Understanding and Responding to Language Errors

Linguistics

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Abstract

As non-native speakers of English we face a lot of difficulties in the use of grammar. So it is the English teachers' task to teach their students how to use the right language in different language settings. This paper makes the difference between the errors and the mistakes made by the Albanian students because of their mother tongue influence.
After the exposure of reasons of the mistakes and errors made by the non-native speakers, we give some ways of correction but mostly we focus on the word order of the English language which is very different from the Albanian one. Great emphasis is put on the psychological way of error correction. It whould be considered as helpful nd supportive in order to enhance English learning in our schools.

Errors and Mistakes

In ordinary use, the words *error* and *mistake* are usually synonyms. However, many writers in the field of second language acquisition make a distinction between these two terms. When this distinction is made, the word *mistake* means something a speaker (or writer) does even though the speaker knows a better form. When a speaker makes a mistake, the speaker knows how to correct it, as when someone says, "I just called that animal a cat. I meant dog." We make mistakes when using our native language as well as when learning a second language. Mistakes are a natural, normal part of language in use. The word *error* is often used when a speaker produces a form that differs from the target language and a) doesn't know how to correct it, or b) doesn't recognize that the form needs correction.

For a classroom teacher, deciding whether something is a mistake or an error can be very difficult, but knowing that there is a difference between the two is very helpful. In second language acquisition theory, the concept of *error* has proved to be a very useful idea, although there is still a great deal that we do not know about what causes errors or how best to correct them. More research is needed and much of the research will need to be done in classrooms. As you develop your skills as a language teaching professional, you may want to consider doing and publishing research on this topic.

Sources of Error

For a teacher, the question of how best to respond to student errors is a difficult one. Research has not yet told us with absolute certainty what principles we should follow, and deciding how to apply a principle, even a good one, in a specific case can be very difficult. There are many factors involved in decisions about how to respond to an error, and an important one is the teacher's belief, conscious or unconscious, about the cause of the error. In the following section we will look at some possible views on the source of errors.

Errors as signs of laziness or failure to study

If a teacher believes that errors occur because students aren't studying hard enough, aren't paying attention in class, or aren't doing their homework, the teacher may respond by punishing, severely criticizing, or intentionally embarrassing the student who produces an error. The intended purpose of the teacher's action is to frighten the student into working harder. This rather harsh approach has been traditional in many school systems around the world, but for language teachers, it has proved to be counter-productive. Instead of frightening students into working harder, it often frightens students into not speaking, and although there is a lot we don't know about how people learn to speak a language, we are confident that people do not learn to speak a language if they never speak it. In fact, some theorists believe that tension and fear, which Krashen called "the affective filter," is the major reason many learners don't acquire fluency in a second language.[114] A language teacher may need to respond very firmly to inappropriate classroom behavior, but second language acquisition theory says there are much more effective ways to respond to language errors than by using harsh criticism or embarrassment.

Errors as transfer from the first language

Errors in second language production may arise because learners apply a rule or follow a pattern from their first language when speaking the target language. At one time, in fact, this was thought to be almost the only reason errors occur. An American who learns to speak Albanian will have an American accent because he or she will follow the rules of American English pronunciation while trying to produce Albanian words. An Albanian speaking English may say, "I have visited Athens last year" instead of "I visited Athens last year" in part because @ is good Albanian. *Contrastive analysis* is the process of comparing two languages in order to find the ways in which they differ. The assumption is that learners will have very few problems using second language patterns that match first language patterns, and teachers can concentrate on

[114] For more information on Krashen's theories, see Krashen, S. (2003) *Explorations in language acquisition and use*. Portsmouth NH:Heinemann.

teaching only those things that differ between the two languages. Following this theory, when a teacher notices an error, the teacher looks for the source of the error in the first language. [115]

Errors as interlanguage forms

As researchers worked with contrastive analysis, they found that language learners fairly often produce forms which are not part of either the first language or the target language and which the learner has never heard used by anyone. Where do these forms come from? One answer is *interlanguage theory*, the theory that learners' errors are actually evidence of an intelligent brain at work. This theory says that learners unconsciously analyze the target language they hear (and read) and deduce rules for the language. Of course, these rules are incomplete and need to be constantly readjusted as the learner receives more and more input in the target language. The forms we note as errors are not random and may not be the result of interference from the first language. Instead, they may arise because the learner is (unconsciously) following an intelligent but incomplete analysis of the target language. A simple example would be a learner who puts an *ed* ending on all verbs to indicate past tense. It's a logical rule to follow, but it doesn't work with irregular verbs. Analyzing errors in order to figure out the rule a learner was unconsciously following is often a very difficult and time-consuming process and may not be a productive use of a classroom teacher's limited time. However, knowing that errors can be analyzed as important evidence that the learner's brain is hard at work may keep us from becoming discouraged about our own teaching and from being overly critical of our students. A good place to look for information on interlanguage theory is in the writings of Larry Selinker, the researcher who invented the term.[116]

Errors as signs of a developmental sequence

As researchers worked to analyze the errors learners make, some broad patterns began to emerge. Several studies suggest that learners with different first languages will tend to make the same errors when learning a target language and that as their skills in the target language improve, they will move closer and closer to the target by passing through the same sequence of stages. This sequence seems to be the same no matter what the learner's first language is, and this sequence is similar to the sequence of stages children go through in acquiring their first language. This data supports the theory that the human brain has a born-in facility for learning language that can't be circumvented by our teaching methods. It is possible that the brain's natural pattern of learning a language will cause a learner to produce certain forms that differ from the target. If this is true, then language teachers can expect specific patterns of errors as their students' language skills increase.

[115] For more information on contrastive analysis, see Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006) *How languages are learned.* Oxford: Oxford University Press and Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2001) *Second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ:Erlbaum.
[116] See Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2001) *Second language acquisition,* Mahwah NJ:Erlbaum.

One example of a possible developmental sequence is negation. Beginning users of English will usually put the word *no* or *not* in front of a word or phrase: *I no like coffee* or *He not nice*. As their English skills improve, learners usually begin to use *don't* instead of *no* or *not*, but without the forms *doesn't* or *didn't* and without analyzing *don't* as *do + not*. Sentences may be of the patterns *I don't can speak English* or *She don't come to class today*. A little later, learners begin to separate *not* from *don't* and use *not* after auxiliary verbs. They produce forms such as *I am not rich* or *He will not come*, but continue to produce sentences such as *I don't feel well yesterday*. Eventually, speakers who continue to learn English enter a final stage in which their negative forms match the forms used by monolingual English speakers.

No study has ever shown these developmental stages to be simple and clear. A learner in stage two will probably continue to produce some stage one errors. However, if errors are signs of a developmental sequence, teachers can use student errors as a way of assessing where their students are in their language development and adapt lessons to meet their students' needs. In addition, teachers don't need to become overly discouraged when they hear their students making predictable errors.[117]

Errors as failure to monitor

Another possible perspective on language errors comes from Krashen's *monitor hypothesis*. In Krashen's model of language acquisition, learners are said to have an internal editor (the monitor) which enables them to follow a rule that has been taught and consciously learned. However, learners are able to use this monitor and follow the rules they have been taught only when conditions are right. In order to use this monitor, the learner must know the rule, must be focused on producing correct language, and must have enough time to apply the rule. According to this model of language acquisition, it is unreasonable to expect perfect accuracy in spontaneous production or at any time that learners are focused on communication more than on accuracy.[118]

Errors as creative use of language

In communicative approaches to language teaching, learners are encouraged to use the target language to express their own thoughts on a topic and to "negotiate meaning" with each other. Learners are encouraged to find a way to get their meaning across even if they aren't sure of a perfectly correct way to state their meaning. This kind of communication requires the learner to experiment a little with the language and to risk making errors. From this viewpoint, some of the errors learners produce are actually creative uses of language. Consider, for example, an Albanian student who does not know the English word *lizard*. If the student is talking with another Albanian student, the temptation is to simply use the Albanian word @. However, the

[117] For more information on developmental stages, see chapter four of Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006) *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[118] See Krashen, S. (2003) *Explorations in language acquisition and use*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

student's English will probably grow stronger if the student tries to communicate in English, perhaps saying "kind of a snake with legs." Or, for example, if a learner doesn't know that the expression *one morning* is used in English to indicate the morning of an indefinite day, the learner may try saying "someday morning" or "one time in morning." A teacher who is focused on encouraging communication will usually classify these expressions as creative use of language rather than as errors.

Responding to Errors

Language teachers have many complicated decisions to make in responding to errors. Should the teacher try to respond to all errors in some way? Is it even possible to respond to all errors? Should the teacher choose certain errors to respond to? If so, which ones? If the teacher decides to respond, what is the best form of response? Do children need the same kind of response that adults do? Should the teacher model the correct form, give an explanation of the correct form, ask the student to self-correct, or lower the student's grade because of the error? Research has not yet answered these questions for us, and even with continued research it is unlikely that we will ever have simple, one-size-fits-all answers. Part of the art of teaching will always be matching our actions to the differing needs of classes and individual students. The following section presents some of the ways a teacher may choose to respond to language errors.

Insisting on perfect work

One approach is to emphasize accuracy of production, in syntax and vocabulary if not in pronunciation, and to maintain a very low tolerance for errors. The assumption is that learning a language is like learning other complex skills, and that students need to develop correct habits from the very beginning, as they would when learning a sport or playing a musical instrument. Without ever directly saying so, a teacher may communicate that the main goal of language learning is to produce error-free work. This goal may be communicated by a teaching method (like the audio-lingual method) which doesn't give learners opportunities to create their own sentences for fear that they may make errors. It may be communicated by a testing and grading system that rewards students who can produce correct forms even if no meaningful communication takes place. Or it may be communicated by a teacher's practice of responding only to students' errors and not to the content of their communication.

When students believe that the goal of language learning is to avoid errors and produce only perfect sentences, certain problems frequently arise. One problem is that learners forget that they are learning a language so that they can use it. Learners often become unwilling to experiment, to try using the words and patterns they know in order to achieve communication even when they don't have the kind of control over the language that they would like to have. Instead, they produce only safe sentences, the ones they have practiced in their lessons. Learning English may not be seen as learning to communicate in English, but rather as a kind of giant puzzle in which one must learn and follow an endless set of complicated rules.

Another possible problem is that language learning is not like learning other skills. If learners go through natural developmental stages in learning a language, and/or if the human brain continually creates rules for the learner's interlanguage as the learner progresses, errors are an important part of the language learning process. Telling students that they must not make errors may actually retard language acquisition.

Ignoring errors in form

Another approach, which is advocated by some theorists, is to ignore all errors unless the errors make it difficult or impossible to understand the speaker's message. The belief is that if the learner receives enough exposure to the target language, learning will take place automatically because the human brain is built to learn languages. Correcting errors is considered a waste of time because learners must work through the stages of language learning at their own speed and because language learning is seen as unconscious acquisition of a system, not conscious learning of rules. In addition, correcting errors is considered an unnatural interaction because, in language use outside of a classroom, native speakers of a language give learners feedback when they can't understand the learner's message, but rarely correct other kinds of errors.

It is true that when young learners receive enough input in the target language (perhaps by living in an area where the language is spoken), they often become very fluent without any error correction. However, for other learners, problems frequently arise. If learners receive correction only when their message is not clear, they may never notice that they are not matching the target. In a classroom where all the students can speak Albanian, students may become quite fluent in an Albanian version of English because all of the people in the room understand each other. And while it is true that Albanian English belongs among the family of World Englishes, most Albanians want to be sure that their English is easy for speakers of other forms of English to understand. In addition, some non-target forms never impede communication and yet may be important for learners to change. For example, omitting the *s* on third person singular verbs never impedes communication and in fact, this *s* is omitted in many English dialects. However, omitting the *s* is traditionally seen as a mark of lower social status or a lack of education, and many learners don't want to be labeled that way. Moreover, many learners want correction and feel frustrated if they don't get any. If a teacher never corrects errors, some learners may feel that the teacher is not doing his/her job, and other learners may feel that they don't need to try for accuracy.[119]

Choosing one's battles

In English, the phrase "choose your battles" is a frequent piece of advice. @(Is this also an Albanian phrase?) The thought is that because we can't win every battle in life, we should choose to fight only those battles that are truly important to us and that we have a chance of winning.

[119] For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see chapter five of Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006) *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Many language teachers decide to choose their battles by focusing corrections on a limited number of errors.

As discussed above, some teachers focus only on errors that impede communication. For example, errors in vocabulary choice often seriously interfere with communication. If someone says, "That big building is our capitol," the listener will probably not guess that the speaker means 'cathedral.' On the other hand, errors in irregular verb forms usually cause no problem. "He knowed the answer" is easily understood, and the learner may be passing through a normal stage on the way to mastery of verb forms.

Other teachers choose to provide correction during form-focused segments of a lesson and avoid correction during fluency and communicative practice segments. If the main purpose of an activity is to practice a particular form, students probably expect feedback on that form of error. If the main purpose of the activity is for students to express themselves in English, constant interruptions by the teacher may be counter-productive.

Many teachers try to match their corrections to the learner's level of acquisition. In theory at least, corrective feedback on forms that the learner is developmentally ready to learn will be much more helpful than other kinds of correction. The difficulty, of course, comes in knowing exactly what an individual student is ready to learn. If a teacher has a sense that a learner is ready to acquire a particular form, corrective feedback during communicative language use may be useful, at least according to some research.

Ways to make corrections

Teachers need to think carefully about the most useful ways to make corrections to student errors. The techniques chosen will depend upon the teacher's beliefs about effective error correction and upon whether the work is oral or written.

In oral work, teachers frequently use *recasts*, correctly restating what the student said. If a student says, "Mother not like dogs," the teacher may respond, "Mother doesn't like dogs." There is some research which suggests that students, especially young ones, may not notice the recast as a correction and instead treat it as confirmation that the teacher understood the original statement. If so, recasts may not help students very much. Other research suggests that students do make use of recasts, especially those students who are sitting nearby and listening to the interaction.[120]

Another approach to correcting oral work is to point out the error in some way and have the student make the correction. Some teachers say "What was that?" or "Excuse me?" and wait for a correction. Other teachers repeat the student's error with rising (question) intonation and a questioning look on their face. At other times, teachers may indicate the kind of error that was made, perhaps with a gesture or by pointing to a correct form on the board, and ask students to make the correction. And at other times, a teacher may choose to give an explanation of the error

[120] For summaries of some of the research, see chapter five of Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006) *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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or supply the correct form. This is particularly useful when it is unlikely that the student knows how to correct the error.

In written work, teachers must decide both which errors to mark and how to mark them. One option is to mark only the location of the error and then return the paper to the student for correction. Frequently students can work together in small groups and help each other make these corrections.

Another approach is to use a code indicating what kind of error is present (for example, writing S/V for subject-verb agreement errors). Students can be asked to keep a chart noting how many errors of each kind they have made in each assignment. If the student sees that many errors are of the same type, the student knows where to focus his/her attention. Of course, the teacher may choose to provide the correct form by writing it above the student's error.

The teacher may choose to mark only certain kinds of errors instead of marking every error the student makes. For example, the teacher might say, "I've marked all the errors in past tense verbs because we are working on past tenses right now." The advantage of this approach is that both teacher and student can focus their attention on a limited part of the language and hope to make progress with it. There is sometimes difficulty in using this method with students who are accustomed to teachers who mark every error, because some of these students may accuse the teacher of being lazy or not knowing the language well. The teacher will have to explain thoroughly why she/he is using this kind of marking and may need to repeatedly state, kindly and politely, "You are the author of your own work. It's not my job to find and correct all your errors. That's your job."

In summary, as teachers make the many complicated decisions about whether to correct errors and how to do so, a few principles seem to be helpful. One principle is that we want to match our corrections to the level of the student. Another principle is that correction should be given in ways that help build a positive class atmosphere because, as much as possible, we want our students to view our corrections as helpful and supportive of their learning, not as personal insults. A third principle is that learners seem to get the most benefit from methods of correction that call for them to think and engage with the language. Self-correction is probably more useful in most situations than reading a teacher's corrections.

Resources

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