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Jacob O Aloba
Department Of English,
Federal College Of
Education, P.M.B 3045
Kano- Nigeria.

Error identification, analysis and correction in second Language (L2) teaching and Learning

Jacob O Aloba

Abstract

This paper looks at error as part and parcel of language learning process which should not be frowned at by both language teachers and the learners. It goes further to examine the concept of error, its types and various sources errors emanate from. The paper also discusses different approaches to error identification, error analysis and its criticisms. It finally examines the importance of error correction in second language (L2) teaching and learning which could lead to capacity building in Applied Linguistics.

Keywords: Error, Second language learning, Error analysis

1. Introduction

Language is a system of rules that the learner has to acquire or learn and that trying out language and making errors are a natural and unavoidable part of this process (Doff, 1995) ^[11]. Students' errors are a very useful tool of showing what they have and what they have not learnt. Instead of seeing errors negatively as a sign of failure (by the teachers or the students) errors should be seen positively as an indication of what teachers still need to teach or learn.

According to Hadley (1993) ^[15], the openness of language leads to both creativity and error. He posits that the process which leads to creativity is also the process which leads to error which is something we must accept, but clearly since we cannot have one without the other, we cannot ignore, confine or fail to appreciate or encourage this process. Errors do occur in second language (L2) learning and therefore we should acknowledge and deal with them. In 1974, Corder ^[6], a proponent of Error Analysis (EA) suggests that a better understanding of second language learning would come from the systematic investigation of learners' errors by discovering the built in syllabus of the language learner. He further comments that by classifying the errors that learners made, researchers can learn a great deal about second language acquisition (SLA) process by inferring the strategies that L2 learners adopt. According to him, the functions of errors are indispensable since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learners use in order to learn.

This paper examines the concept of error, types and sources of error, approaches to error identification, analysis, criticism of error analysis, error correction and its importance to language teaching and learning.

Concept of Error

Error in relation to language and in this case English language can be defined as a deviant form of a language unacceptable by the speakers of the standard version because of its deviation from the accepted norm (Aloba, 2010: 85). It is worthy noting that the world wide acclaimed Standard English today, are standard British English and American Standard English. Although there are several varieties or dialects of English called new Englishes that have sprung up all over the world today such as; Australian English, Canadian English, Indian English, South African English and even Nigerian English. Each of these dialects or varieties have their standard versions. However, the variety acceptable in Nigeria which is being taught in our schools as well as being used by the educated elite is the Standard British English (SBE). Therefore, any deviation from this British Standard version is considered as an error. Even though, many of the proponents of Nigerian English may not subscribe to this proposition.

There is the need to differentiate between an error and mistake. Corder (1974) ^[6] makes a distinction between an error and mistake. According to him, the term error refers to the regular patterns in learners' speech which differ from the target language (TL) model. The regularity of such pattern reveals the learners' underlying competence. He posits that second language learner (SLL) can correct their mistakes, but the errors they make are part of their current system of

Correspondence
Jacob O Aloba
Department Of English,
Federal College Of
Education, P.M.B 3045
Kano- Nigeria.

Their inter-language and hence not recognizable to the learners themselves as wrong.

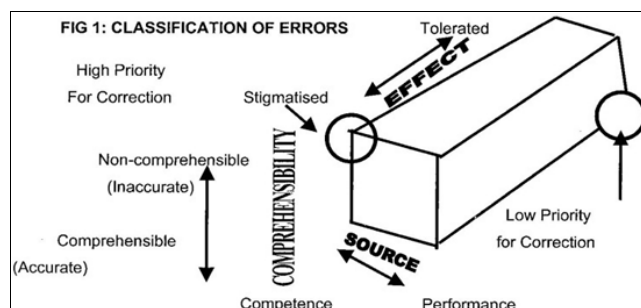
The term mistake according to Corder (1974) ^[6], refers to memory lapses, slip of tongue and other instances of performance errors. Therefore when a speaker makes a mistake usually emanating from impulses, he may become conscious of it later, and hence correct it. But in case of error, the speaker thinks he is using the correct patterns. He is therefore completely ignorant that he has committed an error.

Types of Error

Corder (1971) ^[8] in Littlewood (1984) ^[20] and Hadley (1993) ^[15] classify errors into two major groups. These are inter-lingual and intra - lingual errors. Inter- lingual errors are those that arise from conflicts between the target language and mother tongue while intra - lingual are those that the Learners encounter in the target language (T.L) such as overgeneralizations and false analogies.

Other researchers like Dulay and Burt (1974: b) ^[12] Richards (1992) and Connor (1996) ^[9] contend that errors can be categorized as: developmental, interference and unique. The developmental errors are those that are similar to L1 learning errors. The interference errors are those that reflect L1 structure in the speech of L2; and the unique errors are those that are neither developmental nor interference errors.

Hadley (1993) ^[15] also classifies errors into “competence” and “performance” errors (see the diagram below). She stresses that errors of competence have high priority for correction and their effects are stigmatized, while errors of performance have low priority for correction. For more explanation, see figure 1 below:



Among these classifications of error, the categories relevant to this paper are: inter- lingual errors of competence, intra – lingual errors of competence and errors of performance. The feature of inter-lingual error of competence is common in the English of Nigerian speakers.

Whatever views are expressed on errors irrespective of their classifications and types, deviations are errors and therefore need the concern of every teacher.

2. Sources of Error

In language learning whether LI or L2, all scholars agree that there are errors which learners commit with varying degrees of consistency. Error analysis (EA) contends that learners' errors are inherent within the language system and are not necessarily native language induced. It also admits that errors are caused by analogy with the native language. Evidence from empirical studies indicates that the sources of errors are traceable to:

A. The Learners: Errors are generated by learners who as a result of their innate ability to learn language from hypotheses which are tested and manifest themselves in the formation of wrong analogies by overgeneralization after observing some

paradigms (see Doff 1995 ^[11], Hubbard *et al.*, 1995 ^[16], Stern, 1995:325 ^[26], Corder, 1981 ^[7], Dulay and Burt, 1974) ^[12]. The mentalist theory supports the above view and claims that errors are inevitable because they reflect various stages in the language development of the learners. Thus the learner processes new language data in his mind and produces rules for its production, based on the evidence. Where the data are inadequate or the evidence only partial, such rules may produce the following pattern:

*The doorbell rangs?

*She dranked all the wine alone (Hubbard *et al.*, 1995:149) ^[16].

Overgeneralization covers instances where learners create a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of other structures. For instance, in the case of rangs, the learner has over generalized the third person's rule in the present tense: (he rings) and applied it to the past. In the case of dranked, he over generalizes the past tense-ed inflection.

B. Teaching Materials or Methods: (Teaching/Teacher induced errors). Having related mentalism to overgeneralization, behaviourism can be related to those errors which appear to be induced by the teaching process itself. The behaviourist regards error as evidence of failure, of ineffective teaching or lack of control. They assert that if material is well chosen, graded and presented with care, there would never be any error. Similarly, Hadely (1993) ^[15], states that certain types of teaching techniques increase the frequency of over-generalized structure. Many pattern drills and transformation exercises are made up of utterances that can interfere with each other to produce a hybrid structure as shown below:

Teacher	Instruction	Student
"He walks quickly"	Change to continuous form	"He is walks"

(For more examples, see Stern 1995 ^[26]:146, Hubbard 1995:150) ^[16].

However, Hubard (1995) ^[16] and Mc Arthur (1992) ^[21] argue that it is fairly easy to accept this in the early stages of language learning when controls are applied in the shape of substitution, conversion exercises of a mechanical nature and guided sentence patterns but more difficult at later stages.

Corder (1981) ^[7] admits that some of our students' errors due to our own teaching can only be identified under a close study of the materials and teaching techniques to which the learner has been exposed as in the examples below:

1. *I'm go to school every day.

If the structural syllabus has placed emphasis on one tense, such as the present continuous, there is the danger that the learners will over-use it when going on to new patterns. The prolonged drilling on the 'I'm...ing' is likely to produce 'I'm go'.

2. I did go to cinema (not intended as the emphatic past). In an attempt to persuade a student to use the simple past tense, a teacher may over-stress the auxiliary verb in his repeated question and then find it echoed in the response. Thus example 2 might be the result of the following prompt from the teacher. 'Now, listen to the question. What DID you do yesterday? The teacher can also induce errors by including in some over-generalization himself. It is tempting to say that third person singular of the present tense always ends in 's' (especially having listened to numerous sentences of the type 'he plays football') and forget about sequence such as: 'he can', 'does he' and 'he doesn't play'. These forms together may well

outnumber the 'norm' that the teacher is attempting to deal with. (See Stern 1995 ^[26], Mc Arthur 1992 ^[21], Senders, 1992 ^[25] and Hubbard *et al.* 1995) ^[16].

C. Difficulties inherent in the language: Richards (1974) ^[22] states that there are 'myths' that some languages are difficult, giving the example of Latin and these affect the learner. Headbloom (in Ubahakwe 1979) ^[28], and Senders (1992) ^[25] also maintain that "the complexity of a particular item being" learnt, and the difficult structures inherent within the target language (TL) will cause learners to err".

D. Interference from LI and L2: Errors are also traceable to interference from LI and L2. Certain structures in the mother tongue (MT) appear in the TL as the learner carries over the habits of his MT into the second language (see Corder 1971:158 ^[8] in Stern 1995 ^[26], James 1983:20 ^[17], Thornburg 1999:114) ^[27]. However, negative transfer (interference) takes place when the use of a native form produced an error in the foreign language.

E. Use of L2: Richards (1974) ^[22] and Senders (1992) ^[25] trace 'the source of learners' errors to the use of L2 in the community. Whether it is fully used or not and whether the learners are fully motivated or not. Senders (1992) ^[25] further traces the source of errors to psychological factors such as language shock in which the learner experiences doubt and confusion when using L2 and culture shock in which the L2 learner experiences disorientation, stress, fear etc as a result of differences between his culture and that of target language.

Approaches to Error Identification and Analysis

The earliest approach to error identification is contrastive analysis (CA), which entails a "systematic comparison of specific linguistic characteristics of two (or more) languages" in order to identify points of structural similarity and differences between native languages (NLS) and target languages (TLS)". (Fries 1945:9 cited in Freeman and Long 1991:51-52) ^[14]. Fries believes that "the most efficient materials are those that are based on a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner". Fries (1945:9) and Lado (1957) are some of the exponents of CA: Lado (1957) and Fries (1945) maintain that: "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meaning of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture...." (Lado 1957:9, Fries 1945) cited in Freeman and Long, 1991) ^[14]. They further 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". This conviction that linguistic differences can be used to predict learning difficulty produces contrastive analysis hypotheses (CAH): "where languages are similar, positive transfer will occur; where they are different, negative transfer, or interference, will result" (Freeman and Long 1991:53) ^[14].

CA is concerned with three important issues. Firstly, it provides insights into the similarities and differences between languages. Secondly, it explains and predicts problems in second language (L2) learning and teaching. And finally, it suggests methodology of designing training programmes that will help in language teaching, and also develops course materials for language teaching. This approach is accepted by researchers, linguists and teachers dealing with L2 learners.

Despite its popularity, CA has certain problems. The assumption that whenever two languages come into contact, there is a predictable interference is faulty. This may predict errors, which do not occur, or may fail to predict certain errors

that occur. These inadequacies call for the introduction of 'Error Analysis' (EA) into the literature. EA believes that there are other sources of error, which are more significant than interference from mother tongue. This view has earlier been pointed out by the mentalists in their study of first language (LI) learners. Rivers *et al.*, (1981) ^[23] also share this view. Deviations can be a result of innovation by the learners since they are active manipulators of language, during the process of testing hypotheses, or by the complexities within the language system.

The study of Dulay and Burt (1974) ^[12] indicates that most mistakes or 'errors' committed by L2 learners are not due to interference but are 'developed'. Similarly, Corder (1974) ^[6] claims that 'development' errors of L2 learners are brought about by two dominant languages- mother tongue (MT) and target language (TL) of the learners. Pie indicates that the developmental errors are inter-languages (IL). He defines IL as "a structured grammatical system, constructed by the learner, which approximates the grammatical system of the language being acquired and as the acquisition proceeds, the IL system evolves into a better approximation of the standard system". He further states that the language, which results from the students' strategies, is the major source of L2 learner's errors.

Criticism of Error Analysis

One of the criticisms of EA is that learners avoid areas in which they think they may commit errors or be laughed at and as such if the language teaching is based on EA, this area will be omitted because the researchers or teachers will not sample them as they are not manifested by the learner (Senders 1992 ^[25], Hadley 1993 ^[15] and Ellis, 1986) ^[13].

Moreover, since the totality of the language is not errors, language teaching should not be based on errors. Furthermore, the teaching of error encourages the use of drills and substitution tables which themselves are divorced from reality and do not represent actual use.

Candler (1979) ^[4] criticizes EA as having two consequences which in certain circumstances limit the efficacy of the teaching strategies derived from it. He posits that by EA it implies that when errors are corrected "the divergence from L2 models will be eroded" and that EA focuses attention on "trivial aspects of language learning." Similarly, Widdowson (1972) cited in Brumfit (1993) and Ubahakwe (1979) ^[28] suggest that teachers should devote more attention to the value of communication acts. They assert that correction should have either no place or a very minor place in fluency work, for it normally distracts from the message or may even be perceived as rude. Hubbard (1995) ^[16] posits that errors occur because teachers did not predict and make provision for prevention. This means that in modern language teaching, emphasis should be given to communicative fluency rather than accuracy which emphasizes on error detection and correction.

Importance of Error Correction to Language Teaching and Learning

Changes in pedagogy have influenced our attitudes towards error and its treatment. With the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching, less emphasis has been placed on formal accuracy than was formerly the case; and more emphasis is given to communicative effectiveness. Language learners' speech usually deviates (to some extent) from the model they are trying to master, thereby constituting errors. Teachers who adopt the communicative approach are more

concerned with L2 learners' ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences (Allwright 1991, Doff 1995) ^[1, 11]. Some feel that it is more important for learners to accomplish their communicative goals than it is for their sentences to be well formed. However, Hadley (1993) ^[15] posits that if grammatically deviant speech still serves to communicate the speakers' intent, why should we pay further attention to it, simply because speech is linked to attitude and social structure? Deviance from grammatical and phonological norms of a speech community elicits evolutionary reactions that may classify a person unfavourably. Moreover, Brumfit (1992) ^[2] emphasizes that in written work, whether dealing with native speakers or non-native speakers, 'errors' are unacceptable.

The author, however, is of the view that committing errors in L2 learning is inevitable and it is part and parcel of L2 learning process, as such should not be frowned at by teachers.

Chaudron (1988) ^[5] and Doff (1995) ^[11] assert that "we need to correct some errors to help students learn the correct forms of the language." This does not mean that we have to correct students all the time. The behaviourist (in Hubbard 1995: 235) ^[16] stipulates that "when errors do occur, they are to be remedied by correct form through intensive drilling."

Moreover, Hadley (1993) ^[15] and Brumfit (1993) comment that when and what to correct pre-supposes a system of priorities; when focus is on communication, or discussing ideas, specific error correction should be given a minor role, but this does not mean that errors are never corrected. Direct correction of errors can hinder students' efforts and discourage further attempts to express ideas with the language skills they have available. Rather than correcting errors directly, a teacher can continue the dialogue by restating what the student has said to model the correct form. Similarly, in oral language use, constant, insistent correction of errors will discourage learners from using language to communicate.

Furthermore, Senders (1992) ^[25] suggests that if the aim of the lesson is for the students to produce and practice it accurately, the teacher is likely to correct more immediately than if he is monitoring free production. If a mistake is likely to hinder comprehension or lead students to further errors it should be corrected immediately.

Similarly, Thornburg (1999:117) ^[27] comments that studies of learners whose language development has fossilized suggest that lack of negative feedback may have been the factor. He maintains that if the only messages learners get are positive, there may be no incentive to restructure their mental grammar; and as such their restructuring mechanism close down. Thus a focus on form (not just on meaning) is necessary in order to guard against fossilization. A focus on form includes giving learners clear message about their errors. He further asserts that learners need to value accuracy, they need unambiguous feedback when they make mistake that threaten intelligibility.

Stern (1995) ^[26] asserts that correcting three types of errors can be useful to L2 learners: These are errors that impair communication (i.e. interfere with, distort the speaker's or writer's message) significantly, errors that have highly stigmatizing effects on the listener or reader; and errors that occur frequently in students' speech and writing. He concludes that when instructional focus is on form, corrections occur more frequently. By correcting learner's errors, teachers not only provide the feedback but they convey the message that accuracy is important.

Errors allow the teachers to know the progress of the students and the areas that need more attention. This enables the

teachers to spend less time on the aspect of the language with which students have no problem. Moreover, Corder (1974) ^[6] opines that when an error is detected, noted and corrected, the probability of its occurrence is low in comparison to when it passes unnoticed. If uncorrected, the learner will assume that he is writing the correct form. Studies have shown that learners do commit errors even after correction not to talk of when they are not corrected. In the cases where even after the corrections, ungrammatical sentences are still produced, the problem is not with EA, and rather, it has to do with the learner or the methodology in which the correction is made.

The teacher should be able to determine and distribute the teaching areas according to the availability of time for the subject since it is believed that constant practice will enable the learner to acquire correct habit. EA provides the researchers with the evidence of how language is learnt or acquired. It helps the researchers to know the strategies adopted by the learners in acquiring a language.

Thornburg (1999:15) ^[27] observes that it is the systematic errors rather than the random ones that respond well to correction. He comments that correction can provide the feedback the learner needs to help confirm or reject a hypothesis or to tighten the application of a rule that is being applied fairly loosely. EA describes how, and explains why errors are the way they are, it illuminates alternative courses of action and identifies the implication of choosing among those alternatives. It leads researchers and language teachers to a better understanding of language in general and more humane approach to error correction and language teaching.

However, the argument that EA encourages drills and substitution tables which are divorced from reality and do not represent actual language should not discourage the use of EA. Even if our goal is communication, a student must learn the grammar of the language to conform to the patterns of the accepted model. According to Bright *et al.* (1981:238) ^[3] "we cannot be contented with communication however clear the *pillar sense* if it carries depressing messages to the reader about the writer's level of literacy." The learner has to master the conventional use of the grammatical signals of a language. Similarly, Littlewood (1981) ^[19] maintains that in addition to ample opportunities to use the language for communicative purposes, "a perfect mastery of individual structures is also important to learners as a useful step towards the broader goal." Language as communication can also be used in the teaching of grammatical structures (Williams 1990:96) ^[30]. Accepting errors and not correcting them in the name of communication is dangerous especially at tertiary level. The importance of EA is to identify an incorrect habit from the learner so as to make him break away from it and replace it with a correct one. Thus EA should be seen as one of the steps towards speaking and writing well.

3. Conclusion

In second language learning (L2L) error making seems to be inevitable. The teacher should therefore consider error making as an integral part of learning process. However, the teacher should constantly identify these errors and correct them especially where and when they impede on the communication competence of the learner.

Also, as much as possible, the language teacher should prevent or avoid teacher induced errors by appropriate selection of teaching method/technique and appropriate grading of teaching materials. Equally, over drilling of the learners that may lead to overgeneralization or over application of language rules should be avoided. Capacity

building in Applied Linguistics to a large extent can be achieved only when learners' use of language is largely creative and error free.

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