

Learning from Errors

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Abstract

“Errare humanum est”, a well known and widespread Latin proverb which states that: to err is human, and that people make mistakes all the time. However, what counts is that people must learn from mistakes. On these grounds Steve Jobs stated: “Sometimes when you innovate, you make mistakes. It is best to admit them quickly, and get on with improving your other innovations.” Similarly, in learning new language, learners make mistakes, thus it is important to accept them, learn from them, discover the reason why they make them, improve and move on.

The significance of studying errors is described by Corder as: “There have always been two justifications proposed for the study of learners' errors: the pedagogical justification, namely that a good understanding of the nature of error is necessary before a systematic means of eradicating them could be found, and the theoretical justification, which claims that a study of learners' errors is part of the systematic study of the learners' language which is itself necessary to an understanding of the process of second language acquisition” (Corder, 1982; 1).

Thus the importance and the aim of this paper is analyzing errors in the process of second language acquisition and the way we teachers can benefit from mistakes to help students improve themselves while giving the proper feedback.

Key Words: errors, error analysis, performance, competence, teaching, learning.

1. Introduction

While I was practicing driving with my husband, he kept correcting me on every step I made. The more he corrected me, the more mistakes I made. Naturally, in driving, correction is necessary because you will put your life and the lives of others in danger.

Similarly in language learning, learners make mistake all the time, but when teachers correct them during the whole process of speaking, the learners get more confused, less self confident, insecure and prone to making more mistakes.

Thus, it is important for the driving instructor and the teacher to find the way how to signal when the learner is making a mistake, why does the mistake occur, what to do to correct that mistake in order not to repeat the same mistake again, and when they have that useful feedback their output will definitely be better.

According to Brown: "You learn to swim by first jumping into the water and flailing arms and legs until you discover that there is a combination of movements –a structured pattern- that succeeds in keeping you afloat and propelling you through the water. The first mistakes of learning to swim are giant ones, gradually diminishing as you learn from making those mistakes" (Brown, 2000; 216). The learner will learn to swim and speak, but it will unquestionably be easier if an instructor is by their side applauding, cheering and signaling at some mistakes.

After committing mistakes, there comes the process of self correction when they are exposed to comprehensible input (i+1) According to Krashen, who believes that: "Improvement may even come faster without correction, since the input will more easily get in, the affective filter will be lower, and the students will be off the defensive" (Krashen, 2009; 76)

On the other hand, if you do not provide the proper feedback to those errors, there is a risk that many words will be misspelled, mispronounced and misused such was the case with the words heard very often "apple" pronounced as /eipəl/ or comfortable as /kɒmfɔrteɪbəl/ because of the wrong teaching practice from unqualified teachers.

Further on, Doff makes a crucial claim: Students' errors are a very useful way of showing what they have and have not learnt. So instead of seeing

errors negatively, as a sign of failure, we can see them positively as an indication of what we still need to teach. Obviously, if we try to prevent students from making errors we can never find out what they do not know (Doff, 1993; 188)

Thus throughout this paper the approaches towards errors, the types of errors, the ways of error correction will be analyzed and treated.

2. Theoretical approaches towards Error Analysis

2.1. Behaviorism

First theoretical approach toward first and second language acquisition was Behaviorism which was very influential in the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. Traditional behaviorists believed that language learning is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success and habit formation.

According to behaviorists, learners receive linguistic input from speakers in their environment and they form associations between words and objects and events. These associations become stronger when the experiences are repeated. Since repetition, drilling and habit formation were considered as very important techniques in first and second language acquisition teachers then considered repeating and imitating incorrect forms as harmful and necessary to be avoided. Thus they emphasized error correction during second language acquisition.

2.2. Contrastive Analysis

Another theoretical approach in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) during 1950-1970s was Contrastive Analysis. It was used for explanation of errors conducted by language learners. Furthermore, the method was trying to illuminate why some language features were more difficult for learners to acquire than others. It was believed that the aspects of the target language (L2) which were different from one's mother tongue (L1) were consequently to cause problems in learning, as learners had no habits to follow from.

While learners are acquiring a second language, they often use structures of L1, first language into L2, the target language. This is called interference. According to Lightbound "If two languages were similar, positive transfer occurred, if they were different the transfer would be negative" (MacDonald Lightbound, 2005; 66).

Based on this approach it was believed that errors in second language acquisition can be predicted and remedied, which is proved to be incorrect later supported by many empirical researches conducted in that area.

2.3. Error Analysis

The focus shifted from contrastive analysis to error analysis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As one of the main reasons was the fact that Contrastive Analysis was incapable to describe all errors in language acquisition, as it is not likely to assign them all to differences between first language and second language.

Furthermore, some of the predicted errors did not even appear in spoken practice (see e.g. Allwright and Bailey, 1991). Therefore a need for a new linguistic method appeared which accordingly took form of error analysis. One of the major founders of error analysis was Stephen Pit Corder. Corder states that: "In the field of methodology there have been two schools of thought in respect of learners' errors. Firstly the school which maintains that if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques.

The philosophy of the second school is that we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts." (Corder, 1982; 7)

Carl James viewed, "Error Analysis developed out of the belief that errors indicate the learner's stage of language learning and acquisition. The learner is seen as an active participant in the development of hypotheses regarding the rules of the target language just as is a young child learning the first language.

Errors are considered to be evidence of the learner's strategy as he or she builds competence in the target language. These errors are defined as global, which inhibit understanding, and local, which do not interfere with communication." (James, 1998; 56)

According to Rod Ellis, global errors violate the overall structure of a sentence and for this reason may make it difficult to process, on the other side local errors, affect only a single constituent in the sentence (for example verbs) and are less likely to create any processing problems. (Ellis, 1997; 20)

At the first sight, it may be considered as very strange to focus on what learners get wrong rather than what they get right. However, the reasons for emphasizing errors are evident. To start with the fact that errors are a prominent feature of a learner language.

Continuing with another evidence that teachers are interested to know what errors do learners make. Inasmuch, concluding with a statement that committing errors might help learners learn while self-correcting.

Similarly Corder affirmed that: "A learner's errors are significant because they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of language" (Corder, 1967; 167).

3. Typology of errors

Errors are defined and treated in different way by different linguists, researchers and scholars. First, it is important to distinguish between errors and mistakes, being that these two terms are often confused. According to James: "if the learner is inclined and able to correct a fault in his or her output, it is assumed that the form he or she selected was not the one he intended, and we shall say that the fault is a mistake. If, on the other hand, the learner is unable or in any way disinclined to make the correction, we assume that the form the learner used was the one intended, and that is an error." (James, 1998; 78).

Similarly Corder associates errors with failures in competence, whereas mistakes with failures in performance and insisting that mistakes are of no significance to the process of learning since they do not reflect a defect in our knowledge, meaning that they are not caused by incompetence.

Errors in other words are considered as deviance or discrepancy between what learner tends to say and what the native speaker tends to say.

These deviances can be classified according to James in four groups: *Slips* or lapses of tongue, pen and these can be detected and self corrected. Then there are *mistakes* which can be corrected by their agent if the deviance is pointed out to the speaker. The third group are *errors* that cannot be self-corrected until further input has been provided to the learner to be able to correct that error.

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) claim that there are two basic ways of categorizing learners' errors and that is into either linguistics categories

(morphology, phonology, etc.) or surface structure taxonomies (errors of addition, omission, etc.).

Therefore the most frequent classification of errors is presented below:

Errors of omission -where some element is omitted that should actually be present. It is relevant to distinguish omission from ellipsis and zero elements, which are allowed by grammar, but omission is ungrammatical)

Errors of addition -where some element is present though it should not be there. Dulay, Burt and Krashen suggest that addition is the result of all-too faithful use of certain rules (1982; 156) In this group is distinguished overgeneralization which involves overlooking exceptions and spreading rules to domains where they do not apply.

An example of overgeneralization taken from: (Lightbown, and Spada, 1990; 16)

Son: I *putted* the plates on the table!

Mother: You mean, I *put* the plates on the table.

Son: No, I *putted* them on all by myself.

Errors of misformation -where a wrong form or a morpheme was selected in place of the right one. For example the use of written instead of wrote for the past tense. It means that the learner has miss selected the wrong form instead the proper one

Errors of misordering -where the items presented are selected correctly, but placed in a wrong order. Albanian language regarding word order is more flexible than English, which has a strict word order. Certain word classes in English appear to be very sensitive to misordering such as adverbials, adjectives and interrogative forms. These errors are more frequent when learners' first language is more flexible concerning word order. As Dulay, Burt, Krashen observe, misordering is often the result of learners relying on carrying out 'word for word translations of native language surface structures' (1982; 163).

Based on a corpus of spoken language, Chun et al. (1982) distinguished five categories: *Discourse errors* (errors beyond the sentence level and including structural/pragmatic aspects including inappropriate openings and closings, incorrect topic switches, refusals, etc.)

Factual errors (including those concerning the factual knowledge of an utterance)

Word choice errors (incorrect choice of a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition etc.)

Syntactic errors (tense agreement, morphology, word order, etc.)

Omissions (involving the incorrect omission of nouns, verbs, auxiliaries, articles, etc.)

3.1. Analyzing errors conducted on students' writings

From my teaching experience with university students on different writing assignments, a vast amount of mistakes and errors on phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactical level has been found and analyzed. I always kept in mind not offending students and discouraging them while giving feedback on their writings.

Usually after checking papers, I took notes on the mistakes and errors conducted by students and in the next class, I wrote some of the most representative errors on the blackboard which students and I explained them together trying to find the correct forms in the target language. Authors of errors were left anonymous to the audience, but there were cases when they admitted their mistakes as soon as they recognized and identified them on the blackboard. In this manner a broad and useful feedback on errors was given to learners who committed them without making them feel ashamed and discouraged in front of the class.

In the table below errors from students' papers will be presented:

Figure 1: Errors from students' writing

Type of errors	Errors done by students	Explanation
<i>Errors of addition</i>	*sleeped *our life is not so safely *To happened *Many childrens play	regularization, adding -ed to form past addition of -ly (safe) addition of -ed to infinitive addition of -s to irregular plural
<i>Errors of omission</i>	*she realize *everyone say videogames for hour * every student that hear about the exam overtakes a fear	Omission of -ed Omission of inflectional -s Omission of -s, misplacement of overtakes and omission of by (that hears about the exam is overtaken by fear)
<i>Errors of misformation</i>	*Education generation *be on their feets *they life *human been *the children are boring	Wrong lexical choice (educated) Wrong lexical choice and addition (boots) Wrong lexical choice (their) Misselection (being) Misselection (bored)
<i>Errors of misordering</i>	*The job keep teens out of trouble also a job * week before the exams, certainly I am very stressed	Wrong word order and omission (Jobs and sports keep teens out of trouble) Misordering (Certainly, I am very stressed during the week before the exam)
<i>Errors of L1 interference</i>	*falling down from exams *go in lectures *I will present the exam	First language interference, to fail the exam First language interference (attend) L1 interference (I will apply for the exam)
<i>Errors of double negative and double subject</i>	*they do not help nobody *participating in sport it is a good idea *the lack of concentration was very week	Double negative (they do not help anybody) Double subject Double negative form, misspelling (the lack of concentration was very high)
<i>Blends</i>	This is mine book	Mine used with the noun
<i>Misspelling</i>	*I hear form people *ouer means *in our future live *sing in * get the great you expected	Misspelling (from) Misspelling (our) Misspelling (future life) Misspelling (sign in) Misspelling (get the grade)

Source: Kryeziu, 2015

3.2. How to correct and give the proper feedback

In a language classroom, the student and the teacher are responsible for the process of teaching and learning taking place. Student's task is to fulfill all the assignments required from the teacher indicating here the

performance activities in speaking and writing, whereas the teacher's responsibility is to identify the mistakes, give positive feedback which will help the student treat those mistakes and not repeat them again.

The issues that are risen in this case by many linguists, researchers, educators are Hamletian dilemma "To be or not to be" or "To correct or not to correct", then '*when?*', '*where?*', '*why?*', '*how?*', and '*what?*' to correct.

The term Error correction is commonly used in second language learning with a numerous meanings. In general, it refers to a corrective activity aimed at eradication of a documented inconsistency or simply stating that the term usually refers to the substitution of an error by what is correct.

Carl James (1998) observes that there are three main meanings of the term *correction*:

1. Informing the learners that there is an error and leaving them to discover it and repair it themselves.
2. Providing treatment or information that leads to the revision and correction of the specific error without aiming to prevent the same error from recurring later. In addition to indicating that the present attempt is wrong, the corrector can specify how and where, suggest an alternative, give a hint.
3. Providing learners with information that allows them to revise or reject the wrong rule they were operating with when they produced the error. (James, 1998; 240)

Another useful taxonomy was recommended by Bailey (1985) cited in Brown (2000; 238), where basic options are complemented by possible features. Basic options:

1. To treat or to ignore
2. To treat immediately or to delay
3. To transfer treatment (to, say, other learners) or not
4. To transfer to another individual, a subgroup, or the whole class
5. To return, or not, to original error maker after treatment
6. To permit other learners to initiate treatment
7. To test for the efficacy of the treatment

During error correction, teachers help students become more precise in their L2 performance. Absolutely, it does not mean "insisting on everything being absolutely correct" (Edge, 1989; 33); in the opposite way, error

correction should be defined as a means of helping learners on their way to mastering the second language, not as a tool for reaching perfection. Similarly students find it a very helpful manner in the process of Second language acquisition.

4. Analyzing data from the students' questionnaire on errors and error correction

Aiming at finding out what students think regarding errors and error correction a questionnaire consisting of closed and open questions was distributed to 45 respondents who are second and third year bachelor students of English Language and Literature at the public university of Gjakova.

The goal of the questionnaire was analyzing and finding out students' opinions, attitudes and reactions towards making mistakes or when corrected by their teachers or peers.

The respondents were investigated about how often their teachers correct their errors? Whether it disturbs them when they are corrected by the teacher or their friends? On what areas they keep on being corrected? What they think about error correction and feedback? What are their reactions when they realize they have made a mistake? Whether they keep repeating the same mistake after being corrected? Whether they consult grammar books, dictionaries and other reference books after making mistakes? Whether they feel discouraged after making too many errors? Whether they lose the desire to speak when someone corrects them? Whether they learn from the mistakes they make? Whether they think that meaning is more important than form?

4.1. Data from the closed set of questions

On the question: Whether the teacher corrects them: *too often, adequately, only rarely, or never?* out of 45 students, the highest percentage of 71% responded that teachers correct them adequately, 18% responded that teachers correct them only rarely and 11% answered that their teachers correct them too often. Even though there is no space for assumptions in a research, the figure of 18% of the students who answered 'only rarely' may belong to the students who are fluent in second language, and who rarely make mistakes, whereas the figure of 11% answering 'too often' may belong to the students who lack performance and competence.

On the second closed question whether they are disturbed when they are corrected by their teacher 60% answered 'No', whereas 40 % of students answer with 'Yes' It means that in the process of learning a language, making mistakes is considered as a natural process, thus more than half of students do not mind if they keep being corrected by their teachers.

On the statement: I like to be corrected and receive feedback from my friends 68% responded with 'Yes' whereas 32% with 'No'. On the other hand, when the teacher lets the other students correct their errors 84% of students responded that they feel bad or very bad, whereas 16% of them answered with good. This high percentage might lead us to the belief that students do not like the authority of other students appointed by the teacher to correct them, as there were the cases when some teachers assigned students of a pleasing performance correct students who lack competence and performance.

To the statement: I keep repeating the same mistakes after being corrected, the highest percentage of 93% of respondents answered with 'No', whereas 7% with 'Yes'

The majority of learners of second language have the habit of consulting various books when they do not understand a word or a phrase, and it would be the teacher's best dream when his students make a mistake, consult different grammar and reference books to get that word right.

On the statement: When a teacher or someone else detects my error in my speaking or writing, I consult the books in order to learn that.

When students make mistakes while speaking and the teacher does not correct them 84% consider it as bad, 16% of respondents think this issue is a very bad one, meaning that 100% of students think that teachers should correct students when they make mistakes. There was not a single student who thought that it is good or very good practice when teachers not react at student's errors.

There was a variety of answers on the statement when students make errors and the teacher lets them self correct. 7.5% thought this is a bad practice, 27,5% think this is a very bad practice, 40% think that this is a good practice and 25% of students consider this practice as a very good one. It means that the majority of students have positive opinion about the teacher's practice to let the students self correct.

When the teacher identifies the error and corrects the student, 43% of students think this practice is a very good one. 51% of them think this practice is very good and only 5.4% consider this practice as a bad one. On

the other hand when the teacher introduces the correct form to the students and lets them repeat it, the highest percentage of students consider this practice as a good one and very good. 62% of them think this practice is very good, 22.5% think this is a good practice. Whereas, only 15% of respondents consider this practice as a bad one.

It was a strong confirmation by the majority of respondents, or saying precisely 92% of them consider correcting their errors and explaining what was wrong and why, as a very good practice, and 8% of them consider this practice as a good one. Thus 100% of students consider teachers' error correction and feedback very valuable in the process of second language acquisition. There was not a single student who thought that correcting students on their errors and explaining them what went wrong or why is a bad idea

A majority of 74% of students are discouraged when they make too many mistakes and only 26% of them are not. This data might lead us to the belief that the percentage of 26 % who are not discouraged by the errors they make might be very extrovert and motivated in learning the second language, and they disregard all the difficulties they encounter along the road, but then again, this might be only an assumption in a research when such measurements are not conducted with the respondents.

On the statement when someone corrects me, I lose the desire to speak; 70% of students answered 'No', whereas 30% said that they do. The majority of students continue on speaking even after being corrected. This can be explained that learners do not abandon the path of learning a SL when they encounter obstacles; they aim at reaching their goals.

The statement I learn from my mistakes was supported by 100% of students. Regarding this Otto von Bismark's quote: *"Only a fool learns from his mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others"* would not be very appropriate to use. It would definitely be better if this quote was transformed in the way some people use it, such as: *"A clever man learns from his mistakes, but the wiser man learns from others mistakes. In conclusion to this statement it is important that we all learn from ours and someone else's mistakes, be those in language or in life.*

Another majority of 84% of students believe that meaning is more important than form. 16% of respondents think that form is important. In order of sending the message in a target language, students must focus on meaning, not form or structure.

4.2. Data analysis from open questions

In order of finding out more detailed information on opinions, attitudes and reactions of students about errors and error corrections, the questionnaire consisted of closed questions as well.

On the question when I make a mistake my teacher's reaction is..., many students wrote that their teacher's reaction is calm and politely trying to correct when they are wrong. Some of the responding opinions are cited below:

"Sometimes teachers interfere while I'm speaking, and that confuses me"

"Tells me the right word without emphasizing that I made a mistake"

On the question: I keep being corrected on...The respondents answered similarly that they keep being corrected on pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary retention, lexical choices, word order, grammar, talking too fast, reading, One respondent wrote that he/she keep being corrected on the word "comfortable"

Another open question directed to the students was: "I find error correction and feedback as..."

drew various answers, and the most representative one was that they find error correction and feedback very useful, helpful, important. The best way to learn for the shortest time. A field for improvement. Nearly all answers were positive regarding error correction and feedback as a way of improvement and learning and some of those opinions are introduced below:

"...helpful because I always try to benefit from what my friends and teachers say"

"...something that helps me avoid errors"

"...something helpful because I cannot correct myself if I don't know that I made an error,

because it always seems that we are doing things well"

"...therefore error correction is very helpful as well as feedback because I get to learn why I made the error and improve"

On the other hand there were only two cases when students wrote that they find error correction and feedback as very helpful and effective, but they prefer it to be done by the teachers, not the students, as it is noted below:

"...offensive when done by a student. If it is done by a teacher I'd feel grateful"

"...something that should be done by the teacher, not the students"

The following question aims at finding out what are the students' reactions when they realize that they made a mistake. On this question many students responded: shocked, angry, sad, embarrassed, 'I blush' 'I ask for the correct form and try to learn it' 'I just stop, lower my voice and want to be corrected' The most representative opinions are cited below"

"...I try to find out why I made that mistake and try to improve it"

"...Try to correct it myself and then to seek help from my peers or teachers"

"...Analyze the word and try to say it in the right way"

"...Just stop and listen while I'm being corrected"

The question: "I would appreciate if my teacher..." aimed at finding out what students expect from their teachers and what their preferences are and as thus provided many interesting answers from the respondents. Nearly all the students wanted their teacher to correct them on the mistakes they make. Those worth mentioning are included below:

"...I would appreciate if the teacher corrects me on every error I make"

"...if my teacher would correct me immediately after that mistake and not after I finish reading"

"...knows how to correct us without making us feel bad"

"...would really tell me when I make a mistake, and really help me correct them by advising and suggesting what I should do further"

"...if my teacher tells me that I made a mistake and lets me self-correct until I find the answer"

"...if my teacher corrects me but in the way that would not have such attention"

"...corrects me continually and shows me the right way"

Finally the last open question of the questionnaire is: "What do I think about errors I make?" Students answered in different ways but mostly their common response is that it is human to make mistakes and they hope that they improve by using advices and feedback. Some of their answers are:

"...I usually don't think about them because I try to make as less as I possibly can"

"...Everybody makes mistakes; it is a way of learning, so I do not mind them as long as I not repeat them"

“...try to self correct, not repeat them, and not be discouraged”

5. Conclusion

In the process of learning something new, everyone make mistakes and go through different developmental stages. Similarly in learning a second language, errors or mistakes are considered as a natural way of learning. It is important though, to learn from the mistakes we make.

From the questionnaire conducted with 45 students of the University of Gjakova a very important output was collected and analyzed. Students make mistakes, but they like to be corrected in a way that would not be very intimidating. They would prefer to be notified or signaled when they make mistakes, have the chance to self-correct or be corrected by the teacher, not the students.

Almost all the students responded that it would be very bad if the teacher does not correct them, because when they are explained by the teacher they will be able to learn and not repeat the same mistakes. All the students replied that error correction and feedback is very important process in the second language acquisition and they do not repeat the same mistakes again after being corrected by the teacher. The majority of students thought that meaning is more important than form, but they would like to be corrected because they will not be able to learn if they are not alerted when they make mistakes.

Thus, in an appropriate environment with enough input of a second language, students will learn the language and they will make mistakes along the road, but it is important to be corrected by someone and learn from those mistakes.

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