Causes of making errors in second language learning

Though errors may exert a great influence on second language teaching and learning, few teachers could accurately identify the real causes of errors. When an error occurs, it is supposed subconsciously that the student will assume all the responsibility for that error and teacher will blame the making of

that error on the student's lax attitude towards learning or not being working-hard enough, with all other factors neglected. Considering current unbalanced treatment to errors, this part aims to discuss the causes of error making under the guidance of three influential error analysis theories: Contrastive analysis, Error analysis and Interlanguage theory.

3.1 Contrastive analysis

Ellis (1997) described contrastive analysis as "a set of procedures for comparing and contrasting the linguistic systems of two languages in order to identify their structural similarities and differences" (p.38). Features of the second language system which are similar to the learner's mother language will be easier to learn, and this situation is also called positive transfer, while other aspects that are different will pose difficulties   and it is these aspects of language that account for the making of errors, in this case, negative transfer happens (Boss, 2005; Mutema & Mariko, 2012). And thus contrastive analysis claims errors are a result of a learner's first language interference, and their prior knowledge is claimed to influence the construction of the target language because learners resort to the knowledge of their first language and apply it to the target language. Influences coming from other language is named as interlingual transfer (Erdoğan, 2005). The interference of the first language is more evident in the beginning stage of learning a second language, because a learner's first language is the only and main linguistic system that he/ she could rely on.

3.2 Error analysis

However, not all errors are attributed to the interference of a learner's first language. There are some errors that can be understood from the perspective of the theory of Error analysis. Contrary to the contrastive analysis which was criticized as being overemphasized on the interference of the outer environment and it ignored many other factors that may affect the learner's language acquisition (Khansir, 2012), Error analysis emerges as a branch of applied linguistics to reveal that a learner's native language is not the only cause of errors (Erdoğan, 2005). Error analysis studies a learner's error in second language learning through comparing it with the second language itself to explain how an error happens. Error analysis proposes that errors occur when a learner lacks the knowledge needed to respond to a particular stimulus (Erdoğan, 2005), and thus Ellis (1997) stated that errors can be evidence of gaps in knowledge of the target language rather than merely being the interference of the first language (p.139). That is, a learner's faulty or partial understanding of certain aspects of the target language also triggers errors. Within the target language itself, one language item may also impact on another, Erdoğan (2005) uses the term "Intralingual Transfer" to describe this phenomenon.

3.3 Interlanguage

A learner's interlanguage is also influential enough to be born strong considerations. "Selinker (1969) coined the term interlanguage to refer to the interim grammars constructed by L2 learners as they approximated the target language and this interlanguage is riddled with errors" (cited in Mutema & Mariko, 2012. p. 223). As a   learner progresses towards the native-like language proficiency, he/she often constructs an independent language system which is neither the system of their first language nor the system of the second language, but falls between the two (Xie & Jiang, 2007). And this interlanguage system tends to be dynamic and transitional as it is predicated upon the learner's attempt to perform trials and tests of new language forms against the target language system. In support of interlanguage, Ellis (1977) says that a learner's grammar is transitional and learners change their grammar systems from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules and restructuring the whole system (p.33). Usually when learners update their interlanguage systems, errors will occur.

It is noteworthy that an error may occur as a result of the interaction of two or more factors that discussed above.

3.4 Categorizations of the causes of errors

Based on all these factors, it is possible that the causes of an error in a learner's second language acquisition can be classified specifically to help teachers diagnose learners' language problems continuously (Ellis, 1997). And the categorization of errors also helps students to evaluate their performance in language learning and highlights the aspects of knowledge that they do not fully comprehend, and then carry out self-correction accordingly. Richards (1989) classified causes of errors

in second language acquisition process into following categories:

a) Overgeneralization, covering instances where the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of his or her experience of other structure of the target language;

b) Ignorance of rule restrictions, occurring as a result of failing to observe the restrictions or existing structures;

c) Incomplete application of rules, arising when learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences;

d) False concepts hypothesized, deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language.

Transfer errors are also common as stated in the 3.2 part of this paper, and this kind of error emerges when a learner produces the second language, in writing or speaking, using his/her first language grammar or structures (Feltsen, 2009).

All these respects of theoretical perspectives may explain a learner's errors, which may include errors in grammar, morpheme, word order and spellings. But it is of significance to bear in mind that a learner's errors are not merely attributed to one or more of these reasons, other factors such as inappropriate materials, faulty teaching, environment factors or the input resources to which a learner has access may also influence the learner's second language acquisition to a certain degree.

4. How teachers can deal with learners' errors

Providing error corrections and feedback is an indispensable part of language learning and teaching, whether it is done through teachers' instructions or learners' self-corrections. However, many language instructors fail to treat learner's errors properly.

In most cases, instructors simply mark a learner's errors, then the learner is supposed to or even forced to repeat the correct forms several times. Making error would traditionally entail criticism or even punishment from teachers, such treatment restricted many students from making new attempt to learn, and students would just abandon what they sought to convey to avoid making errors. Therefore, adopting effective and appropriate strategies to facilitate learners' development deserves attention.

James (2013) has proposed several principles as to error correction. Techniques involved in error correction would be able to enhance students' accuracy in expressions. James(2013) also stressed that students' affective factors should be taken into consideration and the feedback should not be face-threatening to students. Feedback presented in a friendly and non-threatening manner will be more likely to be accepted by learners than those that intimidate them. Teacher's indirect corrections are also highly recommended, because indirect corrections or feedback will encourage learners to self-correct their errors in heuristic methods (Xie & Jiang, 2007).

Though error rectification exhibits huge benefits for learners, not all errors should be corrected (Loewen, 2007). The issues as to whether errors made by individuals should be corrected immediately in front of the whole class, and whether to correct errors that appear in different tasks with different instructional targets or not are suggested to be considered. For tasks that aim to develop learners' communicative abilities, it is suggested that teachers pay no attention to the errors committed by learners in their speech (Koni & Leka, 2015) and assist learners to convey their opinions fluently, and delayed correction such as providing sample speeches may be recommended. On the other hand, for tasks improving learners' accuracy in grammar, instant feedback may be an effective device. Teachers should decide beforehand the target of the tasks and adopt effective and efficient remedial strategies correspondingly. Loewen (2007) has listed several error rectification strategies focusing on providing samples speeches or linguistic clues to, including recasting, promoting and the provision of metalinguistic information. And instructors are advised to mix up all the strategies available and incorporate them into classrooms flexibly. When choosing a proper error correction strategy, it is also important to take the teaching objectives and learners' linguistic competence into consideration (Xie & Jiang, 2007), and employ a flexible and appropriate strategy.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, learners' errors in second language acquisition can be attributed to many reasons

which serve as clues for teachers to analyze both teaching procedures and learners' performance in acquiring certain language features or building up proficiency. And it is important for teachers to employ rectification strategies in a proper and flexible way with all factors that influence the making of errors in mind.

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