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ERROR ANALYSIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ELT

PARUPALLI SRINIVAS RAO

Lecturer in English, English Language Centre, King Faisal University  
Al-Hasa, Saudi Arabia



PARUPALLI SRINIVAS RAO

ABSTRACT

Language learning is not a simple process, it is a continuous process and the learners have to focus on the various aspects of the language whether it is English or any other language. In the process of learning, the learners commit errors while speaking and writing. Through constant practice and proper usage, they avoid errors in their language gradually. It is not possible for a teacher or a learner to get rid of this problem without practicing the language. As far as English language is concerned, it is learnt as a foreign language in some countries and as a second language in some other countries. Whether it is EFL or ESL, the learners have to overcome their errors in using the language properly and accurately. The concept of "error" has become one of the major problems in language learning.

In this paper an attempt is made to examine the important dimensions of Error Analysis (EA), with specific reference to the errors produced by learners of English as a second or foreign language. The scope of the paper is four-fold: firstly, it discusses the changed attitude to errors committed by L<sub>2</sub> learners; secondly, it deals with the need and significance of Error Analysis; thirdly it explains and illustrates different categories of error and finally it focuses on a few suggestions offered by the recent research studies in the field of Error Analysis.

**Key words:** EFL, English, errors, Error Analysis, ESL, language, learning, practice, usage

Attitudes to Errors

The traditional approach to the errors produced by second language learners was almost negative and pathological in the sense that an error was considered as an avoidable 'aberration' or 'disease'. Teachers used to believe that errors were the result of faulty learning, thereby throwing the entire blame on the learner. Most of us remember how scared and nervous if not totally bewildered and numb we were, while learning English as a second language, particularly when our English teacher started correcting our compositions or when we were called upon to give oral replies to the questions asked by our English teacher. The teacher would either punish us or make fun of our errors in

English. That is, the learner's errors were treated by teachers as a reflection of a very serious mental deficiency on the part of the learner. It is surprising to note that even in 1960s this attitude was prevalent. For instance, Nelson Brooks observed:

Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcomes, but its presence is to be expected (Brooks 1960: 58).

We find a similar attitude even in 1970s. Lee in his introduction to an elementary course in English wrote:

One of the teacher's aims should be to prevent mistakes occurring. In the early stages while the pupils are wholly dependent on the teacher for what they

learn, it should be possible to achieve this aim (Lee 1970).

Even today, a majority of teachers in general and English teachers in particular, hold a similar view on the errors made by their students.

Fortunately, modern research in the field of language acquisition and learning has clearly established with ample empirical evidence that committing errors in the process of learning is only natural, and if a learner does not commit any mistake, it will be very unnatural and will indicate that there is something wrong or abnormal with that particular learner.

Extensive research into the process of first language acquisition has revealed that the order or sequence of learning the items of the mother tongue is almost the same in all normal children of all languages. This finding triggered a number of studies on second language learning. These studies found that second language learners also pass through the same sequence or order as first language learners, in learning the items of the second language concerned.

It is common knowledge that a child learning his/her mother tongue commits a number of mistakes during the different stages of L<sub>1</sub> acquisition and we, elders, are delighted by these mistakes while the parents in particular love their children, all the more, for uttering words and phrases wrongly and with great delight, encourage the children to repeat the mistakes. Then, why should we, as teachers of a second language like English, be dismayed at the errors produced by our students? Why should we hurl insults at them? There seems to be no justification for such an unfavorable reaction.

The EA movement gained momentum especially during the sixties under the influence of Behaviorist Psychology (e.g. Skinner 1957) and Structural Linguistics (e.g. Hockett 1958, Fries 1957). Subsequently, the basic assumptions of these two disciplines were questioned (e.g. Chomsky 1957, 1965). However, a teacher of English need not be worried about these changes in theoretical stances. His immediate concern should be to formulate

effective strategies to tackle the errors produced by his students.

The current attitude to errors being one of tolerance and expectation, the teacher should expect errors in his learners' use of the second or foreign language; prepare his lessons and adopt classroom techniques so as to help his students to overcome the problem of errors.

This naturally makes EA an indispensable component of English language Teaching (ELT).

#### **Significance of EA**

As pointed out by Corder:

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 programme of reteaching (Corder 1973: 265).

On close observation, a committed teacher can note a number of errors in his students' English, for instance. Unless the teacher, as the actual practitioner in the classroom, is not familiar with the errors his students are likely to commit and with the possible sources of these errors, he will not be in a position to help his students to avoid the errors and to achieve the desired proficiency levels in the target language.

In a majority of cases, we find that the textbooks and teaching materials prescribed for study by different academic bodies for different levels are not adequately structured or graded for the achievement of the above-mentioned objective. Instead of blaming the syllabuses, textbooks, evaluation system etc., which are beyond his control being institutional in nature, the teacher as an individual and as a professional can do significant work in the classroom, provided he is prepared to

put in a meaningful effort as part of his homework before the actual classroom work begins.

It is in this connection, that a systematic analysis of the learners' errors will enable the teacher to exploit the textbook material by grading, reorganizing and presenting the same materials in a very effective manner. If necessary, as Corder pointed out, the teacher can design a remedial programme or repeat certain items in his teaching and restructure certain activities and tasks for the benefit of his students.

In short, EA enables the teacher in making the entire process of L<sub>2</sub> learning/teaching a more meaningful and effective phenomenon.

Keeping this in view, let us now, take a close look at the different types of errors committed by the learners of English as a second or foreign language.

#### Categories of Errors in L<sub>2</sub> Learning

By EA is meant a systematic analysis or close study of the errors committed by second language learners. Such an analysis can be made on the basis of certain assumptions or hypotheses we formulate in terms of a variety of factors responsible for the errors produced by L<sub>2</sub> learners.

On the basis of several factors, the errors produced by second language learners have been classified into four broad categories: (i) Linguistic Errors; (ii) Surface Strategy Errors; (iii) Comparative Errors; and (iv) Communicative Errors (Dulay et al. 1982: 139-198).

#### 1. Linguistic Errors

Linguistic errors are those relating to the three main subsystems of language, viz., Phonology (i.e. pronunciation), Morphology and Syntax (i.e. grammar), Semantics and Lexicon (i.e. meaning and vocabulary), and Discourse, (i.e. style).

Phonological errors are mostly due to the influence of the mother tongue and avoiding phonological errors requires a lot of practice on the part of the learner.

As Dulay et al. (1982) point out; syntactic errors may be within the main or subordinate clause or within a constituent part of a clause, like NP, VP or preposition, adverb etc.

For a long time, curriculum developers used this type of classification of errors to organize their textbooks, lessons and workbooks. The advantage of a curriculum which takes care of linguistic or grammatical errors is that it creates confidence both in the teacher and the learners that they have covered the most important aspects of the second language in their classes.

A number of researchers right from Robert Lado (1957) to Politzer and Ramirez (1973) for instance have focused their attention on linguistic errors. Politzer and Ramirez have provided examples for this category of errors on the basis of their study of errors committed by Mexican-American learners of English, whose mother tongue was Spanish<sup>1</sup>.

I.	<b>Morphology:</b>	<b>Examples</b>
	a) Wrong use of articles	a an ant
	b) Omission of 's	the man feet
	c) Incorrect uses of third person singular verb	The bird help man. The apple fall down.

1.	<b>Syntax:</b>
a)	<b>Wrong use of NP/pron.</b> He put it in the his room. The little boy hurt its leg. My brother he go to Mexico. Me forget it.
b)	<b>Wrong use of VP</b> He in the water. He going. The apples was coming down. How the story helps?

c) **Word-order errors**  
The bird he was gonna shoot it.  
Likewise Burt and Kipasky (1972) illustrated the linguistic errors committed by foreign students learning English as follows<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>1</sup>Note that the following is not the entire list given by the authors. For the purpose of this paper, the present author has drastically simplified the original list.

<sup>2</sup>Note that in this case also, the original list of errors given by Burt and Kiparsky has been simplified. In fact, the authors classified the errors under the following sub-categories: (A) The Skeleton of English

**1. Syntax/Grammar Examples**

a) **Clausal errors** as riot last night.

b) **Word-order errors**

Escaped the professor from prison.

c) **Wrong use of Auxiliaries**

Never do you must spit like that.

d) **Wrong use questions or question-tags**

Why we bow to each other?

She has been smoking less, isn't it?

e) **Wrong passive sentences**

Each cushion given by our priest.

She is not allowed to her parents o go.

He was arrived early.

f) **Other errors**

He is raining today.

They are studying in this school since they are six years old.

I will enjoy to swim.

We are all bored about his teaching.

Also note that Dulay *et. al.* (1982) classified these errors as Surface Strategy Errors whereas in the present discussion, they are included under Linguistic Errors.

**2. Surface Strategy Errors**

These errors may be described as linguistic errors, but for certain surface devices employed by the learners. That is, these errors are the result of some learning strategies adopted by the learners (Dulay *et al.op cit.*). These strategies, according to Dulay *et. al* are:

- (i) Omission of items,
- (ii) Addition of items,
- (iii) Double Markings,
- (iv) Regularization, and
- (v) Misformations.

These strategies are illustrated below:

**i) Omission:**

e.g. Mary president new company.

Clauses, (B) The Auxiliary System, (C) Passive Sentences, (D) Temporal Conjunctions, (E) Sentential Components, and (F) Psychological Predicates.

(for 'Mary is the president of the new company')

**2. Addition:**

e.g. He returned back to India (My example)

(for 'He returned to India')

**3. Double Markings:**

e.g. She didn't went/goed.

(for 'She didn't go')

**4. Regularization:**

e.g. There are ten sheeps in the field, (My example)

(for 'There are ten sheep in the field')

This watch costed me six hundred rupees (My example)

(for 'This watch cost me six hundred rupees')

**5. Misformation:**

This can be of the following three types:

**a) Archi-forms:**

e.g. that dogs (for 'those dogs', on the analogy of 'that dog')

My hungry (for 'I am hungry')

'Me' is used as an archi-form for the first person singular.

**b) Alternating forms:**

e.g. those dog (for 'those dogs')

this cats (for 'this cat')

I *seen* her yesterday ('seen' for 'saw')

I would have saw them ('saw' for 'seen')

**c) Disordering:**

e.g. He is all the time late.

(for 'He is late all the time'.)

I don't know what is that.

(for 'I don't know what that is'.)

**3. Comparative Errors**

For a long time, it was assumed by researchers that a majority of the errors committed by L<sub>2</sub> learners were due to the interference of L<sub>1</sub> (i.e. the learners' mother tongue). This assumption gave impetus to a number of research studies which compared and contrasted the structure of L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub>. This type of study is known as Contrastive Analysis (CA). It was believed that the influence of the learner's mother tongue on his learning of L<sub>2</sub> could be positive or negative and the former type of influence was called Transfer and the latter Interference. But subsequent research proved that Interference could be one source of error and it

cannot account for a number of errors committed by L<sub>2</sub> learners. As Hendrickson points out:

Structural linguists introduced another mechanism for helping teachers deal with students' errors. This mechanism, called contrastive analysis, assumed that interference from students' first language caused errors to occur in their target language speech. Many linguists believed that once a teacher had a systematic knowledge of the differences between the two languages, he or she could begin developing appropriate instructional techniques and materials that would help students avoid producing errors. However, considerable empirical evidence indicates that although interference from students' native language is the major source of phonological errors, interference errors are only one of many types of errors found in the lexicon, syntax, morphology, and orthography of students' utterances in the target language (Hendrickson 1987: 356).

As Dulay et. al. (1982: 164) observed, errors originating from the contrastive features of L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> can be looked upon as two major types: Developmental errors, and Interlingual errors. Let us consider them in some detail.

#### 1. Developmental Errors:

These errors produced by L<sub>2</sub> learners are similar to those committed by children learning their mother tongue.

Recognition of this type of errors derives from extensive empirical evidence which established that the sequence of learning stages in L<sub>2</sub> learning is almost similar to that in L<sub>1</sub> acquisition.

For instance Littlewood observes:

... we can ... see that the typical second language sequence shares a number of common features with the sequence observed in the first language learners (Littlewood 1988; 43).

Explaining the nature of developmental errors, Dulay *et al.* point out:

... if characteristics common to both L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> acquisition could be identified, theoretical inference that have been drawn from the large pool of L<sub>1</sub> research data may

be applicable to L<sub>2</sub> acquisition theory as well (Dulay et al. 1982: 165).

They further state:

Since children acquiring a first language have not experienced learning a previous language, the errors they make cannot possibly be due to any interference from another language. When such errors are made by second language learners, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that mental mechanisms underlying general language development come into play, not the rules and structures of the learner's native language (Ibid).

Thus, at least some errors produced by L<sub>2</sub> learners are similar to those produced by L<sub>1</sub> learners and such errors only reflect the stages of development in the process of learning. For instance, Littlewood (1988: 42-43), following the framework of Cancino et al. (1978) illustrates the four stages of development in the learning of negative sentence formation in English, by American-Spanish learners of English. These four stages are illustrated below:

- Stage 1 They no have water.  
I no sing it.
- Stage 2 He don't like it.  
I don't can explain.
- Stage 3 You can't tell her.  
Somebody is not coming in.
- Stage 4 It doesn't spin.  
We didn't have a study period.

The point to be noted here is that even the native English children also pass through these stages and produce similar errors. Errors of this type are developmental errors.

#### 2. Interlingual Errors:

These errors are due to the interference of the mother tongue of the learners. Dulay *et al.* give the following examples of interlingual errors made by a Spanish learner of English.

e.g. the man skinny (for 'the skinny man')

(source: Spanish word order: *el hombre flaq.*)

Dog eat it. (for 'The dog ate it.')

(Source: Spanish word order; *EL perro lo comio*”.

**3. Other Errors:**

These include errors which could be interpreted either as developmental or interlingual.

e.g. I no have car.

She do angry

These errors are like *She have hungry* or *She hungry*, if the source is Spanish structure; or they could be developmental errors.

**4. Communicative Errors<sup>3</sup>**

Research studies relating to communicative errors are very few. Burt and Kiparsky (1972) and Burt (1975) are important studies in this area. As Dulay *et al* report:

Burt and Kiparsky discovered that errors which significantly hinder communication (in the sense that they cause the listener or reader to misunderstand the message or to consider the sentence incomprehensible) are of a certain type, while those that do not hinder communication are of another type (Dulay *et al.* 1982: 191).

According to Burt and Kiparsky, those errors which hinder communication are ‘global errors’ and those which do not affect communication are ‘local errors’. Consider the following examples cited by Dulay *et al.* (*op. cit.*).

**a) Global errors:**

e.g.

- i. English language use many people.  
(‘for ‘The English language is used by many people’).
1. Not take this bus we late for school.  
(for ‘If we do not take this bus, we will be late for school’)
2. He started to go to school since he studied very hard.

(for ‘He started going to school because he studied very had’)

3. He will be rich until he marry.

(for ‘He will be rich when he marries’)

4. The student’s proposal looked into the principal.

(for The student’s proposal was looked into by the principal’)

5. We amused that movie very much.

(or ‘We enjoyed that movie very much’.

or ‘We were amused by that movie very much’.

or ‘That movie amused us very much’)

These sentences illustrate global errors because it is difficult to interpret their meaning.

**b) Local errors:**

These errors do not impede communication but are ungrammatical or wrong in relation to one or two elements in the sentence. Look at the following examples:

a) Why we like each other?

b) Why like we each other?

c) She is your younger sister, isn’t it?  
(My example)

The distinction between global and local errors was made by Burt and Kiparsky on the basis the native speakers’ perceptions about the data of errors presented to them in a mixed form. In general, sentences consisting of global errors were rated by the native speakers as “un-English” while those with local errors were considered to be grammatically wrong.

**Implications and Suggestions**

It has been mentioned in Section 1 above, that errors should be treated as an indispensable and natural part of learning. Furthermore it has been established that errors provide feedback to the teacher so that he can make his teaching more effective and meaningful. Another important point is to be highlighted in this connection.

The new trend in many countries is that education is now being oriented towards meeting the needs and interests of the learner. That is, teaching English as a second or foreign language can no longer be teacher-centered; it has to be learner-oriented and learner –friendly. It is in this context that EA will be

<sup>3</sup>For the purpose of simplification, I have combined the original subtypes of Dulay *et al.*, viz. Ambiguous errors and Other errors into one sub-category.

of immense help to the teacher because it reveals the problems faced by his students as well as the learning strategies they adopt in coming to grips with the target language (i.e. English).

In view of this, in this section an attempt is made to summarize the different findings and suggestions of research scholars who have worked in the area of EA.

1. The audio-lingual method benefited only the highly motivated and above-average students (Hendrickson 1987).
2. Errors are not always the outcome of inadequate or unsuitable study materials (op. cit.).
3. Contrastive analysis of L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> structures alone cannot explain the causes and sources of L<sub>2</sub> learners' errors (Hanzell 1975; Hendrickson 1977).
4. L<sub>1</sub> interference is largely responsible for phonological errors (i.e. errors in pronunciation).
5. Language teaching should be skills or communication-based and not grammar-based (Chastain 1971).
6. A systematic analysis of learners' errors indicates their progress and success in language learning (Corder 1967; Lange 1977).
7. The methodology of error correction has not been standardized (Robinson 1971; Burt 1975; Hendrickson 1977). More research and empirical evidence is needed in this area. However, some research studies revealed the following findings:
  - a) Students want that their errors to be corrected. (Cathcart and Olsen 1976)
  - b) Error correction is more useful to adult learners (Krashen and Selinger 1975)
  - c) Errors being very important indicators of the process of learning, teachers should accept them as natural and integral to learning (Valdman 1975; Lantolf 1977; Terrel 1977).
  - d) A tolerant attitude of teachers towards errors helps learners to communicate with confidence (Brickbichler 1977).

- e) Students do not want to be corrected for every minor mistake (Walker 1973).
- f) While correcting errors the teacher should judiciously decide how useful the correction will be and what type of errors need correction (George 1972).
- g) Correction should be focused on errors that impede intelligibility of communication (Powel 1975). That is, preference should be given for the correction of global errors rather than local errors (George 1972, Powell 1975: Burt 1975: Hendrickson 1977).
- h) Errors that stigmatise the learner in the eyes of the native speakers should be corrected first (Richards 1973).
- i) Native speakers tolerate minor (or local) errors in foreign learners' speech (Ervin 1977).
- j) Teachers should motivate their students to avoid their "fossilized" errors (i.e. errors which have become a permanent feature in the learners' speech) (Richards 1973; Valdman 1975).
- k) Students should be encouraged to discover their own errors rather than have their teachers identify their errors.
- l) Students will be benefited by peer-correction (Cohen 1975)

However, it should be noted that these findings and suggestions were based on empirical evidence. There may still be other factors, causes and sources for error in the case of each individual learner. Therefore, it is desirable that every teacher has to develop his own methods of identifying and correcting his students' errors. But the basic point projected in this paper remains valid: Error Analysis is a very useful tool for effective teaching, particularly the teaching of English as a second or foreign language in non-Anglophone countries.

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