Identifying Learners' Errors: Inherent Categorisational Limitations

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Abstract:

 One of the main contentions in modern applied research is the recognition of learners' deviated production in second language as being errors or mistakes. This categorisation is built upon the premise that the former represents problems with the learner's knowledge, i.e., competence, of the second language whereas the latter are local to performance. Determining whether a deviated production is local to competence or performance is achieved by means of frequency. Frequently occurring errors are judged as being errors while less frequently occurring ones are considered as mistakes. This categorisation feeds into subsequent pedagogical decisions, particularly feedback and corrective intervention strategies. In the present study, it is shown that such a categorisation is over-simplistic and can be problematic at times

Keywords: Errors; Mistakes, Second Language Learning, Corrective Feedback

Introduction:

The discussion of second language acquisition requires a meticulous care paid to the cognitive and behavioural manifestations of cerebral changes. That is, as learners develop knowledge of a second language, this knowledge translates to projections at the level of learners' cognition and their linguistic behaviours. Such a theoretical discussion is best represented in the dichotomies "Competence and Performance" and "Errors and Mistakes".

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The two dichotomies have direct insight into the development of numerous linguistic and pedagogical theories and have been accredited by the scholarly community. While many cognitive linguists argue against the modular representation of speakes' knowledge of the language, generativists generally accept the claim that language exists in a domain-specific context in the mind of a native speaker. On the other end of the spectrum, errors are accepted by many scholars as being distinct from mistakes by means of being performance-local or competence-local.

The present study has the goal of highlighting these terminological dichotomies in light of compelling theories of linguistics and language pedagogy. The claim made in the present study is that categorising learners' production on the basis of how frequent a structure surfaces brings along a raft of procedural complications that take away from the internal consistency of the model.

1. Terminological Dichotomies

1.1 Competence and Performance

One of the fundamental frames of discussion that is frequently dissertated in contemporary linguistics is the conceptual and operational distinction within the mental representation of language; that is, the cognitive scheme that determines orderliness in language generatively defining all possible structures in language. The second element of the discussion is the output that such construct warrants and the actual use of language as a direct apotheosis of that system. While De Saussure (1922) offers the first theoretical modelling of such a dichotomy, formally referred to as langue and parole, it is Chomsky's enunciation (1965) that is both analytically more intricate and academically more established.

Chomsky's Aspect of the theory of syntax (1965) is believed to have marked the starting point of what is known as cognitive linguistics. The goal from Chomsky's approach to linguistic analysis is to offer theoretical grounds that help account for the underlying mental structures, i.e., competence, that language users have at their

disposal to generate speech, i.e., performance. Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence is native speakers' tacit knowledge about the grammar of their language while performance is the actual use of this knowledge in concrete contexts. In the context of first language acquisition, native speakers are expected to have ideal knowledge about the grammar of their mother tongue. Any deviated linguistic production is believed to be local to performance, and errors are referred to as "performance errors" (Radford, 2009, p. 12). In the context of second language acquisition, however, deviated production is believed to occur at both levels inasmuch as the knowledge of L2 grammar is by no means ideal. The categorisation of learners' erroneous production is substantially on the basis of whether misproductions are local to competence or performance levels.

Much of the research in second language learning and pedagogy refers to communicative competence in lieu of Chomsky's original concept of competence as mere knowledge of the underlying structural patterns governing generative capacities of language. Dell Hymes seminal work (1972) is frequently referred to as being one of the most influential traits of modern language pedagogy. Knowledge of language entails not only knowledge of the grammatical rules given that this Chomskyan view "omits almost everything of sociocultural significance" (Hymes, 1972, p. 280) but also abilities to bring about "the systematically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate . . . to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behavior" (p. 286). Hymes's words delineate what is believed to be the actual communicative event. First, systematic possibility means an evaluation of whether or not the intended linguistic production, i.e., locutionary act, is structurally possible given the phonotactic, morpho-syntactic and lexical repertoire of the language. Second, the feasibility element entails an evaluation of whether the intended locution, notwithstanding the systematic possibility thereof, is available to the interlocutors to make use of given the array of psycholinguistic factors, such as memory and information processing limitations. It is, hence, possible that certain linguistic structures are permissible in the target language yet are "so long or complex [emphasis added] that

interlocutors are incapable of processing the language" (Tarvin, 2014, p. 03). The third judgement of the communicative event is appropriateness. Here, the speaker avails themself of the knowledge about the sociocultural context of the speech event to make judgements about what is acceptable in the given context. What is structurally permissible and communicatively feasible may not necessarily be socioculturally and pragmatically acceptable.

What is notable in Hymes's view of communication (1972) is actual occurrence. Here, a more emphasis is placed on the performance aspect of language use. He notes that a communicative event "may be possible, feasible, and appropriate and not occur" (p. 286). The Chomskyan model plots out analytical guidelines that take into account all possible structural patterns in the actual language notwithstanding the likelihood of some of these combinations to never occur in actual speech, such as the academically illustrious example of "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously [emphasis added]" (Chomsky, 1957, p. 15). Hymes's model (1972) for competence takes into consideration possibility of occurrence, and in many cases actual occurrence, as a predetermining condition for linguistic analysis.

Hymes's ideas of linguistic competence are further developed by scholars such as Canale and Swain (1980), Savignon (2002) and Hall and Pekarek Doehler (2011). The context of the present study does not call for the detailed discussion of the communicative competence inasmuch as the analysis of learners' errors in the present study is rather formal, i.e., structural, in substance. The competence-performance dichotomy serves as a theoretical ground for analysing learners' production of target structures in L2. The following subsection highlights another dichotomy that is often conjoined with the competence and performance dichotomy.

1.2 Errors and Mistakes

Another central element in the discussion of second language acquisition is production imperfections. It is widely observable that learners of a second language frequently demonstrate flawed language

output. While flawed language production is not only inevitable but also necessary for language development, the sources thereof lead to a dichotomy between errors and mistakes. Contrary to the popular behaviouristic belief that flawed language production is a negative aspect of language learning resulting from bad behavioural linguistic habits, and it is, hence, to be avoided, more recent trends in language teaching view learners' production, whether ideal or otherwise, as markers of language development, and they are, hence, used to model the process of evaluation and monitoring.

In the context of first language acquisition, children make use of their innately built system of universal grammar principles which are assigned parametric setups based on a process of trial and error. Errors made on a regular basis help monitor the child's progress toward building an L1-guaged acceptable speech (Brown, 2000). By the same token, second language learners entertain a variety of feedback sources that are elicited by errors. Flawed production not only offers opportunities of progress by wringing corrective feedback but also helps teachers identify the progress made at the level of learners' L2 knowledge. Identifying areas of apprehension, which is made possible by a systematic analysis of learners' flawed production, is the first remedial phase in promoting a more efficient language pedagogy and creating a more supportive learning environment.

Flawed production, for want of a better term, can be consequential to a variety of factors, one being a lack of knowledge about the rules governing the target structure and another being a multitude of extra-linguistic factors such as stress and fatigue. Linguists, particularly Corder (1967; 1971; 1974) and Richard (1971; 1974), offer an insightful categorisation of flawed production on the basis of pattern recognition abilities, systematicity, frequency of occurrence and total feedback. In view of that, some flawed productions are the outcome of a lack in pattern recognition abilities, i.e., critical hindrance at the competence level. Here, the learner produces erroneous linguistic structures as they do not know what the correct rule-governed alternative is. Such errors are observed to be

systematic and more frequently occurring in learners' linguistic performance. Observably, given the lack of competence, such flawed productions are not self-corrected by the learner and require suitable corrective feedback.

On the other end of the spectrum, other instances of flawed production stem not from a lack of linguistic competence but rather from language-exogenous factors such as memory lapses, stress and fatigue. In these cases, learners do recognize language governing patterns, yet they fail to translate this knowledge to correct performance. Such instances of flawed production are reported to be of a lesser frequency and systematicity than the ones stemming from a lack in linguistic competence. Another observation is that the learners, in the case of such flawed production, can demonstrate total feedback as they manage to self-correct and self-regulate their production whenever noticed. Such instances do not offer direct insight into learners' developmental stages due to the absence of a clear pattern of occurrence.

The categorisation of different types of performance flaws translates directly to different terms used to refer to each type. Corder (1967, p.166) refers to flawed production that is not systematic and is solely the outcome of "memory lapses, physical states, such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion" as mistakes. On the other hand, flawed production that is the outcome of incompetence at the level of "underlying knowledge of language to date" is referred to as errors. At this juncture, Chomsky's terminology (1967) can come in handy in drawing distinction between errors and mistakes. It can be argued, in line with Crystal's discussion (1992), that errors are flawed production that are associated with competence imperfections while mistakes are flawed production that are present only at the level of learners' circumstantial performance glitches. In other words, mistakes are deviated language output that occurs in speakers' performance notwithstanding the pre-existing knowledge of the rules whereas errors are a form of deviated linguistic behaviour

that result from the speakers' lack of knowledge about the structures' underlying rules.

The discussion, thus far, gives the impression that there is a clearly set boundary regarding the conceptualisation of what an error and a mistake are. This semantic boundary is, however, very subtle, which causes some procedural complications. The following section argues that the identification of learners' errors on criteria of systematic frequency can be problematic leading to an opaque depiction of the learners' performance. Instead of discussing errors and mistakes as an either/or binary opposition, researchers are better off discussing them as a more/less continuum where more frequent corresponds to more serious.

2. Problems with the Demarcation of Learners' Errors

One major issue with the discussion of errors is that there seems to be the equivocal nature of the term error. While some scholars, such as Liski and Puntanen (1983) and Chun, Day, Chenoweth and Luppescu (1982), view errors with reference to native-like performance notwithstanding the variation therein, other scholars, such as James (1998), consider norms of grammatical accuracy as directly indicative of errors, or the lack thereof. In the latter view, errors are a sign of ignorance about the structural makeup of the language, and the analysis of errors is, in essence, an analysis of ignorance about the language and the way learners make do with what they know to approach structural patterns they ignore (James, 1998). When analysing learners' linguistic performance, researcher may assess their speech against norms of grammaticality. Here, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) point out to the fact that such a method, notwithstanding the seeming objectivity, can be problematic given that grammaticality is subject to variation on the basis of the variety chosen from the target language.

Another issue with grammar-based perspectives of errors is that learner language can involve elements that are well-formed yet semantically or pragmatically unacceptable. In such case, acceptability

serves as the major criterion for error detection. The examination of native speakers' use of language shows that certain structures, although grammatically well-formed, are not acceptable by the intuitive judgement of the competent speakers of that language. The example of Irreversible Coordination, e.g. "black and white" or "more or less" serves as an ideal example for the stylistic choices of native speakers inasmuch as "white and black" or "less or more" are grammatically well-formed yet unacceptable by the speakers (James, 1998). It is noteworthy that accepatability judgment, thus, involves "stylistic rather than grammatical judgements" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 56).

Lennon (1991) argues that identifying errors can be subject to variation. Even errors that are related to grammatical well-formedness evaluation, which are relatively more readily identifiable than those related to stylistic choices evaluation, can be subject to judgement task variation even among native speakers. Such a claim is supported by empirical data. For example, Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) presented a glossary containing thirty-six sentences to thirty individuals to perform a Grammaticality Judgement Task. The glossary contains only four correct sentences, and the remaining thirty-two sentence contain errors of variable degrees. Interestingly, the panel of individuals judging the grammaticality of the sentences consists of ten non-native teachers of English, ten native-speaking teachers of English and ten educated native speakers of English who are not teachers. The study reports findings in favour of the unidentifiability of errors inasmuch as one of the correct sentences was judged erroneous by two non-native teachers, three native-speaking teachers and five native non-teachers. The second correct sentence, taken from the Oxford Advanced Dictionary, was judged erroneous by two non-native teachers, nine native-speaking teachers and nine non-teacher native speakers. What is even more worthy of notice is that the non-native teachers outperformed the native speakers in the judgement of grammaticality.

One observation that arises from the study of Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) is that defining errors on the basis of native speakers' intuition is not accurate. Lennon (1991) offers two definitions, one by Liski and Puntanen (1983, p. 227) who make the claim that "an error occurs when the speaker fails to follow the pattern or manner of speech of educated people in English speaking countries today". The second definition is by Chun et al. (1982) who define errors as "the use of a linguistic item in a way, which, according to fluent users of the language, indicates faulty or incomplete learning". The two definition rely on native speakers' performance and intuition as the norm of error identification which is proven inaccurate by empirical evidence. This view on errors is further challenged by the study of definite and indefinite article by Hultfors (1986) who reports statistically significant findings highlighting native speakers' inconsistencies about the identification of errors. Furthermore, it is reported in the literature, e.g., (Ilin, 2017), that some of the native speakers' intuition of errors is the outcome of some structures being less familiar rather than erroneous.

Errors that are attributed to, inter alia, semantic or collocational anomalies are not consequential to "breaches of rules of the code" (Corder, 1971, p. 101) but are rather the outcome of a stylistic judgement about what combinations in that variety of the target language are natural (James, 1998). It appears that an analysis of errors involves a combination of judgements about the structural well-formedness and the stylistic acceptability of learners' linguistic output. In this regard, Lennon (1991, p. 182) views errors as "a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers native speaker counterparts". This perspective of errors implies that determine erroneous speech requires not only a reference of the grammatical rules but also a sketching of the context of speech in such a way to consider both the grammatical well-formedness and the context and stylistic choices.

One major criticism that can be levelled against policing learners' linguistic output on the basis of norms established with reference to native speakers' expected performance is that native speakers constantly demonstrate "vagaries in syntax" (Lennon, 1991, p. 182), non-regular speech production and discontinuity (Raupach, 1983). It is, thus, conceptually nugatory to refer to native speakers' already flawed linguistic production as a correction inducing criterion. At this juncture, a more naturalistic approach to learners' error should be taken where a first language acquisition contextual analogy is drawn. It is observed that child speech involves a variety of formal and functional vagaries that can lack, inter alia, predication or strategic attribution. Adults' attitudes towards such erroneous speech are very positive inasmuch as they view it as a natural manifestation of children's development and never refer to it as ill-formed speech. Such speech deviations are seen as markers of sequential development that are integral to the process of language acquisition. Adults' production of deviant forms in second language, however, is viewed as indicative of "ignorance" (James, 1998), which reflects a less positive attitude towards errors. Such attitudes incite constant corrective feedback that is not invariably needed.

A more optimistic approach towards learners' language can be taken with reference to the study of Brown and Frazer (1968) who argue that it is systematic errors made by children that offer evidence to the dynamic state of learning rather than the correct speech. By the same token, second language learners' correct speech can simply be the outcome of repeated linguistic units, and systematic errors are the reliable indicative of the learners' active involvement in the development of their mental grammar and cognitive skills. It is only then that second language learning can overcome the impressionistic evaluation about what should constitute a good learning experience to the actual celebration of learners' customised and individualised involvement in the monitoring of their learning outcomes.

The error-mistake dichotomy serves as a theoretical model that can help distinguish deviated linguistic output that is the result of

incompetency and one that is consequential to performance glitches that can be present even among native speakers. Such a categorisation would cause no empirical and procedural complication if no pedagogical implications are entailed. However, much of the evaluation and, hence, correction protocols constantly refer to errors and mistakes to design intervention plans. The theoretical vindication for that comes from the fact that errors are perceived as indicative of ignorance which require emendication while mistakes are less frequent and require no intervention. One complication that can accompany such credence is that criteria of systematicity and frequency are not necessarily indicative of incompetence.

Two very important concepts need to be prevalent in any discussion of second language learning processes, automaticity and restructuring. The two concepts were first introduced by Barry McLaughlin (1990) where he refers to the fact that second language learners build a system of knowledge about the structural and functional patterns of the target language. The processing of information from the in-build system occurs in two different forms. The first form of processing occurs when there are instances of control over one's acquired knowledge; this control is referred to as automaticity. McLaughlin (1990) makes clear that the linguistic system that learners' develop for the target language is dynamic, given that learners frequently restructure the previously internalised rules consequentially to new learning experiences. By so contending, it transpires that learners' failing to exhibit expected linguistic behaviours, notwithstanding the systematicity and the frequency thereof, is by no manner of means unequivocally indicative of a lack in learners' competence. Rather, most of learners' erroneous output can, arguably, be the outcome of frailty to rally the set of perceptual, cognitive and socio-communicative skills required for that contextual speech event (Gass & Selinker, 1994).

The restructuring of knowledge that accompanies second language learning occurs in a qualitative and discontinuous manner (McLaughlin, 1990). The acquisition of new linguistic rules requires

modification to the existing system thereby creating a modified version of the actual internalised system. Notably, Constant revisits to the system result in a non-linear pattern of acquisition. Empirical evidence reflects consensual stances regarding the developmental sequences of learners' performance. Research suggests that developments in learners' mental grammar do not necessarily translate to directly observable development in linguistic use. Interestingly, learners' performance can fluctuate and even regress as they progress in their second language learning. Lightbown (1983) reports findings resulting from tracking developmental sequences among French learners of English. The study shows good mastery of the functional uses of gerund and participial at early stages of learning which reportedly decreases as learning proceeds. Such findings, along with a profusion of other studies, argue against the linear perspective of language learning.

The dismissal of the linear perspective on second language learning brings forth a more realistic frame of reference assigning the process of learning a U-shaped pattern. U-shaped learning is marked by "the appearance of correct, or native-like, forms at an early stage of development which then undergo a process of attrition, only to be re-established at a later stage" (Sharwood Smith & Kellerman, 1989, p. 220). One argument against the view of linguistic output with reference to frequency of occurrence, i.e., quantitative evaluation, comes from the discussion of Ortega (2009) where a claim is made about the qualitative discrepancies within a learner's output. She (2009, p. 118) argues that, while some phases of learning involve linguistic output that is error free, "the underlying representations at the two times are qualitatively different". This means that learners' correct production, however frequent and regular, may well be the outcome of coincidence. Erroneous performance of already acquired rules can be associated with more advanced phases with the developmental sequence frame.

In light of the arguments presented above, it can be concluded that erroneous linguistic output cannot be distinguished on the basis of

frequency of occurrence due to the fact that engaging in more complex learning phases can cause new rules to eclipse previously acquired rules. It is the human limitation of information processing that results in nonlinear patterns of learning inasmuch as the restructuring of knowledge can involve rule-overlap and seeming decreases in knowledge in transitionary phases. The discussion of errors and mistakes is not merely a discussion of conceptual and semantic borders. In such a case, the compulsion for these counterarguments is no longer substantiated. Rather, the discussion entails implicational consequences, and the conceptual differences between errors and mistakes serve as prefatory measures that determine whether corrective feedback is needed and how it is planned.

The bisection of learners' deviated linguistic production into errors and mistakes apropos derelictions at the competence and performance levels respectively involves other conjectural limitations. The discussion of errors and mistakes rarely, if ever, alludes to the different levels of conscious cognitive processing of information in the speaking and writing activities. It is attested that different activities require varying degrees of cognitive resource (Ortega, 2009). It is, therefore, far-fetched to discuss recurrent linguistic deviations at the written and spoken forms of language equitably. In other words, erroneous output that is present in a learner's spoken production cannot be taken as indicative of underlying ignorance the same way as the same erroneous output would when found in the one learner's written production.

One final criticism that can be levelled against the categorisation if learners' as errors and mistakes on the basis of frequency is that the frequency criterion is rather equivocal in nature. It is yet to be made clear what frequency ranges warrant the bisection of a learner's deviated production as either errors or mistakes. Given the spectral nature of frequency, Corder's (1971) account, and other posliminary major works, do not take into account this nature and offer theoretical accounts that delineate frequency as a distinction criterion yet offer no clear basis for the demarcation of errors on this

basis. It is, therefore, more theoretically yielding to view learners' production as falling with a continuum of errors and mistakes where frequency of occurrence is inversely correlated with the stage of learning for the most part. Given the above, the present study analyses the learners' deviated production without much attention on the errors' frequency of occurrence while giving the examined learners opportunities to self-correct.

3. Conclusion:

The enunciation of pedagogies require a good understanding of the characteristic cognitive features associated with the acquisition of second language. By so doing, good learning avenues can be sketched in such a way as to distinguish learning outcomes that are naturastically progressive and those that are less encouraged and, hence, require intervention.

The present study overviews the concepts of competence and performance in the generative paradigm and its projection on the applied field of language pedagogy. The study also discusses the concepts of errors and mistakes in light of Corder's framework (1967) and argues against the consideration of this model in planning corrective feedback. The study concludes that the discussion of errors and mistakes as categorical rather continuous variable can lead to inconsistent findings, and recommend that a more humanistic approach be taken where errors and mistakes are markers of progression.

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