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The Role and Significance of Error Linguistics in a Second Language Environment

By

Joseph- Kenneth (Joe-ken) kelechi Nzerem PhD
Imo- State University, Owerri

&

Prisca Odinakachi Bob
Evangel University, Akaeze, Ebonyi State

Abstract

Despite the fact that learners of the English language in non-native environments strive to attain native speakers’ standard, their performance is replete with various forms of errors capable of causing infidelity in communication. This study investigates the significance of error linguistics in a Second Language environment. It states that errors are inevitable parts of language learning. They are indications that there exists a learning process. The study argues that although the making of errors is significant in the learning process, there is need to identify, locate, quantify and assess errors committed by learners. Therefore, error linguistics becomes a tool in the hands of linguists to unravel the mystery surrounding the making of errors. The study hinges on the behaviourist theory which is a psychological theory that emphasizes on observable behaviour. It was propounded by J. B. Watson, E. L. Thorndike and B. F. Skinner. The causes of errors as stated in this study include: lack of motivation, First Language interference, translation of idiomatic expressions and overgeneralization. The study classifies errors into inter-lingual and intra-lingual as well as distinguishes between errors and mistakes. It therefore presents procedures used for error analysis in error linguistics which hopefully would reduce the number of errors committed by a Second Language learner of the English language.

Keywords: Role, Significance, Second Language and English Environment.
Introduction

The study of learners’ errors has been one of the major areas of investigation by linguists in the history of second language acquisition research. The inevitability of errors and its frequent occurrence moved linguists to device techniques to enable them deal with and conceptualize learner. To this end, linguists came up with certain linguistic principles that could check errors in the use of English of the L2 learner.

The principle of Error linguistics, otherwise known as Error Analysis was postulated by S. Pit Corder to assess and determine a language learners’ proficiency in the use of the second language. The technique is such that locates, quantifies, classifies and categorizes errors in the texts of language learners (Otagburuagu et al, 2012). In line with the principles of Error Linguistics is the concept of interlanguage, a term coined by Larry Selinker to account for a model of the target language which the L2 learner approximates in the process of language learning.

Errors are systematic deviations from the native speakers’ linguistic norms which arise from a learner’s lack of proper knowledge of the rules of the language. They occur repeatedly and are not recognizable by the learner even if his attention is drawn to it. According to Headbloom (1979), errors are goofs or deviant productions. They are deviations from the syntactic structure of native speakers. Errors are also integral parts of the second language learning. No wonder Dulay and Burt (1990) argue that, “You cannot learn without goofing.” Through error making, the strategy of learning adopted by the learner which is either approved or disapproved is shown.

According to Klassen (1991) cited in Otagburuagu (2016), errors are forms or structures that native speakers deem unacceptable because of their inappropriate use. The writer opines that errors give a clue to what is happening in the mind of a learner and this must occur as a matter of necessity before the correct grammar is learnt. This accounts for the errors committed in the language learning process, a situation where a L2 Learner continuously attempts to attain a level of linguistic competence through trials and errors.

It is important to state that errors are not mistakes. The distinguishing feature of error lies in its systematic nature. Mistakes are not systematic but occur as a result of the failure to utilize a known system correctly. Brown (1982) argues that mistakes are performance errors frequently made by both native speakers and second language learners. Mistakes include slips of the tongue and random ungrammatical formations which can be corrected with or without drawing the attention of the speaker.

In relating errors and mistakes to competence and performance, Chomsky (1965) argues that the competence of a speaker is represented in the errors that occur in his linguistic data. For Richard et al (2002), the actual state of the speaker influences his performance, either causing mistakes or not. Thus, good performance is a function of a learner’s linguistic competence. While competence error is systematic, performance error is a slip which is of no importance to language learning process.

In their own view, Ellis and Tomlinson (2001) assert that when a learner makes a mistake, he tends to break the rules of the language as a result of non-linguistic factors. Thus a pupil might use a particular
item wrongly because he is careless, tired, sick, bored, writing very quickly, or thinking ahead. Mistakes as seen by the authors are inevitable and are frequently made by the native speakers. They tell us very little about language learning problems and (unless excessive) they should be corrected by the learner himself. The writers further point out the difference between a mistake and an error using error analysis by stating that error analysis is the analysis of the learner’s errors not their mistakes.

The authors explain further that error analysis is the systematic description and explanation of errors made by speaking of a foreign or second language. They also see error analysis as a branch of Applied Linguistics that diagnosis difficulties in second language learning by systematically collecting, analyzing and categorizing errors. They view error analysis as the study of errors in the performance of the second language learners.

To Ellis and Tomlinson, errors analysis contributes greatly to linguistic theory formation leading to the discovery of new aspects of language use. They maintain that error analysis could be used as a method of testing the hypothesis developed within the ambit of a linguistic theory. The writers are of the view that mistakes are language goofs which a language user recognizes and corrects when his attention is drawn to them.

Abstracting from these, it is worthy to note that errors are not bad in the process of second language learning. Once errors are identified and corrected, the performance of the language learner will improve. Problems only exist when these errors are not identified and corrected. This no doubt is the preoccupation of the study done by Ellis and Tomlinson while our present study is interested in contributing to scholarship by also discussing the procedures for Error Analysis.

**Theoretical Framework**

This work relies heavily on the behaviorist theory of language learning. Psychologists such as J. B. Watson (Respondent conditioning), B. F. Skinner (Operant conditioning), Ivan Pavlov (Classical conditioning) are the proponents of behaviorism which considers language learning as a process of habit formation built on reinforcement and reward. The behaviorist theory believes that a child acquires language through resources that are continually reinforced: therefore is imitation language learners tend to imitate and reproduce the linguistic pattern of the second language. The second language teacher should take into cognizance the dependence of the second language learner on the teaching methodology and avoid faulty teaching.

The behaviorists believe that language learning is fundamentally a process which involves the making of errors. They believe that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning and that behavior can be measured, trained and changed. They also believe that a learner’s state as a clean slate and his behavior are shaped through positive or negative reinforcement or influence.

Dullay and Burt (1974) further submits that the notion of errors itself is controversial: its native description and explanation depend mainly on the outlook of the process of human learning in general and language learning in particular.

It is on the basis of the behaviorist theory that this work studied errors, its identification, causes and sources as well as process of Error Analysis.
**Procedure for Error Analysis**

Error analysis was established as an alternative to contrastive analysis which failed to predict a great majority of errors. This technique was employed in solving language learners’ problem in learning a second language. The aim of Error linguistics according to Richard (2002) is in the first instance, to identify strategies which learners use in language learning, paying attention to the approaches and strategies displayed in the teaching and learning process. Another thing is to identify the causes of learners errors, and finally to obtain information areas of difficulties in language learning which will help in adequate preparation of the teaching materials.

Error analysis is sometimes called weak hypothesis. It is also called linguistic a posteri or. A term borrowed from French, meaning post mortem linguistics. Error analysis is identified with two schools of thought. While one school examines errors as a result of poor teaching method, the other identifies errors as a norm. This is in line with Corder (1967) when he highlights that the first school of thought argues that errors are committed as a result of faulty teaching method. Lending his support, Corder (1991) states that: “If we were to achieve a perfect teaching method, the errors would never be committed in the first place and therefore is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of teaching techniques …”

The argument is hinged on the fact that an individual’s teaching method, if not properly designed and redesigned, could constitute a source of error to the learner. The second school of thought which identifies error making as an inevitable occurrence and a product of a real and imperfect world aligns with Strevens (1969) opinion that errors as normal and inevitable features, indicating the strategy that learners use.

Procedures are adopted for error analysis. A highlight as explained by S. Pit Corder is discussed below. The first stage of error analysis is to collect language samples of language learner. To collect this data, one should administer a test or an examination on language. There are two broad ways of this examination. They are essay type which is free writing. This approach helps the learner to avoid making mistakes and objective tests which pins the learner down to that which he would have avoided in essay type test. The collected data is for the most part compared with the already existing information.

The second stage is for the linguist or language teacher to mark the scripts of the test he administered. The third stage is to identify the errors committed. Here the linguist or language teacher identifies what constitutes an error and tries to distinguish a learner’s lack of linguistic competence from a lapse in memory. This shows the difference between error and mistake which manifests after the language teacher has located the second language user’s error.

The fourth stage is for the language teacher or linguist to classify the errors committed. At this stage he puts each error according to its kinds for example verb errors, prepositional errors, noun errors etc. The linguist also states whether the error is at the language level or at general linguistics. The fifth stage has to do with describing the errors committed by the second language user.

At the sixth stage, the linguist or language teacher explains the errors. Here he tells us the cause of the errors. That is if the error was committed as a result of inter-lingual or
intra-lingual transfer. The seventh and last stage of error analysis is to eliminate error of the second language user by teaching him the correct version of the error he committed.

**Identification of Errors**

To identify errors, linguists should know what constitutes an error. From the definitions given earlier in the work by different authorities and personal conviction, the identification of errors is not a difficult one. Any deviation from linguistic norm or standard usage identifies an error. Example: He have a book. This is an error caused by a deviation from the grammatical concord rule.

In addition, errors should be distinguished from mistakes. Errors occur as a result of lack of linguistic competence, while mistakes are the result of slips. Brown (1982) argues that a mistake is a performance error that results from the inability to apply an already known system. Furthermore, distinctions should be made between overt and covert errors. Overt errors describe recognizable errors and show how easy it is to identify errors. There is apparent deviation in “I happy”. They are obvious even when out of context. Covert errors are vague and fuzzy despite their supposed grammaticality. They are evident only in context. An example is the use of the clause, “it ceased” when used to refer to the stopping of the rain. The identification of error is not an exercise in futility. It is a sure way to error analysis. When errors are identified, the second language learners’ linguistic profile is ascertained.

**Classification of Errors**

Classifying errors also accounts for error analysis. To this end, linguists have been making attempts to categorize errors. Richard et al (2002) classified errors into two; inter-lingual and intra-lingual. He argues that inter-lingual errors arise as a result of a cross-linguistic transfer caused by L1 interference. This error is the result of a negative transfer, a situation where the structure of the mother tongue is transferred to the learning of a target language. Intra-lingual error is identified as a developmental error which occurs in the process of learning the target language. It indicates that there is a knowledge gap in the target language which is the result of faulty or partial learning. Intra-lingual errors are further classified as:

i) **Errors of Overgeneralization:** This is caused by the extension of the rules of the target language to inappropriate contexts. The wrong application of grammatical rules results in the errors of overgeneralization. For instance, the use of the inflectional “s” for pluralization of regular nouns might be applied in contexts that do not admit “s” as a plural form. E.g. Child – Childs. There are also situations where the “ed” past tense maker is wrongly applied in contexts that do not admit “ed” as a past tense maker. E.g. do – doed, etc.

ii) **Induced Errors:** This occurs when teachers do not exhaustively explain a concept or when they use rules without highlighting the exceptions. If for instance the word “lie” is used in the context of a position of not standing or sitting, efforts should be made to identify the prepositions that most likely fit into their various uses. E.g. ‘I am lying in bed’ and “The dog is lying in the table”. Note that the preposition used in the first sentence is appropriate while the preposition used in the second sentence is inappropriate in the context. The use of “lying in” in the second sentence is an induced error, arising from
failure to identify exceptions to grammatical rules.

iii) Simplification: This is the result of learners’ attempt to be creative by producing their own utterances in unusually simpler linguistic forms than those in the target language. Mahmoud (2014) opines that learners do not possess a complex system which can be simplified. Omissions and additions of some linguistic items at the level of spelling or grammar is an ideal feature of this error type. The examples below are presented by Mahmoud (2014) on the written English of Arabic-Speaking second year University students.

Spelling:
Omission of silent letters: no (know), doubt (doubt), weit (weight)

Grammar:
Omission: We wait the bus all the time. He was clever and has understanding father.
Addition: Student are do researches every semester.
Both the boys and the girls they can study together

From the foregoing, it is clear that any attempt at simplifying the linguistic forms of a target language results in an error. No wonder omissions and additions are made at certain levels of grammar.

Errors can also be classified based on the nature of the language skill in which the error occurred. Essentially, classification of language into productive skills and receptive skills accounts for the classification of errors into productive errors and receptive errors. Productive errors are committed in the process of reading and listening.

Chomsky identifies “performance error” and “competence error”. According to him, performance error uses language in a concrete situation while competence error occurs as a result of the level of linguistic competence of the speaker or hearer.

Further classification of errors includes local and global errors. In local errors, there is a violation of a minor part of a sentence which does not prevent the message from being understood. Global error hinders communication because the hearer is prevented from grasping some parts of the message. This classification is based on the degree to which errors interfere with communication. E.g. “I happy” is an example of a local error because the meaning is apparent.

At the linguistic level, errors are classified into phonological error, morphological error, semantic error, syntactic error, graphological error, etc.

Phonological Errors: These are errors that occur at the level of phonology. This type of error may follow phonotactic constraints defined by the target grammar. However, this should be learnt during the language learning process. Warker & Dell (2006) affirm this when they stated that these constraints are learned through exposure and practice. For instance, while the English language admits consonant clusters both at word initial, word middle and word final positions, the Igbo language is not structured alike.

Again, while the English language is stress timed and quite distinguishable from other languages, most indigenous Nigerian languages are syllable timed. This accounts for discrepancies in pronunciation by a second language learner in the Nigerian
linguistic ecology. Words such as, Wednesday, February, fit into this description.

**Semantic errors**: These are errors that occur when the learner’s concept of meaning in a vernacular does not agree with the meaning of the words in the target language. This error type creates confusion in the semantic map of the L2 learner. This accounts for the arbitrary feature of language.

**Graphological errors**: This is the result of the differences that exist in the writing systems of a L2 target language and the learner’s L1. The contrasting features in the graphology of the languages compel him to impose the feature of his native language even when they do not exist in the target language.

**Syntactic error**: This is accounted for in the structure of the language of the L2 learner who implants the structure of his native language on the target language. In describing this error, the following illustrations will suffice:
- O nwere ego? (Interrogative)
- Has he money? (Interrogative)

This is the structure of the English language functioning as a interrogative sentence which is the result of an imposition of the structure of the native Igbo language on the target language by the L2 learner. The structure “Is he rich?” would have been more appropriate in this context. The second language learner is often confronted with the problem of interference which is apparently one of the major causes of error making in language learning. Through error analysis, these errors are identified, located, classified and quantified, and possible measures employed for their reduction.

**Causes of Errors**

Errors are inevitable parts in the learning of a language. Through committing errors, both second language learners and teachers sharpen their skills. They learn from the error and effect necessary changes. However, errors do not just happen, certain factors are responsible for making errors. Norrish (1983) identifies three causes of errors as:

- **Lack of Motivation**: Errors occur in language learning when there is no motivation. Motivation may be intrinsic or extrinsic. The absence of motivation means that the learner purportedly has no reason to learn because there are no set goals (21-26).

- **First Language Interference**: This is known as language transfer and involves the transfer of the structure of a learner’s mother tongue into the structure of the target language.

- **Translation of Idiomatic Expression**: Idioms are expressions or groups of words whose meanings are different from the meanings of the individual words that make up the expression. Word to word translation of an idiomatic expression results in error because it is a case of transliteration which imposes linguistic items in the first language on the second language.

In the same vein, Richards (1971) identifies other causes of errors as:

- **Overgeneralization**: This involves creating a deviant structure as a result of a similar structure already existing in the first language. Example is the use of “highly” that has a similar semantic import with “loudly” in the native language. Hence “the baby screamed loudly”, becomes “the baby screamed highly”.


Incomplete Application of Rules: This arises when there is poor development of structure. Expectedly, the tendency to use one structure in place of another is evident. Example: “Your name is Obi Okonkwo?” replaces “Is your name Obi Okonkwo?”

Hypothesizing False Concepts: Errors occur when there exists in the mind of the language learners, a poor understanding of a concept in the second language. Good examples are in the distinctive use of “his”, a possessive pronoun in place of “he is”, and also the wrong use of “is” a primary auxiliary verb in place of “it is”. For instance: “His a boy” is used rather than “He is a boy”. “Is my own” is also used rather than “it is my own”.

Sources of Errors
There are two main sources of errors. They are interference and intra-lingual factors. The interference phenomenon is the transfer of the structures of the L1 into the target language. The knowledge of the first language influences language processing in the second language. This error can manifest at the phonological level. The transposition of (l) with (r) among some Igbo speakers such that words like love, look, lobby are pronounced as rove, rook and robby accounts for phonological interference. At the syntactic level, it involves cases such as modification of the English structure where the modifier before the headword takes a reverse order as accounted for in some Nigeria words, such as frame door, head bridge, (Otagburuagu, 2016).

Intra-Lingual Factors: Also called developmental factors, this source of error is derived from the experiences of a language learner which include among others some difficulties encountered in the process of learning the second language. Consequently, learners will tend to keep certain linguistic items in their inter-language which over time become fossilized and difficult to correct. This occurs at the various levels of linguistic analysis.

Conclusion
Error Linguistics, is quite significant in its pedagogic and theoretical import. In its pedagogical approach, it provides means of eradicating errors from the learner’s linguistic repertoire. Theoretically, it accounts for an understanding of the learning process by studying errors. Error Linguistics functions as a device the learner has for testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning. Through trial, error, and hypothesis, learners establish approximation to the system used by the native speakers of the language. Based on the importance of error linguistics, this work discussed errors, its identification, classification, causes and sources. As a linguistic construct, error analysis was identified as a tool that bears on errors. Having established the aim, its role in a second language environment cannot be over-emphasized.

Finally, this study supports the view of Brown (1994) that the feedback a second language learner gets upon making errors benefits him in developing the second language knowledge.

References


