A Brief Study of Second Language Learning Strategies From the Perspective of Error Analysis

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Language teaching is not a one-way process. It interacts with language learning in an extremely intricate way. To improve language teaching, we need to take the process of language learning into account. This paper tries to explore and understand what strategies the second language learners consciously or subconsciously adopt during their language learning process through the analyses of the linguistic errors they commit, so as to provide some insights into language teaching practice.

_Keyswors:_ second language acquisition, error analysis, learning strategies, language teaching

**Introduction**

How to improve language pedagogy? This is a question that has been haunting most linguistic researchers and, above all, language teachers. But not until the second half of the 20th century was the systematic study of how learners learn a second language related to the study of how teachers teach a second language. Before that time, language learning and language teaching were considered two clearly separate areas. Therefore, researchers trying to improve language teaching have never taken language learning into consideration.

Now, we know that language teaching is not a one-way process. It interacts with language learning in an extremely intricate way. We can never define it apart from learning. Theories of teaching must be based on theories of learning. Without taking learning into account, we can never really improve teaching. Teaching guides and facilitates learning, helping learners learn, setting conditions for learning to take place. Our understanding of how learners learn will provide us with some insights into how we should teach. What should guide our teaching (our teaching style, methods, materials, and so on) is our understanding of language learning. The more we find out and are sure about language learning, especially through error analysis, the better we can do to improve our teaching, although language learning is not so simple a phenomenon that can be easily understood.

**Significance of Error Analysis**

At first thought, it may seem rather surprising or even ridiculous for us to deal with the question of learner errors while normally learners are trying to learn, and teachers to teach the standard forms of a language. Traditionally, errors are considered as a matter of no particular importance. They are just annoying, but inevitable byproducts of the learning process. Both teachers and learners are doing their best to find a way to overcome these negative byproducts. With the development of research on psycholinguistics, people now begin to see the
significance of learner errors. Errors have both commonality and individuality. By commonality, the author means that it is common for learners to make errors in the process of language learning and that a large number of errors are common in different language learners, i.e., different learners may commit the same errors while learning a language. By individuality, the author means that while some errors can be seen as common, other errors are particular and belong to individuals only. These two features of errors now raise a most important question of why learners make errors. What do they do in the process of language learning? Another important feature of errors is their systematicity. They are a reflection of an underlying linguistic system of the learner at a particular time, which is the basis of the learner’s production of his language. Therefore, focusing our attention on errors is not at all senseless. We have very good reasons to study learner errors. Error analysis, as a way of studying learner language, has its practical as well as its theoretical values.

Classification of Errors

After reading and referring to some works of language learning theories, we find that the classification of language errors can be carried out from different perspectives, that is to say, we can use different methods to classify errors. Through the analysis of the data collected by myself, and taking my own needs of research into account, the author here mainly uses the comparative method to classify and analyze learner errors. By the comparative method, the author means the errors will be classified based on a comparison of students’ first language (their mother tongue, in this case, Chinese) and second language (in this case English).

Generally speaking, competence errors can be classified into three groups of different psycholinguistic sources. One group of errors occurs when the learner makes use of a linguistic item or rule of his mother tongue or of the other languages; he has already possessed in the production of the language he is learning. This group of errors will be called “intralingual errors” in the author’s paper in that the commitment of such errors involves at least two languages.

In addition, second language learners make errors as those made by children acquiring their first language. This kind of errors reflects the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply. The learner creates such deviant structures on the basis of processing the rules of the target language. Elements from other languages are not involved in the commitment of such errors. Therefore, errors of this group are called intralingual errors, or developmental errors because errors of this nature can first be seen in children’s development of their first language.

Apart from these two groups of errors, there is still another group of errors. The errors neither interlingual nor intralingual belong to this group. We call this group of errors unique errors temporarily, because these errors neither reflect rules in the learner’s previously acquired languages, which shows that they are unique reflections of creative construction; nor do they reflect rule-processing of the target language, i.e., they are different from those errors children acquiring their first language make; they are unique to second language learners. Sources of this group of errors may be from the teacher, the teaching materials, etc.

Interlingual Errors

Now, let’s examine each of these three types of errors on the basis of learner errors collected in the course of my teaching of English. All the following utterances are typical of Chinese learners of English. Each of them
contains an interlingual error of some kind, an error of pronunciation, of vocabulary, of structure, or of language use.

1. He married with the girl last week.
2. I very like little animals.
3. No, no, my English is very poor. (In response to “Your English is excellent”)
4. I’d like to /in’vait/ you to dinner.
5. I’ll do a model plane after doing my homework.

Phonologically speaking, some of the English vowels and consonants are absent from some Chinese dialects. /v/ is such a consonant. This causes errors, such as the one illustrated in the fourth example, where the speaker intends to /in’vait/ the listener. Examples 1 and 2 are structural errors which occur, because the learner transfers the Chinese patterns to English. Example 3 concerns the appropriacy of the language. The learner producing such an utterance utilizes the Chinese rule of language use which tells the learner to show his modesty on hearing others’ compliments. The errors in the above-mentioned examples, as the author understands, are real transfer errors in that the learners of these utterances have transferred some features (phonological, grammatical, or pragmatic) of the languages they have previously learned to the language he is learning. The making of the error in Example 5 also involves two different languages, but to some extent, is different from the other four examples. It arises because there is no clear distinction between “make” and “do” in the Chinese language.

**Intralingual Errors**

After the examination of interlingual errors, the author will now transfer to intralingual errors. Intralingual errors may be subdivided into types of more specific sources. They may generally fall into the following three different sources: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, and incomplete application of rules. Overgeneralization errors occur when the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language. Overgeneralization generally involves two regular structures in the creation of a deviant structure. For example, “This shows that how clever he is” is an ill-formed structure on the basis of two regular structures “This shows that…” and “This shows how…” The learner has overgeneralized the use of “that” for introducing a noun clause. Overgeneralization may also be associated with omission or redundancy reduction. This may occur as a result of the learner reducing his linguistic burden. For example, by omitting the third person singular “-s”, the learner eliminates the annoying task of subject-predicate verb concord, thus utterances such as “He come from America”, “Mary go to school every day” are produced. Learners omit things especially when these elements are of no significant meaning in the sentence, but only as markers of a particular grammar point. For instance, the “-ed” marker carries hardly any meaning in the following sentence: “I watched a football match yesterday” for pastness is already indicated lexically by the time adverbial “yesterday”. Therefore, learners, to reduce their burden, will omit such elements and produce deviant structures.

Another source of intralingual errors is ignorance of rule restrictions, which involves the application of a rule to contexts where it does not apply. As a matter of fact, this is still a type of generalization. Since the learner is generalizing the usage of the rule, we often see in students’ language production materials such past forms as “taked”, “teached”, “comed”, and “sleepeed”. Those are quite typical rule restriction errors. Learners who produce such forms are unaware of the restrictions of the rule of past-form formation of regular verbs. The learner who utters “I make him to go with me” ignores restrictions on the distribution of “make”, extending the general pattern
found with most verbs which take an infinitive as their complements, such as “ask”, “want”, “allow”, etc. This type of rule restriction errors may be accounted for in terms of analogy or a result of rote learning of rules.

Errors of incomplete application of rules occur when the learner fails to fully develop a structure. Thus, learners of English as a second language may be observed to use interrogative word order instead of declarative word order in clauses where the latter is needed. For example, “I asked him where did he live” is a deviation resulting from the learner’s partial application of the rules to be obeyed in the formation of an object clause.

Classroom observation has provided more than enough material concerning this type of errors, as a result of the use of questions to elicit sentences from learners. Look at the following examples:

Teacher: What’s he doing? Student: He opening the door.
Teacher: What does she tell you? Student: She tell me to wait.
Teacher: Ask her what time it is now. Student: What time it is now?

These samples of language production indicate that under the influence of the teacher’s questions, the students tend to create deviations of this category—Incomplete application of rules. In this way, they are relieving their burdens by simplifying the task without any severe affection on their communication.

**Unique Errors**

Now, those neither interlingual nor intralingual errors come to be the object of our discussion. This type of errors is not a result of the learner’s direct processing of linguistic rules. These errors may be attributed to some teaching techniques or material presentation in the classroom. Learners derive faulty rules from the instruction of the teacher and form false concepts of the target language. For example, at elementary level of English learning, learners may be drowned with such expressions as “This is a…”, “That is a…”, “He/She is a…” with the teacher’s intention of instructing them how to identify a person or a thing. But later on, students, with a false concept that all “is” is followed by “a”, produce all kinds of deviations with the form “…is a…”, such as “This is a water” and “It is a red”. Another example remains clear in the author’s mind, because the deviant structures produced here are all due to her careless explanation of the two items. The author, once, explained to her student, a boy of about 10 years old, that “was” is used to show past time and “is” to show present time when being asked about the difference between the two items. Later, the author found in his speech or writing, whenever there is time adverbial indicating the past, “was” can surely be found there: “I was see a film yesterday”, “Mother was break a cup last week”. Therefore, inadequate, and unclear explanation, particular teaching techniques like contrasting or over drilling, and so on will result in learners’ committing this kind of errors, which is called “induced errors” by certain researchers.

The author has, by now, illustrated these three groups of errors. But as one may have already discovered, it is not really possible to provide a clear distinction. There are many instances where it is hard to decide a specific cause of an error. It may be pointless to debate on the question of which is the primary cause of the error, because in reality, there appears to be several simultaneous processes going on in many cases and these processes may reinforce each other to produce a final utterance. This characteristic of ambiguity of error source makes it impossible for researchers to obtain valid figures of the proportion of different types of errors. However, the author is not saying that error analysis is of no value for that reason. At least, it provides us with insights into learners’ learning strategies and learning processes, thus giving us pedagogical implications.
Discovering Learning Strategies From Learner Errors

While there are a number of different strategies (specific or general) employed by different learners, the following five maybe the most general approaches that most learners use while forming their rules of the target language. Our discussion will be based on those errors that are common to most second language learners.

From what error analysis tells us, we may conclude that learners’ hypotheses about the target language are formed mainly in three ways: by using previously acquired linguistic knowledge (learners’ first language knowledge, their existing second language knowledge, or knowledge of other languages); by inducing new rules from the input data; or by combining the first two ways. Underlying these general processes, four different but interactive strategies can be identified: transfer, generalization, analogy, and inferencing.

Transfer

In a rather broad sense, transfer means using any previously acquired linguistic knowledge in a new linguistic context to facilitate a learning task. Learners can base their hypotheses on their knowledge of the first, second, and any other language they have already acquired. Used in this paper in a much narrower sense, transfer involves the use of the learner’s linguistic knowledge of any language he possesses other than the second language he is learning as a basis for making hypotheses about the second language. Those interlingual errors of transfer discussed in the last chapter may well serve as evidence for the employment of this learning strategy. “I love my mother” is a product of the learner’s hypothesis that “very”, as an adverb of degree, can precede such emotional verbs, such as “love”, “like”. “hate”, etc., which is formed on the basis of his knowledge of Chinese, where this rule can be applied. The employment of this strategy cannot be directly observed, but from the errors learners make, we can say with certainty that the learning strategy of transfer is working in the learner’s learning process.

Generalization

The strategy of generalization is not different from the strategy of transfer in essence. They represent aspects of the same learning process. Generalization is still the learner’s use of what he already knows about a language to form hypotheses. But in the case of generalization, it is the previous knowledge of the second language that the learner makes use of. He extends his existing knowledge of the second language to similar linguistic contexts. Consequently, this strategy is not very frequent with beginners of the second language. Beginners have less previous second language knowledge for them to draw hypotheses about rules. It is the strategy of transfer that is frequently adopted by beginners. Generalization, as a learning strategy, can ease the learner’s learning task. However, overgeneralizing a rule may result in error making. The explanation of learner errors tells us that most intralingual errors are a result of the learner’s making use of this strategy.

Analogy

Analogy is another learning strategy used by learners to form new hypotheses about rules of the target language on the basis of the previous knowledge or the input data. It is not really different from the strategy of generalization or transfer. Analogy occurs when the learner discovers something similar between his previous linguistic experience and the new experience he is undergoing. It may occur interlingually or intralingually. Evidence of employing this strategy is shown by those interlingual errors of analogy and some intralingual errors of ignorance of rule restrictions.
Inferencing

The three strategies mentioned above are employed to simplify the learner’s learning task. Therefore, they can be put under a more general learning strategy called “simplification”. They all manifest the same basic strategy of relying on prior linguistic knowledge to facilitate new learning.

Inferencing is different from the simplification strategies in that it is a means by which the learner forms hypotheses by attending to information available to him, i.e., the input data. The basis of his hypotheses is the linguistic material exposed to him rather than his previous linguistic knowledge as in the simplification strategies. In some cases, the learner will need to induce the rule through a close examination of the linguistic material before him, when, for example, a correct second language rule cannot be derived by means of transfer, generalization, or analogy, etc. While the learner’s correct utterances provide us with no information as to which strategy he has employed, his deviant utterances offer us some insights into what strategies he employs. A special type of errors discussed in the previous chapter called “induced errors” is very suggestive about the learning strategy the learner has employed which results in such errors. By attending to the input in class or from textbooks or any other sources, the learner forms hypotheses about the second language rules. And sometimes, he will arrive at incorrect rules of the language owing to certain imperfections of the input data. For example, the learner may induce the form “causative vt. + sb. to do sth” from the over drilling of this pattern in class. If it is a rule with no exceptions, the learner is successful in getting this rule by means of inferencing. However, if it is a rule which is not applicable in all cases, then “induced errors” will be a result.

Memorization

In addition to the four learning strategies which are normally used at the hypothesis-formation stage, we can identify from learner errors another learning strategy commonly used by learners to acquire rules of the target language and some ready-made expressions of that language. That is the learning strategy of memorization. In such cases when the learner is informed of a particular rule or is taught a number of daily expressions to meet his basic communicative needs, he will try to automatize the knowledge he has learned through repetition and then memorization so that he can use it freely in communication. Memorization is, no doubt, an effective strategy for the acquisition of grammatical rules and formulaic expressions. For example, a certain number of beginners of English can readily express greetings, such as “How are you?”, “How do you do?” without really understanding those rules working in forming these expressions. “I don’t know” is another ready-made expression that most learners learn to say before they learn the rule of forming a negative sentence with the auxiliary verb “do”. Because these expressions are learned as ready-made chunks, learners are hardly able to create new utterances correctly based on these structures. Thus, deviant utterances such as “He don’t know” will, not surprisingly, appear in learners’ speech. What error analysis researchers have discovered provides us with evidence that learners memorize something they find necessary in the learning process and try to make best use of it but may not always be successful.

Conclusions

To err is human, let alone in the process of language learning. Error commitment is inevitable, but they can provide clues to how students learn a language. Therefore, as teachers, we should change our attitude towards errors. First, we should allow them to exist. We should correct learner errors moderately, especially for the errors
in oral practice. It is necessary to consider the right time for correction. Interrupting students too much will make them feel frustrated and reduce their courage and enthusiasm in oral expression. But on the other hand, if correction takes place after too long a time, students will not remember how they expressed themselves and whether they made such mistakes. In addition, the method of correcting errors should also be noted. Teachers can directly point out students’ errors and inform them of the correct forms; or they can adopt other methods to make students realize their own mistakes and guide them to correct them. However, from the analysis of students’ learning strategies, we find that the basic premise of error correction should be to ensure sufficient language input so as to guarantee effective language absorption.

In the field of error analysis, researchers at home and abroad have done a lot of research work. The author’s paper here is just a simple analysis from the actual situation of the Chinese students she teaches. The analysis is not deep enough and the scale of the survey is not broad enough. But we can still realize the importance of error analysis for English teaching. In the future, we should expand the scale of the investigation, accumulate more error samples under different conditions, increase the intensity of analysis, and improve the analysis method to better understand the English learning process of Chinese students. Based on that, teachers can understand more the characteristics of foreign language learning from a psychological perspective, so as to promote the reform of English teaching.

References