

Error Analysis: Its Historical Progression and its Characteristics

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Abstract

Error Analysis flourished in the 1970s and 1980s as one of the first ways to investigate L2 acquisition but then declined in popularity. However, recently it has made a comeback in a more specific way. Error analysis gives language teachers and learners the strategies to overcome or minimize their disabilities and the disabling effect of their ignorance. This paper provides a description of the historical progression of the analysis of learner errors in order to understand Error Analysis more clearly and the characteristics of Error Analysis including the classification of errors and error treatment. In the concluding section, the author gives concrete suggestions on classroom instruction for Japanese college students through the results of the author's small study of the error analysis practiced at an ESL classroom at Central Washington University, Washington, USA.

Introduction

Until the late 1960s, there were almost no empirical studies of L2 acquisition. But around that time, because of the need to investigate the claims of competing theories and the desire to improve L2 pedagogy, researchers became interested in the empirical study of L2 acquisition. The analysis of learner errors was one of the first ways to investigate L2 acquisition. Error analysis flourished in the 1970s and 1980s but then declined in popularity, because of its weakness in methodology and accuracy of analysis. However, it has recently made a come-

back in a more specific way. Considering this recent movement, this paper provides an overview of the historical progression of the study of learner errors and describes the main characteristics of error analysis including the classification of errors and error treatment.

I. Contrastive Analysis vs. Error Analysis

Error analysis differs from the contrastive analysis which was practiced extensively in the 1960s. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), formulated by Lado (1957), it is possible to predict when difficulty will occur on the basis of the differences between the native and target languages.

CAH claimed that theoretically all L2 errors could be predicted by identifying the differences between the learners' native language and the target language. Based on this assumption, contrastive analysis compares the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners of any particular language background. On the other hand, pedagogically, behaviorists believed that L1 facilitates learning where native-and target-language structures are the same (positive transfer) and results in errors where they are different (negative transfer). This idea is the same as CAH in its strong form. Therefore, procedures such as imitation, repetition, and reinforcement were practiced because it was believed that they enabled learners to develop 'habits' of the L2. However, empirical evidence indicated that the influence of the L1 was much smaller than that claimed by the CAH and Wardhaugh (1970) proposed that "only some errors were traceable to transfer, and contrastive analysis could be used only *a posteriori* to *explain* rather than predict."¹⁾ As a result, in the late 1960s and 1970s, contrastive analysis was not popular and behaviorist theories of L2 learning were recognized unqualified as the general consensus.

Replacing contrastive analysis, error analysis which owed much to the work of Corder (1981a) was carried on. Corder claimed that errors sometimes occur regardless of the learners' first language and most of the errors seem to be found in the developmental stage and to be largely independent of the nature of their mother tongue. The most significant point of his argument is the distinction between *errors* and *mistakes*. He mentioned that *an error* takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge, while *a mistake* occurs when learners fail to perform to the best of their competence. And he

suggested that error analysis should be restricted to the study of errors.

As a strong point, error analysis helped to make errors respectable — to force recognition that errors were not something to be avoided but were an inevitable feature of the learning process. In other words, errors are considered significant in three ways according to Corder (1967): (1) they provided the teacher with information about how much the learner had learnt, (2) they provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, and (3) they served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language. As weaknesses, however, (1) error analysis could not show when learners resorted to avoiding running a risk of making errors (Schachter, 1974), (2) errors can have more than one cause and (3) the precise proposition of error analysis varies depending on the learners' level, the type of language sampled, the language level (for example, lexis v. grammar) and learners' ages. Moreover, Svartvik (1973b) points out that the materials for error analysis are regular examination papers such as composition, translations, and so on. As a result of these perceived weaknesses, error analysis has lost popularity, although it was widely developed in the 1970s and 1980s and helped the study of L2 acquisition in various ways, such as the study of interlanguage theory.

However, error analysis is currently showing signs of making a come-back. Taylor (1986) claims that "what constitutes significant error is not strictly quantifiable" and that we should "conceive our analytical aims to lie rather more in the interpretative tradition of a humanistic discipline than has recently been customary."²⁾ He demonstrated how the study of errors should be located in the 'whole text' and how it can afford valuable insights into the process of language use,

through the detailed analysis of a piece of writing produced by a native speaker. Lennon (1991) remains more committed to the quantification of errors and seeks to show how some of the problems of error identification can be overcome. Bardavi-Harlig and Bofman (1989) employed error analysis techniques to investigate the linguistic differences between advanced learners who were successful on a university placement test and those who were unsuccessful. In fact, error analysis continues to be practiced to serve as a means for investigating specific research questions.

II. Classification of errors

Learner errors can be roughly classified into five categories according to their source.

1. Interlingual interference

Interlingual errors are those which are caused by the transference of rules from the mother tongue.

2. Intralingual interference

Intralingual errors are those originating within the structure of the target language itself. Complex rule-learning behavior is typically characterized by overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions for rule application.

⟨Examples of overgeneralization⟩

- a. We *are* not *knowing* the rules. (Overgeneralized use of the rule for forming progressives)
- b. This shows *that* how sensitive he is. (Overgeneralized use of *that* for introducing a noun clause.)
- c. Who can Angela *sees*? (Overgeneralized third-person ending.)
- d. Who *did* write this book? (Overgeneralization of the rule for inserting *do* into interrogatives.)
- e. You are expected not to make noise here. (Noise is classed as 'uncountable',

so *a* is omitted.)

3. L2 learning strategies

Simplification and 'redundancy reduction' by omitting elements, make production easier but may, of course, make comprehension difficult or even impossible.

⟨Examples⟩

- a. No understand.
- b. He champion.
- c. Is man.

4. Communication strategies

When a learner has difficulty in expressing himself, he tries to find an alternative way of getting the meaning across or may be able to forestall it by avoiding communication by modifying what he intended to say. These are called 'communication strategies'. The main distinguishing characteristic of a communication strategy is that it occurs when a learner becomes aware of a problem with which his current knowledge has difficulty in coping.

⟨Examples⟩

- a. avoid communication (This happens to learners who dislike risks or uncertainty)
- b. adjust the message (Omit some items of information making the ideas simpler or less precise, or say something slightly different.)
- c. use paraphrase (a learner who did not recall the word for a 'car seat-belt' avoided the need for it by saying 'I'd better tie myself in'.)
- d. use approximation (using words which are less specific than the intended meaning. For example, 'some fruit' instead of 'pineapple'.)
- e. create new words
- f. switch to the native language
- g. use non-linguistic resources (mime,

gesture or imitation)

h. seek help

5. Errors due to the effects of teaching

For example, when the distinction between two forms may not be clearly explained, the learner confuses them. Alternatively, one form or pattern may be overemphasized or overpractised, so that the learner produces it in inappropriate contexts.

III. Error treatment

The question of whether teachers should treat errors or ignore them is not simple to answer. Teachers should take into account learners' place on the interlanguage continuum. Also teachers have to consider that the correction of their errors will help the learners to speed the acquisition of the correct form, and that it is simply futile until the learners reach a sufficiently advanced stage of interlanguage development. According to Allwright (1988), in most cases of oral errors, learners can make use of the feedback to modify their hypothesis at a certain interlanguage stage. So many teachers ignore the errors in learners' utterance. But Cathcart and Olsen (1976) found that learners want more correction than is typically offered by their teachers. Consequently, the important thing is to find the right balance between correction and ignorance all the time.

After deciding whether the errors should be dealt with or ignored, the next question arises: When should learner errors be corrected? The teacher may deal with the error immediately or treat somewhat later (ex. wait until the learner has finished with the message the learner was trying to convey). Each way has problems. The problem of immediate error treatment is that it often involves interrupting the learner in mid-sentence. And the problem of postponed treat-

ment is that feedback becomes less effective as the time between the performance of the skill and the feedback lengthens. However, as each treatment has its own relative value, we teachers and researchers must make our own informed decisions. Besides, teachers need to keep on trying out different possibilities to see what happens.

Then who should correct learner errors? The obvious possible answers to this question might be the teacher, the learner making the error, or the other learners. The teacher has a responsibility to correct the learner's error until the learner evidences understanding of the error problem. But it may be more appropriate to allow the learner to self-correct. Certainly, it should be the goal of instruction to improve learners' ability to monitor their own target language speech. The other learners in the classroom could also help to provide corrective feedback if necessary. Porter (1986) concluded in his study that teachers should probably not worry, when learners are working together in groups, about students miscorrecting one another.

Conclusion

As a small study of error analysis, I collected data of informal dialogues of ESL students — two Japanese, a Mexican, a Korean and a native English speaking teacher, in a classroom setting at Central Washington University in 1994. The level of the students was intermediate, that is, they knew the grammar relatively well in theory, but they sometimes had grammatical problems in actual use, especially in speaking. The topics were personal matters.

The first thing I realized while I recorded their dialogues in the class was the differences in fluency of speech and in the volume of their voice among the students. The Mexican student spoke much more fluently and

loudly than the other students. Communication between the teacher and her seemed to be effected smoothly. On the other hand, the two Japanese students often paused and thought or looked for adequate expressions or words. They were monitoring themselves so often. Moreover, their voice was rather low. It seemed that many pauses interrupted the communication. The Korean student also paused sometimes but her voice was not so low as those of the Japanese students.

After I transcribed their dialogue, I was surprised to see what they had said. The results of the analysis were different from what I expected. I had thought the Japanese students' utterances would contain many more errors than those of the Mexican student because the communication between the Japanese students and the teacher was less smooth, less active, and less understandable than the communication between the Mexican student and the teacher. But the results showed us that most of the errors which the Japanese students made were not serious ones, mainly problems of the tense. On the other hand, the Mexican student made more

serious errors such as word order, omitting subject, overlapping the verb, etc.

So this analysis shows us two things. One is that fluency and accuracy are different. If the learners' goal is communicative competence, they should learn the language in ways which aim at the fluency. The other is that Japanese students need to have many more opportunities of production in order to reduce the pauses in their thinking. Production might "make perfect" for Japanese students.

Recently language teaching emphasizes the functional use of a language system for communicative purposes. It is considered that languages are acquired through the need and attempt to communicate, that is, through conversation. The learner works to create for himself his knowledge of the language system and its use in communication. But the learner is himself hampered in his attempt to use his interlanguage for communicative purposes. So, as my small study shows, error analysis helps the teacher and the learner to know how to overcome his disabilities and what strategies he should adopt to minimize the disabling effect of his ignorance.

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Notes

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