

EDU WORLD 2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****APPLYING A SMALL-SCALE ERROR INVESTIGATION INTO
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

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Abstract

Error analysis in foreign language (FL) learning involves gathering data of errors, examining them by ordering in different ways, indicating possible causes and implicitly possible remedies in the learning process. Language teachers and researchers have been doing this for many years but more recently, due to their studies particularly in psycholinguistic area, applied linguistics and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), efforts have been made with the view of more systematic analyses of learners' errors. The present study is such an attempt whose underlying objective is to examine the major dimensions of error analysis in the English as a foreign language (EFL) with specific reference to the role of errors in the learning process and the linguistic phenomena implied in it. Accordingly, the paper is an investigation of the aims and uses of error analysis, the data collected from different groups of students coming from different fields of study at "Ovidius" University of Constanta, learners of EFL, at various stages of learning and of the process of error analysis. Such error analysis can be intricate and chronophage, yet this should not put teachers off making their own pieces of research which can be nevertheless helpful. That is why a small-scale informal survey for the purpose of this study have been carried out in order to describe and classify our university students' errors in linguistic terms, and last but not least, in order to light on the main traits of the English language which may cause them learning problems.

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1. Introduction

While studying errors as well as cases of appropriate use, it should be possible to say precisely whether students find certain parts of a language difficult, or whether they only have problems with a few examples in isolation. Regardless of the reason for these errors, an error analysis shows where the most remedial teaching is needed and can suggest ways to address it. This is performed all the time by teachers in the classroom, maybe daily or informally, and is based on the typical errors generated by different task-based activities, especially the written ones.

In the literature review notable linguists such as Abbot (1992), Corder (1974), Ellis (1995), Harmer (2002), Richards (1973), Hendrickson (1987), and last but not least, Slama-Cazacu (1999) made a distinction between an error (which is systematic and consistent) and a mistake (which is seen as an oversight or slip, which when pointed out the learner can self-correct).

There is often an assumption that all mistakes should be dealt with thoroughly, and that allowing learners to make mistakes is a bad thing. On the other hand, some people say that making mistakes is a sign that learning is taking place. It provides teachers with better understanding the ways of teaching by giving the feedback on the errors made by the learners. As highlighted by Corder (1974):

Errors provide feedback; they tell the teacher something about the effectiveness of his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the syllabus he has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him to decide whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors. But in terms of broader planning and with a new group of learners, they provide the information for designing a remedial syllabus or a program of reteaching. (p. 265)

It is known that learners make mistakes in the process of learning but these mistakes seem to be an important ingredient in the language learning “recipe”. Not only do these mistakes provide new insights into the foreign language learning and teaching, in particular the English language, but it also offers practical solutions for improving language instruction in the classroom. Error analysis can create exclusive learning opportunities for students and should be employed by teachers.

Recognizing errors is not so difficult for teachers, and it seems that most of them have a highly developed sixth sense, that of error detection, perhaps because they know that their students are prone to those errors. Often, the linguistic context helps teachers determine whether or not an error has been made, and if it is about an error or a mistake. In short, the role of error analysis is undoubtedly very important in language teaching and learning.

Considering the possible causes, most of them based on the differences between the first and second languages, the English teacher could develop an empathetic but strict attitude. Modern approaches to teaching English promote a teacher who no longer stands still in front of the class and delivers his speech from there as an all-knowing authority. On the contrary, he is much more flexible, takes into account the needs and wishes of his students and adapts his methods accordingly. However, there are also situations in which the teacher must control his students in a manner similar to the traditional teacher (he

interrupts the activities when the working time has expired, restores order when the students are preoccupied with something other than the activity he is carrying out, resolves any conflicts, etc.).

During a lesson, the teacher plays multiple roles, closely related to each other, without very strict boundaries. As a conclusion to what has been said before, it must be said that a good English teacher is a charismatic leader and manager, able to effectively manage all the resources at his disposal and motivate students to get involved in the sometimes-difficult process of learning a foreign language.

2. Problem Statement

Error analysis is part of the linguistics, dealing with the compilation, study and analysis of errors made by English language learners (cf. http://www.glottopedia.org/index.php/Error_analysis) and it aims at investigating aspects of English as second language acquisition. It can also explain relevant problems involved in the complex process of language learning, thus, being an indispensable component of English Language Teaching (ELT). As it was mentioned before, teachers can use error analysis in several ways, to diagnose misunderstandings, and as a starting point for providing better understanding of the different errors committed by the learners. From this perspective, a systematic analysis of the learners' errors will enable the teacher to find a remedial program and restructure certain activities in order to make his/her teaching effective. Unfortunately, the methodology of error correction has not been standardized. As a result, every teacher has to develop his/her own methods of identifying and correcting his/her students' errors.

3. Research Questions

Based on the points mentioned above and on the aims of this study, the following research questions can be drawn upon:

- i. What are the general features of an error analysis in EFL?
- ii. What types of errors are the EFL learners likely to commit?
- iii. What are the reasons behind those errors?
- iv. What are the causes underlying those errors?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study is such an attempt whose underlying objective is to examine errors in order to give a change of perspective. Accordingly, the paper is an investigation of the aims and uses of error analysis, as well as of the data collected from individuals or groups at various stages of learning and of the process of error analysis.

5. Research Methods

This piece of research is descriptive in its nature and the method used for the error analysis is collecting and analysing the type of errors. The data is collected from the students of different departments of the university and various classes within the English courses, in the form of their

examination papers. A linguistic classification of errors is not only useful but also edifying according to the purposes of the present study. Moreover, such a classification can be of use to curriculum developers in the organization of units in language learning coursebooks. Yet in any error analysis a linguistic classification is needed, that is assigning errors to different levels of linguistic description such as:

- phonological
- spelling and punctuation
- grammatical
- lexico-semantic
- situational (appropriacy)
- vocabulary (meaning)

Having in view the diversity in classifying errors, a system of multiple classifications is called for. Thus, an error can be classified into individual lexical items, semantics, morphology/grammar areas communicative aspects, etc. Here is an example: *The horse is an animal of great help*, which could be integrated to (a) article use, (b) generic reference, and (c) number system.

Apart from problems of interpretation, the explanation of the error causes is a much more speculative part in the process of analysis, nevertheless there is much to be gained from a rigorous analysis of the possible causes of language errors, but this matter is not the subject of the present study.

Corder (1974), considered Father of error analysis, suggests five steps in analysing learners' errors, collection, identifying, describing, explaining and evaluating or correcting errors. In my research, the data on error analysis is analysed in three stages, which are interrelated.

- (i) identifying
- (ii) ordering
- (iii) explanation.

(i) Identifying errors.

In many cases, what is considered an error can be attributed in relation with factors such as age, language level, degree of student motivation, available time, a rational assessment of the possibilities for improving performance, etc. (Harmer, 2002, pp. 99-101).

Identifying errors has become a classroom routine for many EFL teachers, as I mentioned before, because they know that their students make mistakes when they write or speak due to lack of attention, motivation, fatigue, carelessness or other aspects of performance. Some of the errors are recognized as something that an L1(mother tongue) learner would make, others seem to be of a nature quite different from

L1 learner errors. Therefore, there are two ways to do this, the first is to check the learner's performance, whether it is consistent or not. If it sometimes uses the correct form and sometimes the wrong one, it is a mistake. However, if he always uses it incorrectly, then it is a bug. The second way is to ask the learner to try to correct his own error. Again, if he can't, then it is about errors; if he succeeds, there are mistakes.

In addition to this, non-linguist context has to be considered. For example, the “situational-based” errors which can be found in cultural interference or inadequate context or using an inappropriate register.

(ii) Ordering errors.

There are many errors typologies that can be attributed to classes, systems or combination of systems. Abbot (1992, pp. 224-226) claims that a classification of errors involves assigning them to different levels of linguistic description, namely phonological (both spoken and auditory), orthographic (spelling and punctuation), syntactic (grammatical), lexicon-semantic (vocabulary choice, which affects in turn meaning), situational or socio-linguistic (appropriateness). An error like, She said yes you can go can be seen as a combined syntax and punctuation error, adding it and omitting the punctuation. She said: “Yes, you can go, it can only be seen as a syntax error, that is, lack of knowledge of the rules of reported speech, She said I could go. However, some teachers skip the stage of classifying language errors and immediately classify these errors according to their supposed causes, gaps in knowledge, carelessness, L1 interference, analogy, overgeneralization of a rule, etc.

Certain linguistic errors can cause associated errors of different nature. Let us exemplify with spelling mistakes, which are close to pronunciation items, e.g., replacing the “sing” with “thing”. These are considered spelling mistakes, but also sub-classified as “phonologically related” errors, as their correction implies improvement of the perception and pronunciation of the sounds in question.

Ordering or classifying errors involves naming them accurately in linguistic system. Some prepositions are the subject of discussions as they are particularly difficult to remedy. There is a large number of prepositions in English, as well as the fact that many prepositions serve multiple purposes, it can be quite difficult to determine which preposition to use in a particular situation. Slama-Cazacu (1999, pp. 745-759) considers errors in terms of prepositions, in particular of their frequency as well as of L1 interference. Other ‘preposition’ errors are generated by the fact there is no correspondence in their mother tongue: I must wait 3 hours. Here there is an omission of preposition. The preposition “for” is used in the English language to show time duration. So, the correct sentence is I must wait for 3 hours.

Moreover, many verbs are able to take multiple prepositions after them. However, this often results in a change in the sentence’s meaning. The most common of these pairs is to and at, a large number of verbs are able to take both. Let us have a look at a number of such constructions below such as She threw the ball to the dog. He caught it and ran away with it compared to She was so angry with her husband that she threw her wedding ring at him.

Ellis (1995, p. 24) suggests that “classifying errors in these ways can help us to diagnose learners’ learning problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time.” This classification can be found in the following examples, omissions (This is book); additions such as (The chairs is there) and double markings (I didn't spoke), in lexicon (key car instead of car key; misinformation errors subcategorized into regularization errors (two childs), and alternating forms (this dogs, those dog), in syntax (I want that he wins the competition),etc.

Nevertheless, it would be better for teachers to use a system of various classifications with a span of references. According to some linguists as James (1998), Abbot (1992) and Keshavarz (2003, 2006) an

error could be listed under grammatical, word order, spelling, pronunciation, syntax and morphology/grammar and semantic errors, etc.

Classifying errors can be a subjective matter involving explanation the possible causes of errors. In addition, it requires increased attention and some practice in addition. This is also one of the major aims of error analysis, in particular of contrastive analysis. In fact, the contrastive analysis of errors helps a lot the second language acquisition theory.

(iii) Explaining errors is a very difficult part of error analysis and perhaps a subjective procedure as outlined above. By explaining errors, it is possible to talk more accurately about common difficulties in language learning, whether students are unsure of the language knowledge, or pieces of it, or just a few isolated examples, or what kind of remedial teaching is needed, while designing and preparing appropriate materials and effective ways of approaching errors, and building tests suitable for different levels and needs of learners. It is a general impression with no objective value and most teachers waste their time with these explanations. It is a good idea for the teachers to measure roughly the number students actually making a particular error. This strategy will point out that there is only a small group of students involved and as a consequence, remedial teaching with the whole class is not necessary.

That is why, students' errors have always been of interest not only to teachers, but also to syllabus designers and test developers. It is a matter of error remedy or treatment and it should have its own methodology.

6. Findings

At present it is widely accepted and here Richards (1973, pp.114-135) and Harmer (2002, pp. 112-113) can bring a strong argument, namely there are two different ways of categorizing the errors which occur at various stages of students' learning process:

1) L1 interference or interlingual errors. Indeed, the native language of learners plays a significant role in learning a second language. Learners seem to apply the rules of grammar as they know them from their first language to the new language. "Walk you to school today?" is a common error caused by L1 interference, heard by EFL teachers many times. This can be also found in the area of vocabulary where semantically equivalent words or phrases can be the source of frequent errors.

2) Intralingual or developmental errors originate in the following factors such as simplification, overgeneralization, faulty teaching, hypercorrection, avoidance, inadequate learning and so on. Developmental errors often occur in child language development due to a so-called phenomenon of "over-generalization" (Harmer, 2002), when a child who starts by saying: *I ate, I go*, etc. perfectly correctly suddenly starts saying: *I eated, I goed*, etc. It is reasonable to believe that learners' mental processes of general language development are involved this time and not the grammar rules of the L2 learner's L1.

Frequently language students make the same type of "developmental" errors as well, *You didn't spoke, She is more taller than her brother*, where the use of grammatical rules is over-generalised and then mixed up. On the one hand, errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process and Gass & Selinker (2008, pp. 23-24) as well as Hendrickson (1987, p.53-55) emphasize this point by saying that

50% of errors are due to “the initial acquisition of stock in the target. language”. On the other hand, Harmer points out that errors are an integral part of the students' interlinguistic process.

3) The incorrect delivery or erroneous rules given by the teacher underlie other possible sources of errors under. For example, there are times when teachers provide students with rules which are put under the question mark, and the result is students' making errors similar to those caused by the “over-generalisation” as mentioned before. Let us take the common rule, “If the action is in the past, the verb must be in the past tense”, which is quite reasonable and well intended, nevertheless it results in a form of hyper-correction and occurrence of errors like, *I saw him crossed the street*.

Another cause could be a sort of carelessness and some linguists on EA, such as White (1977), Abbot (1992) and Norrish (1983), pointing that we should distinguish between errors and slips. An error is used to mean that the learner produces an incorrect utterance and is not able to correct themselves. They don't know how to use the piece of language correctly. ‘Mistake’ will be used here as umbrella term covering both concepts – a slip and an error – for the ease of communication and because it is often unclear which of the two categories an incorrect utterance, or written mistake, falls into.

7. Conclusions

Studies of error analysis can be relevant to the common difficulties in teaching a foreign language and to the study of language acquisition process but also a reconsideration of the possible error sources which would direct the EFL teacher to establish the remedial work necessary for his students preparing for the language tests and what is important, it helps teachers develop an understandable but firm approach, in short a tolerant attitude towards errors helps learners to communicate with confidence.

The findings of the present study would be an attempt in helping the language teachers to prepare and design the materials as well as the remedial techniques for a more effective teaching. Generally speaking, findings of error analysis function as facilitator in language teaching in many ways only if the teacher is aware of them and able to make use of them in the teaching process appropriately. However, even if the extensive research of language errors can be quite demanding, this should not make teachers give up on conducting small surveys that may be relevant for a better understanding of them.

The language error analysis is of great help as it gives teachers ideas and knowledge about the neuralgic areas of learner's language learning and helps them in focusing on those points, particularly. This subject matter of research is significant as it also provides the deeper insight in different areas of language.

Some limitations of the study derive from the fact that it only explored some categories of learners' errors, and that it was limited only to the analysis of the four questions. There are many gaps such as grammatical and lexical errors made by students at advanced levels etc. which need to be covered by future research. Spoken language errors can also be analyzed to improve learners' communication skills.

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