

An Analysis of Second Language Learners' Errors in English Writing

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ABSTRACT

This paper is to explore second language learners' errors on the basis of three important schools, namely, Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, and Inter-language. It takes errors in English writing, committed by Chinese college students as researching samples. It classifies the errors and further probes into the causes as well as proper treatments when dealing with such errors. It presents that errors should be explained from different perspectives in order to find rational explanations and they are significant for teachers to know the progress of students' learning proficiency. Therefore, teachers should treat the errors properly so as to improve teaching and learning effectiveness.

Keywords: *Leaners' errors, Causes, Treatments, English Writing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the sight of "error", we cannot ignore another word "mistake". Therefore, First of all, it is very necessary to differentiate between these two similar words. Corder in his 1967 paper made a distinction between a mistake and an error. Whereas a mistake is a random performance slip caused by fatigue, excitement, etc, and therefore can be readily self-corrected, an error is a systematic deviation made by learners who have not yet mastered the rules of the second language (L2) [1]. Error is also explained by Ellis [3] as "a deviation from the norms of the target language". However, a dispute existing among linguists about which should be considered the most, error or mistake, which actually should be reconsidered and resolved in a dialectical method. These definitions are true to some degree while they are not completely convincing.

Therefore, it might be safer to define error as the incorrect or inappropriate use of language, which seems to be deviant from norms of native speakers out of multi-factors like psychology, affection, etc, and it goes beyond the limitations of "error" and "mistake" mentioned above.

In fact, it is since the 1950s that learners' errors have begun to be noticed by an increasing number of linguists and language teachers with some achievements made [2]. The teachers begin to get precious enlightenment from the students' errors and they are sensitive to identify

which are errors reflecting the knowledge the students have not yet mastered.

There are namely three schools concerning error study which are worth mentioning, Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Inter-language (IL), and a review of these theories will be briefly mentioned in the following.

1.1 Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis, which lasted from the 1940s to the 1960s, was pioneered by Charles Fries, one of the leading applied linguists of the day [1]. CA researchers held that conducting contrastive analysis could predict difficulties, and therefore more effective teaching method would result by systematically contrasting and comparing native language and target language and identifying similarities and differences between them, with such belief that similarity meant simplicity while difference meant difficulty. It was Lado's famous claim that "those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (1957). Weinreich (1953) asserted: "The greater the difference between two systems, i.e. the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of interference". Such conviction gave rise to contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH): "Where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur; where they were different, negative

transfer, or interference would result” [1]. There are in fact two versions of CAH. The strong version claims that all L2 errors can be predicted by identifying the differences between the target language and the learner’s native language. The weak version claims to start with learner’s errors, to be diagnostic.

CA could really help the students be aware of the differences and similarities between Native Language (NL) and Target Language (TL), but because empirical tests did not prove the claim that CA could predict all the errors. Besides it sometimes over-predicted and then some other times under-predicted errors, the strong version were therefore criticized. Consequently it was weak version that gave rise to another theory: error analysis.

1.2 Error analysis

In the 1960s, CA went to its downfall, and weak version gradually developed into error analysis (EA). In the 1970s, CA is replaced by EA. Whereas CA only focused on the learners’ native language and the target language, EA provided a methodology for exploring learner language. The researchers shifted their attention from language teaching to language learning, learner language and L2.

EA was actually established with applied linguist Corder as the pioneer. In his famous article *The Significance of Learners’ Errors*, Corder (1967) pointed out that learners’ errors were significant in three ways: They provide the teacher with information about how much the learner has learnt; They provide the researcher with evidence of how language has been learnt; They serve as devices by which the learners discover the rules of the target language.

In order to explore learner language better, Corder (1974) suggested five steps in EA research: collection of a sample of learner language; identification of errors; description of errors; explanation of errors; and evaluation of errors. Moreover, he classified errors into two big groups: inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors. Corder (1967) believed that both L1 and L2 learners made errors in order to test out certain hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning.

Contrasting these two analyses, it is very obvious that errors are the result of interference of L1 habits, and the learners are passive recipients imitating and memorizing until automatically using that TL according to CA, while errors are significant not only to teachers, researchers but also the learners, and they do not passively receive the input of that TL, but play an active role during acquisition, initiating hypotheses, testing and improving them all the way until they can ultimately attain the TL level.

However, even EA is not satisfactory. It exaggerates the role of errors in understanding learners’ learning. Besides, only focusing on errors, and ignoring what makes the learners successful in acquiring TL, fail to describe the whole picture of language learning process.

1.3 Inter-language

Inter-language (IL) was first proposed by Selinker in 1972. It also contributes a lot to error study and language learning process in the 1970s.

IL theory realizes a complete shift of the focus from teaching perspective to learning perspective. It considers the learners’ language as an independent one, which is not only different from learners’ L1, but also differs from learners’ L2. IL is regarded as grammatical in its own way which is also different from learners’ L1 and L2, but corresponds with learners’ stage of learning, since Dulay and Burt (1974) claimed that language learners go through similar stages of second language acquisition (SLA) on the basis of their research findings. “Demonstrating the existence of an L2 sequence of acquisition proved there was a point to developing SLA research separately from the study of the L1 and the L2 and from L1 acquisition; in short, L2 learners had inter-languages of their own that were valid objects of study. So Dulay and Burt (1980) went on to claim, based chiefly on grammatical morpheme research, that the discovery of a common acquisition sequence of L2 learners is ‘surely one of the most exciting and significant outcomes of the last decade of second language research’” [5].

However, there are still weaknesses in this theory concerning language error. At first, inter-language is just a kind of assumption, which has not yet been proved sufficiently so far. Secondly, although inter-language could be a testing process by making errors, the making errors could not be a positive learning strategy any way. As a matter of fact, nobody intends to make errors in order to make progress in learning a foreign language. Thirdly, it only provided a rational explanation that it was natural for learners to commit errors during learning a language, but it unfortunately did not present a satisfying method of studying errors so as to perceive the internal process of language teaching [4]. The last but not the least, inter-language is considered as an independent one, but it cannot break away from learners’ native language and target language, so it is still needed to be improved in many ways.

Summarizing all these three theories concerning errors, although some achievements have been made, some other problems have been left unsolved, for example, CA, EA, and IL theories all concern about linguistic aspects while overlooking non-linguistic factors towards errors. Therefore, this paper suggest that a multi-perspective view should be adopted to analyse students’ errors in certain context. Besides, based on the

real errors committed by students, a rational explanation and treatment might be sought by combining these three different schools.

2. COLLECTING AND CLASSIFYING STUDENTS' ERRORS

The sample errors were collected from English major freshmen. They were told to write and submitted a book report in English in a month's reading limit without any other detailed requirements. Students were supposed to fully display their reviews after reading the books they chose. All of the students accomplished their assignments in time, while they ignored one thing, errors, which gravely influenced their fluency in showing the plot and expressing their feelings. Those errors explicitly revealed their proficiency in English and also proved that errors classification was meaningful to be conducted for a comprehensive analysis.

2.1 Errors in articles

Articles "a", "an", "the" do exist in abundance in English. They are most frequently used than other words in English. It has been found that students still have difficulties in distinguishing "an" and "a", for example "I read a* English book." Besides, It is quite common that some students will randomly add or omit articles in a sentence. It may rise from students' carelessness or lack of basic knowledge of articles.

2.2 Errors in verbs

As for verbs, students are confused about different forms of the verbs. "goed" would replace the past form of "went" or sometimes even perfect form of "gone". For another example, "...so he always wish* good life. Unfortunately, when he was ten years old..." Students would use original form to fill the place where past form should be. In addition, when voices are concerned, more errors would occur, such as the following sentence, "...but Jasper was* disappeared."

According to CA, these errors occur when target language and native language are different. Since there are no extra derivational suffixes showing the time differences in Chinese, the students still follow the native language rule in learning a second language, which gives rise to mixed usage of "goed" or "gone" for "went" randomly, or using "wish" instead of "wished". According to IL theory, they are called "developmental errors" by some researchers, since they find that the children of that target language will also make such errors, such as "he goed to school yesterday on foot". They also find that this kind of error will be less and less likely to happen as learners gradually improve their competence of the target language.

2.3 Errors in Syntax

Syntax is another significant point that causes errors in the students' English writing. As it is known that Chinese and English are two different languages, there are similarities and differences here and there studied by CA. However, sometimes differences between them may not cause difficulty directly, and similarities may not mean simplicity, but no one can deny that both differences and similarities can result in difficulties to some extent. For example,

"I'm very* moved", for example, and such clause appears in another report with just the same structure "...the hotel boss was very* liked Joe".

Some students are aware of certain structures and try to use them all in one, so the problems arise, set the following tedious clause as example:

"The private investigator's² named is² Nart Marley."

The following abnormal clause is even more hilarious. "Max killed his dead² wife."; "...she was his unmarried wife..."

It is very obvious that these students are trying to put English words into Chinese thinking frame and Chinese structure and order. From the above clauses, we can find that the students are strongly influenced by their NL Chinese. Such errors can be classified into the group of inter-lingual errors.

Above errors and some other errors such as pronouns and part of speeches may also be the problems that most Chinese students will probably encounter. Therefore, it is the teachers' duty to guide the students onto the right way in learning a foreign language and help the students build appropriate learning strategies in Chinese context.

3. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF ERRORS

In a word, inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors concern either learners'L1 or learners'L2. Because they are lacking of knowledge or ignorance about the target language, the influence of L1 will probably increase and inter-lingual errors will occur under such circumstances, such as the student means to say "fiancée", while he does not know this word, so he has to go out of his way to use some substitutes like "unmarried wife". However, after a period of instructions, some students maybe have already mastered some rules of how to organize their expressions, while they are not totally aware of them, therefore intra-lingual errors would occur because that the students are possibly only knowing part of the target language, such as in "...he stole* from an old man who called Mr Brownlow...", the student has already known that a past-tense form should be used here, while what he does not know is that "steal" has its own irregular form "stole".

We can find that we are located between native language and target language because of influence of L1 and ignorance of L2. However, we can not therefore conclude that all the problems are because of students' L1 or L2, or only from the perspectives of linguistic aspect.

Errors appear maybe due to varieties of reasons. Psychologically speaking, the students would misuse words or expressions perhaps because of haste or hurry in order to hand in the report on time. Carelessness is another possible protruding problem obsessing lots of students and there are lots of misspellings in their reports, which may be because of carelessness or even fatigue. Moreover, affectively the students may be disgusted about writing book reports, and have no interest in English study at all although they are English major students. Frankly speaking, most students have no solid foundation of English studies. In a word, above reasons will probably cause the students to make errors to some extent. Therefore, we have to treat and explain them from multi-perspectives, or we will easily fall into one-sided explanation and fail to give rational ones.

4. TREATMENT OF ERRORS

This paper does not stop at only collecting errors, identifying errors, describing errors, analysing the possible causes and finding out rational explanations towards errors, it also explores how to treat these errors. If all the errors are corrected, students' learning interest or enthusiasm would decrease. For fear of making errors or even trivial ones, students would even dare not to speak or write. The teachers on the other hand would also be burdened with time-consuming efforts to correct all of the errors. However, If the errors are not corrected in time, some of them would become fossilized, which would be difficult to correct. Under such circumstances, a common agreement has been reached at present that errors should be corrected but not entirely. There are therefore three quite different attitudes towards correcting errors: overall correction; non-correction; and selective correction.

Considering the realities of teaching practice, this paper insists that choosing certain method should depend on the students' learning process and individual differences. For example, according to a teaching syllabus, certain tense and aspect is the learning focus, so the teachers should pay attention to the correspondent tense and aspect. As for most students, if a teacher really corrects everything, they will be frustrated to learn English, especially those starters who lack interest and enthusiasm to learn English; and those who easily give up, but if a teacher does not correct errors at all, these students will never know they are not right and continue making such errors again and again until they are fossilized. Therefore, teachers have to have a good command of manipulating different situations.

5. CONCLUSION

With samples collected, this paper classified students' errors into different categories and conducted an analysis based on three major theories CA, EA, and IL. It presents that they though respectively contribute a lot to the error study while a comprehensive analysis involves all aspects in order to give a rational explanation in different context. It further shows how to treat those errors in general, since errors committed by second language learners always appear non-systematically in most teachers' eyes. For a long time, language teachers have been disgusted about various errors made by students in and out of classroom settings. Therefore, the benefits from the feedback of errors have been more or less neglected by both teachers and students. As a matter of fact, the feedback of errors can greatly help the students acquire the second language through that seemingly non-systematic interlanguage and simultaneously help the teachers improve the efficiency of their instructions.

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