

## **Key Concepts and Terms in Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Errors's Significnace and Treatment**

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### ***Abstract***

In the field of methodology, there are two schools of thoughts as far as learner's errors are concerned. The first school believes that even if we achieve a perfect teaching, errors will still be committed because there would always be inadequacies in our teaching techniques. The second school however says that since we are living in an imperfect world, errors will always occur. As such then we must find techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred. This paper tries to shed light on the history of Contrastive Analysis and Language Interference. It explains some concepts and simplifies them to the readers in one hand, and on the other hand, it details the history of Errors Analysis and its significance in Second/Foreign Language teaching and learning. The study is descriptive and theoretical but the researcher believes that practice stems from theory and without theory practice is useless and insignificant. Thus, if learners of English are not aware enough about the types and sources of their errors, they will be unable to progress and find strategies to avoid or minimize the numbers of errors they commit whenever they are asked to speak or write.

***Keywords:*** Contrastive Analysis, Errors, Errors Analysis, Interference, SLA.

Before 1970, SLA research was dominated by Contrastive Analysis Research. The purpose of this research was to test the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis' idea that learners' errors could be predicted on the basis of differences between the learners' first language and the target language. Linguistics compared languages to see what the differences were and then used those data to predict the transfer errors learners would make. It was hoped that the data from linguists could eventually be used to help design special drills and exercises that would help learners learn accurate use of second languages but not make any errors while doing so. The prevailing view of errors at that time was that errors were bad habits that must be broken and not reinforced. They were viewed as harmful. Experts felt that errors had to be avoided even in the course of learning, and for decades SLA researchers worked toward this goal.

By 1970, it was clear that Contrastive Analysis could not predict the errors learners would make. Therefore, researchers concluded that there must be some other processes involved in second language learning besides interference. As researchers discovered many errors that were clearly not due to interference, it became safe to assume that there must be other sources of errors beside the first language. Researchers then, shifted their focus from predicting errors based on contrasting language to classifying the various kinds of errors they saw learners making. It was hoped that by studying the various types of errors that learners made at various stages of learning, that researchers could get a clearer view of the second language learning process. Thus, Error Analysis, the study of learner language for the purpose of classifying errors and identifying their sources, emerged as the dominant SLA research.

Whereas Contrastive Analysis was based only on the assumption that errors were all due to first language interference

and were somehow harmful to the learner's development. Error Analysis was based on the assumption that errors were a natural and healthy part of the language learning process a natural by-product of the learners' step-by-step discovery of the second language's rules through a process of trial and error. This process was called « Creative Construction ».

During creative construction, learners look to different sources for information about the target language. Sometimes the learner simply assumes that features of his/her first language are the same as those of his/her target language, and so, transfer might occur as he/she tests out his/her assumption by using L1 features in the L2. This could be either successful or unsuccessful. In other times, a learner might vaguely know a rule of the target language and attempt to use it creatively. She might for example, generalize the rule to a new context she is unsure of. At times such creativity might be successful, at other times it may lead to an error. Learners could also get ideas from textbooks, movies, dictionaries, and other such materials and then test those ideas out when speaking or writing. Sometimes resulting in errors, and sometimes resulting in accurate or successful use of the target language. In sum, learners could get ideas about the target language from many different sources, including themselves, and these ideas could result in both progress and errors. In that sense, the sources of errors are also the sources of learners' knowledge.

Errors viewed in that light are now seen as a window to the learning process for researchers. Errors are no longer viewed as mindless behavior such as « bad habit », but actually considered to be the by-product of the learner's intelligent efforts to discover the rules of the target language. Simply put learners with their incomplete and inaccurate knowledge about the language can reasonably be expected to produce incomplete and inaccurate utterances. Errors are, in a sense, a type of knowledge

the learner has about the target language. They are the hypotheses she is currently experimenting. For researchers, learners' errors can tell them about the learner's internal system of knowledge and the rules she follows. In fact, errors are often more useful than accurate language use because accurate language use could come from anywhere—it is impossible to guess the source of accurate language use. An accurate sentence produced by the learner could simply have been memorized, but an inaccurate one is probably the result of misapplying some rule. Errors often have a certain character that gives away their source, for example; it is possible to guess whether an error has come from the first language if it seems similar to the first language. Likewise, errors that do not resemble the first language, but resemble those made by children, can be attributed to the natural process of development. An utterance with a missing piece tells researchers that the learner's system is still missing some pieces.

- According to S. Pit Corder there are two major kinds of errors:

**Systematic error:** also known as error of competence. This kind of error seems to occur because of some unknown rules. E.g.: He can learn.

**Non-systematic error:** these are errors of performance; they are due to some psychological conditions as stress, anxiety, tiredness, slips of the tongue...etc.

- Error analysts say that errors are significant in different ways:

1. It is significant to the teachers, it will tell him how is the learner learning and what remain for him to learn.
2. To the researchers, it would tell them how language is learnt and what strategies are the learner employing.
3. To the learner himself, errors seem to be a device necessary to learn.

In error analysis, there are three varieties of language: a source language (LS), a target language (LT) and an approximate language (LA). A language usually involves the different steps we go through when learning a language. What has been proved to be important is that this (LA) takes grammar from (LT) and lexis from (LS).

## Errors Analysis

I should explain Error Analysis in the relationship with Interlanguage because it is difficult to understand the construct of **interlanguage** without the background of **error analysis**.

**1.** The definition of Error Analysis involves a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining errors in learner language (Ellis, 1994, p701).

Error Analysis (EA) is the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners. Error analysis may be carried out in order to :

- a) identify strategies which learners use in language learning.
- b) try to identify causes of learner errors.
- c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials (Richards, Jack C. et al., 1992, p.127).

**2.** The difference between Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis :(EA) became distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of error attributable to all possible sources not just those which result from negative transfer of the native language (Broun, Douglas B.,1994, p.206).

In the 1970s, Error Analysis supplanted Contrastive Analysis, which sought to predict the error that learners make by identifying the linguistic difference between their L1 and the target language. The underlying assumption of CA was that error occurred primarily as a result of interference when the

learner transferred native language 'habits' into the L2. Interference was believed to take place whenever the 'habits' of the native languages differ from those of the target language. CA gave way to EA as this assumption came to be challenged. Whereas CA looked at only the learner's native language, EA provided a methodology for investigating learner language (Ellis, 1994, pp.47-48).

**3.** The importance of learner's errors are not negative things. They can be a strategy when learning a second/foreign language. 'A learner's errors are significant in three different ways.

- a) to the teacher, in that they tell him if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently what remains for him to learn.
- b) they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language.
- c) they are indispensable to the learner himself because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn (Corder,1967).

**4.** The limitation of Error Analysis

- a) An overstressing of production data.
- b) Fail to account for the strategy of avoidance.
- c) Too closely focused on specific language rather than viewing universal aspects of language (Brown et al, 1994).

**5.** The Contribution of Error Analysis

- a) Creativeness of much learner language.
- b) helped to make errors respectable to force recognition that errors were not something avoided but were an inevitable feature of the learning process.

**The concept of error:** After the 1960's, it became evident that the language behaviour of children was characterised as the subconscious application of rule systems deviating (**stronger**) from the rule systems which adult speakers use.

**Input→internal mechanism→output**

**Child's primary linguistic data→cognitive organiser→child's language behaviour**

Errors now are considered to be inevitable, necessary and systematic stages in the language learning process, and are taken to constitute (subconscious) hypotheses by the child about the language to be learned.

Traditionally, errors did not receive much attention and were regarded as regrettable by-products of L2 learning which could and had to be avoided as much as possible with the help of efficient teaching.

The following steps are distinguished with Error Analysis (hence forth EA). Identifying errors, describing, explaining, evaluating, preventing, then correcting errors.

**Identification of errors:** errors are deviations from the norms. The latter depend on the medium (spoken /written language), the social context (formal/informal), and the relation between the speaker and the hearer (symmetrical / asymmetrical).

**Description and explanation of errors:** under Contrastive Analysis we considered a close connection between the notions of 'error' and the notion of 'interference'.

**Transfer:** - pro-active transfer: transfer of existing skills onto new skills.

- Retro-active transfer: transfer of new skills onto existing skills

In both cases, transfer may be positive or negative. Positive transfer or facilitation is transfer of skill which facilitates the learning or it has a positive influence on the command of a skill because of similarities between both skills. However, negative transfer or interference is transfer of a skill which impedes the learning or has a negative on the command of a skill because of differences between both skills.

Contrastive analysis is based on the assumption that L2 learners will tend to transfer structure L1 features to their L2 utterances. Hence, CA focuses on pro-active interference rather than of retro-active interference and on production rather than on comprehension of language.

### **Typology of Errors:**

First, S.Pit Corder (1971) distinguished:

**-Errors of competence:** which are the results of the application of rules by L2 learners which do not (yet) correspond to the L2 norm.

**-Errors of performance:** these are mistakes of language use and manifest themselves by repetitions, false starts, corrections or slips of the tongue. They are due to stress, indecision, or fatigue. For Corder, learners can recognize and correct errors of performance, but not errors of competence.

**Developmental errors:** these are similar to L1 learning errors.

### **Errors Analysis and Remedial Teaching**

Error analysis has two aims; the first one is a theoretical one. It investigates the learning process to find out the psychological learning processes. It aims at describing the learner's knowledge at any moment in the learning process and tries to relate it to the teaching that has been given so far. The second aim is a practical one. It has to do with the remedial teaching that is supposed to be given once learner's errors have been analysed. Error



Analysis, then, enables us to specify and to plan the remedial work to be done.

**What is remedial teaching:** Nature, scope and problem of EA. EA is useful in planning remedial works. But it has some limitations.

Remedial work presupposes that there is disequilibrium between the knowledge, skill or ability a learner is supposed to have and some demands that are made on him in a specific learning situation

In some learning situations, the learner can avoid some productions when he feels that he will make an error. This is known as the avoidance phenomenon. However, sometimes learners are obliged to meet the requirements of the learning situation and thus will be unable to avoid it.

To diagnose: Remedial work means bringing the learner's knowledge up to the standard required by the situation. There is something wrong with the educational system and not with the teaching or the learner himself.

Why is remedial work necessary 're-teaching' that particular bit of the language which has proved to be a problem but once the learners' difficulties have been understood, not just to classify the error but to try to know why it occurred.

First case: errors of communication, omission, wrong sequence, wrong selection.

Second case: if errors are natural as analogical errors ( which are a result of the learner's mother tongue. In the comparison of the mother tongue and the target language within a linguistic and psycholinguistic enterprise we try to deal with such errors by predicting and avoiding their occurrence.

## - Conclusion

Some errors need to be corrected otherwise they will become fossilized. EFL teachers should be aware of what is going on in the field of Error Analysis and keep a keen eye on the related theories. In addition, while placing an emphasis on error correction in the classroom as language teachers, we should take the teaching objectives, students' linguistic competence, their affective factors and the effectiveness of the error correction into consideration. Consequently, we can employ more flexible strategies in error correction and make more contributions to the EFL classroom teaching and learning. Error analysis is significant, but it also has its limitations; there is a danger in too much attention to learners' errors and in the classroom teacher tends to become so preoccupied with noticing errors that the correct utterance in the second language will go unnoticed. While the diminishing of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency, the ultimate goal of second language learning is the achievement of communicative fluency in a language (Amara, 2015). Language is only a means of communication.

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