

## ERROR ANALYSIS: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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### The Notion of Error

The phenomenon of words and sentences red-pencilled by language teachers while evaluating students' writings are commonly known as mistakes, errors, and slips. The presence of errors explains the students' inability to use appropriate grammatical structures, semantic categories and other linguistic units. It is a characteristic while acquiring another language at a particular stage of learning, and its eradication is the development of control over language elements.

At first, especially in the fifties and early sixties, errors were looked upon as evils which hindered the learning process and which had to be eradicated. From the sixties to the seventies, however, there has been a gradual but definite change in the attitude of language teaching specialists towards errors. The current view suggests that errors should not be looked upon as problems to be overcome, but rather as normal and inevitable strategies that language learner's use. Linguists today believe that a learner errs because he is evolving a language system, that he is always formulating and discarding hypotheses and is constantly testing his knowledge of the language against the data he encounters. Researchers have reached the conclusion that errors are an essential part of the learning process, that they show evidence of a system and are not random as is generally supposed.

With the change in attitude towards errors, the emphasis of error analysis also underwent modification. Until the sixties, the main focus of the analyst was on the actual error, that is the 'product'. Now the emphasis has shifted from the product to the 'process' behind it. This shift from 'product' to 'process' is significant because a systematic analysis of errors will (i) tell the teacher how much of the target language the learner knows and what still remains for him to learn; (ii) It will give researchers evidence of how language is learned or acquired and (iii) It will be helpful to the learner himself because it will help him test his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.

### Errors and Mistakes

The terms 'error' and 'mistake' according to most dictionaries are synonymous, but in error analysis, it is convenient to reserve the term 'mistake' for something rather different. Corder (1967: 25) says it will be useful to refer to errors of performance as

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'mistakes' which is not significant to the language learning process, and reserve the term 'error' for the systematic errors of the learner from which his knowledge of the language to date can be reconstructed. He draws a careful distinction between regular and systematic erroneous utterances and occasional 'lapses' and 'slips' which are not systematic and which the speaker can more or less readily correct. These slips of the tongue or pen which a speaker can readily correct are in error analysis called 'mistakes' and are of no interest to the error analyst, as they tell nothing about the true state of the learner's knowledge. It is only errors (systematic errors) that deserve attention. Some typical examples of mistakes are:

- (a) "Its a bit - it isn't - I mean, I wouldn't really care to have one just like that ..."
- (b) "It didn't bother me in the sleast ... slightest but those frunds ... funds have been frozen of ... peester ustinov ..." (Corder 1973: 257).

(a) and (b) are classic examples of mistakes which mostly native speakers of the English language would make.

(a) Is a lapse and (b) is a case of a slip of the tongue. Even learners of another language are liable to make mistakes (lapses and slips) but a vast majority of them would be 'errors'. They will be unacceptable utterances and breaches of the code. In other words, learners will make 'errors' not because of physical failures but because of an imperfect knowledge of the code and the formation rules of the second language which they have not yet internalized. Here are some examples of errors made by Nepali learners of English.

- (a) She will marry to him.
- (b) He was borned in Nepal.
- (c) He is not civilization person.
- (d) Tourists are mushroom in Pokhara by thirty percent.

#### The Approaches to the Study of Errors

There are various approaches to the study of errors. For the sake of convenience they may be divided into (1) Linguistic Approaches (2) Non-linguistic Approaches.

- (1) The linguistic approaches are:

- (i) Contrastive Analysis Approach
  - (ii) Error Analysis Approach
- (2) The non-linguistic approaches are:
- (i) Sociological Approach
  - (ii) Psychological Approach

Since only the linguistic approaches fall within the scope of this paper, the non-linguistic approaches will not be discussed.

### Contrastive Analysis Approach

From the early 1940s to the 1960s, teachers of foreign languages were rather optimistic about their language teaching problems being approached scientifically, with the use of methods derived from structural linguistics. Essentially the aim of structural linguistics was to characterize the syntactic structure of sentences in terms of their grammatical categories and surface arrangements. Fries was explicit about the implications of the approach of contrastive analysis and claimed that "the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner" (Fries, 1945/1972: 9). Lado, another ardent supporter of this approach, in the preface to Linguistics Across Cultures (1957: 9) says:

"The plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student."

Claims like Fries' and Lado's were reinforced by informal observations of learners' systematic errors which seemed to reflect the structure of their native language. Though most of the errors were phonological in nature others clearly occurred at the syntactic and morphological levels. From this it appeared that difficulties of foreign language learner's could be predicted from the differences evident in the structures of the two languages. It was this comparative approach that came to be known as contrastive analysis.

Contrastive analysis borrowed principles from the field of the psychology of learning such as imitation, reinforcement, habit strength, and positive and negative transfer, and incorporated these into its framework. This approach presupposed that language development consisted of the acquisition of a set of habits, and so errors in the second language were regarded as the result of the first language habits interfering during the acquisition of the habits of a second language. Difficult patterns were predicted on the basis of contrastive analysis, and emphasized in the drills. Teachers were made aware of these differences and consequently asked to pay special attention to them while teaching.

The comparison of the structures of languages is still a respectable activity within contrastive linguistics and has come to be conducted within the transformational generative grammar-framework. The status of contrastive analysis as a psychological approach to the investigation of the second language process, however, became unpopular for several reasons. For one thing, it carried an unfortunate association with the behaviourist view of language acquisition, whose theoretical adequacy was seriously questioned most notably by Chomsky (1959). Secondly, according to Hakuta and Cancino, "a more devastating reason was that contrastive analysis fared quite poorly once researchers, instead of relying on anecdotal impressions from the classroom, began collecting data in more systematic ways ..." (1977: 296). The analysis of learners' errors from these data showed that most of them were not predictable on the basis of contrastive analysis. As a matter of fact, most of the errors like rule simplification and overgeneralization which show a striking resemblance to errors made by children while acquiring a first language, could not be accounted for by contrastive analysis. When the inadequacy of this approach as a predictive model became obvious, Wardhaugh (1970) made the useful distinction between strong and weak versions of the approach. The strong version claimed to predict errors, whereas the weak version just accounted for errors that occurred.

In spite of its obvious shortcomings, contrastive analysis survives only in its weak form. As it can account only for some and not for all of the errors, it gives an incomplete representation of the second language acquisition process. Recently it has been included in the more general approach of error analysis which analyses all systematic deviations of the learner's language from the target language norms.

#### Error Analysis Approach

The contrastive analysis approach is not the only way towards the solution of a highly complex problem like designing properly graded teaching materials. A more reliable approach to the study

of errors is the approach of Error Analysis, which is directly concerned with student performance. This approach adopts the view that the sources of linguistic interference are not restricted to the learners' mother tongue. On the basis of Error Analysis, many investigators noted similarities between the types of errors reported in the first language acquisition and the errors made by second language learners. Obviously, these were the errors that could not be accounted for within the contrastive analysis framework. On this basis, researchers speculated that the process of acquiring the first and second language are essentially the same (Corder 1967, Dulay and Burt 1972, Richards 1973). Today the aim of Error Analysis is (i) to describe, by the evidence contained in errors, the nature of the interlanguage in its stages of development and (ii) to deduce from these descriptions the process of second language acquisition.

Most of the studies in error analysis attempt to classify learners' errors. Errors are generally divided into two categories: intralingual errors and interference (or interlingual) errors. Intralingual errors are those that arise from the target language itself, whereas interference errors are those whose source can be traced to the mother tongue of the learner. These latter are the "errors" that contrastive analysis addressed. However, in the framework of Error Analysis these errors are not interpreted as products of the mother tongue interfering with the second language habit, as the language learning process is seen as an active hypothesis testing on the part of the learner. Interference errors are therefore interpreted as a manifestation of the learner's hypothesis that the target language is just like his mother tongue (Corder, 1967).

Richards defines the field of Error Analysis as dealing with the differences between the way people learning a language speak, and the way adult native speakers of the language use the language (1971b: 12). He goes on to say that errors in second language learning are as systematic as the differences between the first language learning utterances of the child and the utterances of adult speakers of the language. For evidence, he gives a list of typical errors in the English verbal groups made by those learning English as a second language. These represent common errors made by students with quite different mother tongues. In order to emphasize his point, namely that the learner's errors in second language acquisition are systematic, Richards draws on Selinker's (1969) presentation of the speech output in second language as 'interlanguage' since it invariably differs from the target language.

"It is my contention that the most interesting phenomenon in interlanguage performance are those items, rules, and subsystems which are fossilizable (i.e.) permanent characteristics of the speech of bilinguals irrespective of the age at which the second language is acquired or the amount of instruction or practice in it. If it can be experimentally demonstrated that fossilizable items, rules, and subsystems which occur in interlanguage performance are a result of the native language then we are dealing with the process of language transfér. If these are a result of identifiable items in training procedures, then we are dealing with transfér of training; if they are a result of an identifiable approach by the learner to the material to be learned, then we are dealing with strategies of learning; if they are the result of an identifiable approach by the learner to communication with native speakers of the target language rules, then we are dealing with strategies of communication; and finally if they are the result of a clear overgeneralization of target language rules, then we are dealing with the reorganization of linguistic materials. I would like to hypothesize that these five processes are central in second language learning and that each process forces fossilizable material upon surface interlanguage utterances, controlling to a very extent the shape of these utterances."

Richards (1971b: 14), on the basis of this theoretical framework, suggests errors of interference, overgeneralization, and assimilation in which the learner makes his learning task easier. Several researchers have investigated the extent to which learners make errors. Dulay and Burt in their two widely cited papers (1973, 1974) report a study in which they took speech samples of 179 Spanish speaking children. They tallied errors that could be 'unambiguously' classified as either being interference, intralingual or unique (neither of the two) and came to the rather dramatic and straightforward conclusion, that of the 513 unambiguous errors, only about 5% were interference while 87% were intralingual and the remainder were classified as unique. Dulay and Burt according to this finding said that 'children do not use their first language habits in the process of learning the syntax of their new language' (1974: 134).

Other studies in Error Analysis attempt to compare the proportions of interference and intralingual errors in adult learners. Corder (1975) citing Duskova (1969) reports that there is a larger proportion of interlingual errors in the case of adult Czechoslovakians made in English composition, and reported that roughly 30% of the 1,007 errors collected were interference and the remainder intralingual. A closer look the breakdown of her data reveals that many interference errors were omissions of articles, a part of speech for which Czech does not have an equivalent. Dulay and Burt considered omission of articles to be intralingual errors, since children learning English as their first language also omit articles. When one compares the interference errors according to Dulay and Burt's criteria the proportion in Duskova's study is also reduced to 5%.

Other studies of errors are taxonomic, generally classifying errors as interference, overgeneralization and simplification. Such studies include Selinker, Swain and Dumans (1975), Jain (1974), Richards (1971a) and Taylor (1975).

#### An Approach Suitable to the Nepalese Context

In a paper on the contrastive analysis hypothesis, Wardhaugh (1970) observes that a decade ago this approach was still a fairly new and exciting idea holding great promise for curriculum development and teaching. But after the Chomskyan revolution in linguistics, one is not too sure. Today contrastive analysis is just one of many uncertain variables which one must re-evaluate in second language teaching. "The predicting power of contrastive analysis is now seriously questioned; it is being confronted with approaches that are more directly concerned with pupil performance." (Buteau 1970: 134). Buteau concludes in her study of students' errors in the learning of French as a second language that an error based analysis is necessary to work out and test hypotheses concerning factors that set degrees of difficulty in second language acquisition.

In Nepal, where learners acquire English as a foreign language an error based of learners' errors can give more reliable results upon which remedial materials can be constructed. Corder, Wilkins, Duskova, Buteau, and Richards have all emphasized the need for an error based analysis.

Besides, as already mentioned, an error based analysis gives information on the actual performance of the learners and is therefore most suited to the Nepalese context. Unfortunately, few studies have been done on errors made by Nepali speakers of English. The

work done by Donnelley and Malla (1970) and Jordan and Jordan (1969) on actual errors of Nepali learners are pioneering works in this field, and errors have been generally classified as interference, overgeneralization and simplification.

From what has been said, it is evident that work on known rather than hypothesised errors are more fruitful. The error based approach proposed for the Nepalese context is of course a pedagogical one, and does not deny the validity of contrastive explanations for some errors. The results of this approach are significant to the teacher in that they help him assess the level of achievement of the learner and by implication the teaching content for the future.

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