
ERROR ANALYSIS AND CORRECTION IN ESL/EFL TEACHING

Hua Tang
Jian-Sheng Zhao

Errors and mistakes are by-products of language learning. They are inevitable, but a necessary part of learning a language. Errors and mistakes comprise a significant portion of a learner's language performance, and provide important insights into the processes of second language acquisition and instruction. They indicate that learning activity is taking place in the learner, and also show us that the learner is on his or her way toward target language proficiency. To some extent, it is errors and mistakes that pave the way for a language learner towards target language proficiency.

Language teachers and researchers should pay attention to the errors and mistakes of a language learner. Knowing learner's errors and analyzing them will offer teachers and researchers a chance to examine their teaching syllabus, and teaching methodologies. Learners' errors make teachers study the curriculum and teaching material from the point of view of learning as well as from the viewpoint of teaching.

Teachers will notice that even though they give an identical input, the result will not always be as they expect. Some errors and mistakes will inevitably occur, and the resulting errors and mistakes will not be identical. This phenomenon is caused by different strategies that learners use, such as the strategies of second language learning, the strategies of communication, the overgeneralization of linguistic material, language transfer and transfer of training (Selinker, 1972).

The variety of error categories

In order to judge errors, an objective means for clarifying error types is needed. Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) point out that it is difficult to be certain precisely what type of error a second-

language learner is making or why the learner makes it. Generally speaking, there are two schools of error analysis: contrastive analysis and error analysis. The contrastive analysis is undertaken in order to discover and describe the differences. Based on bilingual comparison, it traces errors back to a learner's native language (Corder, 1981). Contrastive linguists believe that many errors are caused by interference from the learner's mother tongue, that is, *interlingual errors* (Richards, 1970). This contribution throws light on the analysis of errors and provides a theoretical basis for the analysis of error.

Nevertheless, not all errors are affected by learner's first language. Error analysis, beyond bilingual comparison, aims at telling us something about the psycholinguistic processes of language learning (Corder, 1981). Error analysis, regardless of the learner's language background, argues that many errors are *intralingual* and *developmental errors*, which reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. The origins of errors are found within the structure of English itself, and through reference to the strategy by which a second language is acquired and taught (Richards, 1970). Nickel (1989) argues that even if many errors made by English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners coincide with errors made by L1 learners of a native language, it does not mean that they are developmental errors. Though they look alike, they may still be due to different reasons.

For example both Serbo-Croatian speakers and Chinese EFL learners have trouble with the "he/she" distinction in English. There is a distinction of "he/she" in Serbo-Croatian. Therefore according to a standard contrastive

analysis, there should be no trouble for Serbo-Creation speakers. Selinker (1972) argues that it is due directly to the transfer of training; textbooks and teachers in this interlingual situation almost always present drills with "he" and never with "she". However, for Chinese EFL learners, they also have trouble with the "he/she" distinction even though the textbooks and pattern drills offer as many chances as possible to practice "he/she". An interesting phenomenon is that the Chinese EFL learners have trouble with "he/she" or "his/her" in oral communication, while they seldom have trouble with "he/she" or "his/her" in written communication. This phenomenon can be traced to the native language of the Chinese EFL learners. There is no distinction between "he/she" in spoken Chinese but there is a distinction between "he/she" in written Chinese. Thus the errors of "he/she" distinction of Chinese EFL learners would be due to interlingual or language transfer instead of transfer of training.

Corder (1973:271) suggests that there are three basic categories of error:

1. *pre-systematic errors*: i.e. those made by a learner while he or she is trying to come to grips with a new point;
2. *systematic errors*: i.e. those which occur when the learner has found inaccurate hypothesis about the target language;
3. *post-systematic errors*: i.e. the temporary forgetting of a point that had been previously understood.

In recent years linguistics has drawn a distinction between "competence" and "performance" errors, which might be likened to Corder's "systematic" and "post-systematic" errors. This, in turn, has led to a distinction between errors and mistakes.

However, it is of some difficulty to define what a learner's mistake is and what a learner's error is. Corder (1981:10) argues:

Errors of performance are mistakes, reserving the term error to refer to the systematic errors of learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his transitional competence.

Brown (1987) similarly points out that a mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip", which is the result of a failure to utilize a known system correctly, but

an error is a noticeable deviation from the grammar of adult native speakers, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. In contrast, Edge (1989) calls all deviation from standard English "mistakes", not "errors". He argues that mistakes are those which a student can self-correct if they are pointed out by the teacher, whereas an "error" cannot be corrected by the student even if it is pointed out, though the teacher knows that the class is familiar with the form. Here, in order to be consistent, "error" will be used to mean both error and mistake, for it is hard to distinguish between error and mistake in practice.

Considering the communicative effect, errors are divided into *global errors* and *local errors*. The communicative classification deals with errors from the perspective of the error's effect on the listener or reader. The criterion to judge if the error is global or local is whether it blocks understanding. Global errors are those that affect overall sentence organization and significantly hinder communication, whereas local errors are those that affect single elements (constituents) in a sentence which do not usually hinder communication significantly (Dulay & Burt, 1981).

This classification is accepted by many or most researchers and language teachers. It, however, has also been challenged recently. Santos (1987) and Nickel (1989) argue that the local/global distinction may not be the most useful way of thinking about error gravity. For example, would an error in a sentence such as *They seem to be *fooll/fools*. be classified as a global error because it crosses sentence boundaries or as a local morphological error of the singular/plural NP type (Santos, 1987)?

Murphy (1986) argues that some sentences are comprehensible but not acceptable. Then another category of error arises, that is, the *error of accuracy* and the *error of fluency*. Brumfit (1983) did observations on "fluency" and "accuracy" in English language teaching, and pointed out:

...fluency activity gives the students the opportunity to use the language in the same ways that they have had opportunities to use their mother tongues in the process of language acquisition (Brumfit, 1983:5).

While Murphy (1986) addresses the issue

that errors of accuracy show that the learner is lacking in knowledge of the target language; errors of fluency reveal how the target language is used by non-native learners.

Attitude and reaction toward ESL/EFL learners' errors

The question for teachers is whether or not to correct errors and if so, when and how. Omaggio, et al. (1986) points out that errors should not be left uncorrected on the assumption that in time learners will self-correct naturally. Errors need to be corrected and appropriate feedback needs to be provided in a fashion that is not threatening and does not interfere with or interrupt attempts to communicate meaning. Murphy (1986) and Woods (1990) suggest that we should correct or give feedback to ESL/EFL learners in communication activities. Murphy emphasizes providing feedback to error of fluency in order to keep communication going. In contrast, Woods focuses on the correction of form in communication activities.

Santos (1987) utilizes markedness theory to judge native speakers' attitude to non-native speakers' errors. His study reveals that there is a tendency for ESL learners to make marked-to-unmarked errors. The study also shows that native speakers reaction to marked-to-unmarked errors is less serious than to unmarked-to-marked errors. This may imply that it is because of the native speakers' acceptable attitude toward the marked-to-unmarked errors, that many ESL learners and immigrants speak pidginized or fossilized English, and pidginization exists.

Some researchers like Chastain (1980), Ludwig (1982), Hughes and Lascaraton (1982), Sheorey (1986), etc. compared native speaking teachers and non-native speaking teachers' attitude toward learners' errors. Their investigations revealed that non-native speakers were more severe in their evaluation of learners' errors than native speakers. Hughes and Lascaraton (1982) suggest that the native speakers' tendency to greater leniency may be attributed to their superior knowledge of the wide-ranging norms of English.

This suggestion provides at least three implications. First, the non-native teachers' own language background and their familiarity with learners' language background may affect their understanding of learners' strategies and may also

affect their view of error gravity. Second, non-native teachers should improve their own target language to become proficient in the language; they should not only know the linguistic rules, but also know how to communicate appropriately, so that the errors of transfer of training can be avoided. Third, if a native-speaker teaches EFL in a foreign country, he should learn the local language in order to teach effectively.

ESL/EFL language teachers, especially EFL teachers, need to correct students' errors in instruction in order to help them to avoid early fossilization and plateau in their target language. The EFL teacher is the major source for learners to get corrective feedback as other learners are not ready to provide feedback successfully at certain stages. ESL and EFL learners who succeed in communicating a message and who receive no negative or corrective feedback will often assume that their hypotheses are correct, and will not attempt to change or improve their hypotheses. Only by obtaining some corrective feedback, will learners be motivated to alter their hypotheses. In instruction at the beginner level, direct correction of learners' oral errors on form should be avoided as correction on form is disheartening and will make students frustrated and give up practice, but at intermediate and advanced levels, ESL/EFL teachers should encourage the learners' fluency and accuracy of communication. Especially for advanced learners, fluency and accuracy of communication are equally important.

Techniques of correction

There have been two schools of thought in respect to learners' errors, one school believes that if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method, the errors would never be committed in the first place. The philosophy of the other school is that we live in an imperfect world and, consequently, errors always occur in spite of our best efforts (Corder, 1981).

In regard to errors in speech, Terrell (1977 : 330) argues, "There is no evidence which shows that the correction of speech errors is necessary or even helpful in language acquisition" and has put forward three solid reasons for avoiding *direct* correction of speech errors:

1. correction of speech errors plays no important role in the progress toward an adult's

model of grammar in any natural language acquisition situation;

2. correction of speech errors will create affective barriers; and

3. correction of speech errors tends to focus the speaker on form, promoting learning at the expense of acquisition. (Terrell, 1982:28)

Many researchers like Norrish (1983), Murphy (1986), and Edge (1989) emphasize not stopping speakers and correcting in mid-stream. Murphy (1986), on the other hand, also suggests that if errors of fluency occur in learners' communicative activities, for example, if some students in a group are unable to get a turn to speak, or if the group goes silent and is unclear on how to proceed, at that time they are making an error of fluency which should be corrected immediately in order to keep communication going. The above researchers also suggest many techniques to correct errors in speech indirectly, i.e. making notes of errors to correct them later (Norrish, 1983); using what we really often use in real communication, such as *Do you mean...*, *Beg your pardon, Sorry, but...* (Murphy, 1986); and utilizing tape-recorders and using cloze to correct learners' errors (Gainer, 1989).

Walz (1982) and Edge (1989) suggest three techniques to correct errors: (1) self-correction with teacher helping; (2) peer-correction; and (3) teacher correction. These techniques can be used to correct oral as well as written errors. With regard to errors in writing, the question is whether content or form, or both should be corrected.

Allwright (1975) points out that errors which interfere with meaning and comprehension are clearly more important than those that do not. Comprehensibility is a criterion for the correction of errors. However, Chastain's study (1981) using student compositions, showed that the most frequent response from native speakers was that the written language samples were quite comprehensible (only 10% of the errors were considered incomprehensible), but that they were unacceptable. Chastain (1981) and Santos (1987) reported that native speakers react more negatively to form errors, at least in written communication. Norrish (1983) got the same result and pointed out that errors in grammar are more likely to interfere with communication than inexact selection of vocabulary items, as are errors which

affect the whole sentence rather than just part of it.

For ESL/EFL learners, especially the adult learners, they have already developed their cognitive and creative thinking in their native language. The difficulty in front of them is how to express their ideas in a second or a foreign language. When learners concentrate more on the content of communication than on the code they are using to express it, errors might occur. In this case, their code monitors fail to work. Language teachers should offer timely feedback to their content as well as to their form.

Giving feedback is part of learning another language and knowing how to use the language (Murphy, 1986). Edge (1989), Murphy (1986), Norrish (1983) and Walz (1982) all suggest that learners should give feedback to one another. The process of pointing out and correcting others' errors develops a new channel of learning for learners. Through this channel they can improve their own accuracy and proficiency of the target language. Learners are more likely to learn and will benefit from their own experience. Therefore, language teachers should encourage learners to provide feedback to one another. Peer-correction can also save teachers' time so that teachers can focus on systematic and typical errors and offer remedial teaching.

Many studies suggest that teachers should not merely write out a correct response. Offering correct forms simply is unlikely to offer stimuli to future improvement. Too much red ink is not psychologically rewarding for students, and it is costly in terms of teachers' time and effort. Many teachers have found it useful to adopt symbols such as T=tense, Sp=spelling, etc. (Norrish, 1983) to guide students to their errors and indicate the kind of mistake.

Hyland (1990) suggests providing productive or interactive feedback to language learners, as these kinds of feedback can encourage learners to react or respond to feedback from teachers. Then teachers and learners can share the responsibility of correction. Correction ceases to be a teachers' patent. Hyland recommends that minimal marking (i.e. a cross in the margin alongside the lines in which errors occur) be used to correct students' written work. Minimal marking does not indicate the type of error, which make students figure out where and what their errors are and correct them. With this technique students do

not merely read the teacher's correction passively, but actively correct errors by themselves. Then the teacher can re-correct the students' written work to make sure they really learn from their errors. Hyland also recommends that recorded commentary be useful in encouraging students to respond to feedback. He reports that he has successfully used this technique in a variety of EFL/ESP situations with intermediate and advanced students.

Summary, conclusion and pedagogical implication.

Knowing the category of errors and native speakers' attitudes towards non-native speakers' error will help ESL/EFL teachers know sources of learners' errors and their degree of seriousness of different errors. All these will enable ESL/EFL teachers to have a positive attitude towards learners' errors, that is, errors are unavoidable and teachers can benefit from them by getting information on how learning occurs in learners. ESL/EFL teachers can then work out their teaching and correction techniques to promote the learners' proficiency in the target language.

Error analysis and error correction are significant for language teachers and learners. Error analysis is not merely researchers' work--every ESL/EFL teacher can contribute to it. If ESL/EFL teachers undertake a systematic analysis, they will know how far towards the goal the learner has progressed, and what remains for him to learn (Corder, 1981). From error analysis, ESL/EFL teachers will know how language is learnt and what strategies the learner is employing. Errors yield important information for teachers in diagnosing and determining the learners' current internalized rule systems. Error analysis also provides material for remedial teaching and information on choosing teaching material.

The clearer teachers understand the sources of students' errors, the better they will be able to judge which errors are most worthy of concentration. ESL/EFL teacher should also know when students are ready to be corrected. It is unfortunate that there can be no consensus as to when errors should be corrected, each teacher will have a personal preference, since there are a lot of

variables in different language learning situations. For instance, learners will be different (i.e. ESL learners or EFL learners), the learning situation will be different (i.e. host environment or foreign environment), learning motivation will be different (i.e. instrumental, integrative or vocational motivation), and etc. Therefore, it is only the ESL/EFL teachers who know their students better, who know when their learners are ready to be corrected and which errors need correcting in a certain learning situation.

ESL/EFL teachers should provide productive feedback to enable students to become aware of their errors, and to encourage them to monitor their output and correct errors by themselves. They should also choose appropriate teaching methods according to the needs and real degree of proficiency of their learners. Non-English speaking EFL teachers especially should create a language environment for learners instead of merely using pattern drills in order to avoid the errors of transfer of training.

To ESL/EFL learners, errors reveal whether their hypotheses are right or wrong; and provide chances for them to revise their hypotheses. In the procedure of providing feedback to others, their own language proficiency improves, thus fossilization and plateau can be avoided. Correcting errors by themselves encourages learners to learn the target language from their own experience. Learning to provide feedback and correct their own errors becomes a strategy of "killing two birds with one stone."

Errors are an inevitable part of language learning; and error analysis is a significant part of language teaching, which cannot be overlooked. Error analysis enables ESL/EFL teachers to know what, why, when, and how; that is, what is the student's difficulty at a certain stage, why does the student make this kind of error, when is the student in a position to be corrected, and how can ESL/EFL teacher offer corrective feedback to their students. There is still a lot of research to do to explore sources of learners' errors and to work out applicable techniques to correct learners' errors. Each ESL/EFL teacher can contribute to error analysis in order to know how language acquisition and learning occur in a learner, and to teach ESL/EFL effectively.

The authors

Ms. Hua Tang, a graduate student in Language Arts in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria in Canada, received her Bachelor of Arts at Henan Normal University in the People's Republic of China. Ms. Tang taught English as a foreign language (EFL) for two years at the high school level and nine years at Pingyuan University in China. She is a member of the Community of English for Science and Technology in Xinxiang, Henan, China.

Mr. Jiansheng Zhao, a translator and interpreter, obtained his Bachelor of Arts at Henan Normal University in China. Mr. Zhao has taught EFL in high school and night-college. He is a member of the community of English Translators and Interpreters and a member of the Community of English for Science and Technology in Xinxiang, Henan, China.

The above authors have cooperatively published some research papers in the EFL teaching and learning field in such Chinese-English journals as *College English Journal of Henan Normal University* and *Pingyuan University Journal*. Their research covers reading in a foreign language, English rhetorical style, abbreviation of English, and teaching reading in the classroom.

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