Contribution of Error Analysis to Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract – It is inevitable that learners make mistakes in the process of foreign language learning. However, what is questioned by language teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. Yet not all mistakes are the same; sometimes they seem to be deeply ingrained, but at other times students correct themselves with ease. Thus, researchers and teachers of foreign language came to realize that the mistakes a person made in the process of constructing a new system of language is needed to be analyzed carefully, for they possibly held in them some of the keys to the understanding of second language acquisition. In this respect, the aim of this study is to point out the significance of learners' errors for they provide evidence of how language is learned and what strategies or procedures the learners are employing in the discovery of language.

Key words – Error, mistake, error analysis, error correction, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer.

Özet – Yanlış Çözümlemesinin Yabancı Dil Öğretimine Katkısı – Yabancı bir dili öğrenme sürecinde öğrencilerin hata yapmaları kaçınılmazdır. Ancak, öğretmenlerin sorguladıkları, defalarca üzerinde durulmasına karşın öğrencilerin aynı hataları neden yapıyor olmalarıdır. Tüm hatalar aynı değildir; bazıları tamamen yerleşmişken, bazıları da öğrencilerin kendileri tarafından kolaylıkla düzeltilebilmektedir. Bu nedenle araştırmacılar ve yabancı dil öğretmenleri, ikinci dil edinimini anlama konusunda ipucu vereceği düşüncesiyle, yeni bir dil sistemini oluştururken yapılan hataların çözümlenmesi gerektiğinin farkına varmışlardır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmanın amacı, dilin nasıl öğrenildiği ve dilin keşfinde hangi yöntem ve basamakların kullanıldığı konusunda yol göstermesi açısından öğrenci yanlışlarının çözümlenmesinin önemini göstermektir.

Anahtar kelimeler – Yanlış, hata, yanlış çözümlemesi, yanlış düzeltme, diller arası aktarım, dil içi aktarım.

Introduction

For years, there have been many studies on the process of first language acquisition and second language learning. Findings about first language acquisition have been adapted to foreign language learning and it has been concluded that the process works in a similar way. That children learning their native tongue make plenty of mistakes is a natural part of language acquisition process. As they get feedback from adults, they learn how to produce grammatically and semantically acceptable sentences in their

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native language. What a foreign language learner does in operating on the target language is not different from that of a child acquiring his first language.

It is inevitable that all learners make mistakes and commit errors. However, that process can be impeded through realizing the errors and operating on them according to the feedbacks given. The steps that learners follow get the researchers and language teachers realize that if the mistakes and errors of language learners in constructing the new language system are analyzed carefully, the process of language acquisition shall be understood. The analysis of errors thus has become a field of linguistics in that sense. The field of language teaching benefit from the findings of linguistics in many cases including error analysis. As indicated above, what a linguist looking for in understanding the language learning process contribute a lot to the questions of language teachers. Many of the teachers complain that their students are unable to use the linguistic forms that they are taught. Lengo (1995) states "this situation is due to the teacher's false impression that output should be an authentic representation of input." This belief ignores the function of intake- that knowledge of language the students internalize. Intake may be different from the teacher's syllabus being subject to be internalized.

Error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them. Thus, the analysis of learner language has become an essential need to overcome some questions and propose solutions regarding different aspects.

This study concerns the error analysis and its contribution to English language teaching at both linguistic and methodological levels.

A Historical Background to the Field of Error Analysis

Until late sixties, the prominent theory regarding the issue of second language learning was behaviouristic, which suggested that the learning was largely a question of acquiring a set of new language habits. Therefore, errors were considered as being the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language. Consequently, this idea made the researchers of applied linguistics devote their studies largely to the comparison of the native and the target language in order to make predictions and explanations about errors. However, errors that were not explained in this way were underestimated. As a result, all errors whatever their origins were dealt with the same technique of further drilling and exercise.

Error analysis, a branch of applied linguistics, emerged in the sixties to demonstrate that learner errors were not only because of the learner's native language but also they reflected some universal learning strategies, as a reaction to contrastive analysis theory, which considered language transfer as the basic process of second language learning as what behavioristic theory suggested. Error analysis, on the other hand, deals with the

learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of in recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language. Therefore, a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide with an understanding of the underlying process of second language acquisition. At this point, Keshavars (1997) suggests that the field of error analysis can be divided into two branches: (i) theoretical, and (ii) applied.

Theoretical analysis of errors, as mentioned before, primarily concerns the process and strategies of language learning and its similarities with first language acquisition. In other words, it tries to investigate what is going on in the minds of language learners. Secondly, it tries to decode the strategies of learners such as overgeneralization and simplification, and thirdly, to go to a conclusion that regards the universals of language learning process whether there is an internal syllabus for learning a second language.

Applied error analysis, on the other hand, concerns organizing remedial courses, and devising appropriate materials and teaching strategies based on the findings of theoretical error analysis.

Identification of Errors

Identifying an error goes beyond explaining what an error is. However, as linguists pay attention to the distinction between an error and a mistake, it is necessary to go over the definition of the two different phenomena.

According to *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992) a learner makes a mistake when writing or speaking because of lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspects of performance. Mistakes can be self-corrected when attention is called. Whereas, an error is the use of linguistic item in a way that a fluent or native speaker of the language regards it as showing faulty or incomplete learning. In other words, it occurs because the learner does not know what is correct, and thus it cannot be self-corrected.

To distinguish between an error and mistake, Ellis (1997) suggests two ways. The first one is to check the consistency of learner's performance. If he sometimes uses the correct form and sometimes the wrong one, it is a mistake. However, if he always uses it incorrectly, it is then an error. The second way is to ask learner to try to correct his own deviant utterance. Where he is unable to, the deviations are errors; where he is successful, they are mistakes.

Description of Errors

A number of different categories for describing errors have been identified. Firstly, Corder (1973) classifies the errors in terms of the difference between the learners'

utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four categories: *omission* of some required element; *addition* of some unnecessary or incorrect element; *selection* of an incorrect element; and *misordering* of the elements. Nevertheless, Corder himself adds that this classification is not enough to describe errors. That is why he includes the linguistics level of the errors under the sub-areas of morphology, syntax, and lexicon (Corder, 1973).

Ellis (1997) maintains that "classifying errors in these ways can help us to diagnose learners' learning problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time." This categorization can be exemplified as follows:

> *Omission*:
>> Morphological omission   *A strange thing happen to me yesterday.
>> Syntactical omission   * Must say also the names?
> *Addition*:
>> In morphology   * The book**s** is here.
>> In syntax   * The London
>> In lexicon   ***** I stayed there during five years ago.
> *Selection*:
>> In morphology   * My friend is old**est** than me.
>> In syntax   * I want that he comes here.
> *Ordering*:
>> In pronunciation   * fignisicant for 'significant'; *prulal for 'plural'
>> In morphology   * get upping for 'getting up'
>> In syntax   * He is a dear to me friend.
>> In lexicon   * key car for 'car key'

An error may vary in magnitude. It can include a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a sentence or even a paragraph. Due to this fact, errors may also be viewed as being either *global* or *local* (cited in Brown, 2000)**.** Global errors hinder communication. They prevent the message from being comprehended as in the example below:

> * I like bus but my mother said so not that we must be late for school.

On the other hand, local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because there is usually a minor violation of one segment of a sentence that allows the hearer to guess the intended meaning as follows:

> * If I hear from her, I would let you know.

The final group is the two related dimensions of error, *domain* and *extent***.** Domain is the rank of linguistic unit from phoneme to discourse that must be taken as context in order for the error to be understood, and extent is the rank of linguistic unit that would have to be deleted, replaced, supplied or reordered in order to repair the sentence. This suggestion by Lennon (cited in Brown, 2000) is parallel with Corder's other categorization of *overtly* and *covertly* (1973). Overt errors are unquestionably ungrammatical at the sentence level and covert errors are grammatically well- formed

at the sentence level but are not interpretable within the context of communication. For example, "I'm fine, thanks." Is a correct sentence but if it is given as an answer to the question of "How old are you?" it is covertly error.

Sources of Errors

As there are many descriptions for different kinds of errors, it is inevitable to move further and ask for the sources of errors. It has been indicated in the fist part of the study that errors were assumed as being the only result of interference of the first language habits to the learning of second language. However, with the field of error analysis, it has been understood that the nature of errors implicates the existence of other reasons for errors to occur. Then, the sources of errors can be categorized within two domains: (i) interlingual transfer, and (ii) intralingual transfer.

Interlingual Transfer

Interlingual transfer is a significant source for language learners. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992) defines interlingual errors as being the result of language transfer, which is caused by the learner's first language. However, this should not be confused with behaviouristic approach of language transfer. Error analysis does not regard them as the persistence of old habits, but rather as signs that the learner is internalizing and investigating the system of the new language.

Interlingual errors may occur at different levels such as transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical and lexica-semantic elements of the native language into the target language. These different levels can be explained with some possible errors of Turkish students.

At phonological level, the sounds that do not occur in Turkish cause the students to mispronounce some sounds. They attempt to pronounce '*th*' of 'thank you' as 't' of 'tea'; or '*th*' of 'they' as 'd' of 'dean'. Or else, since Turkish does not let two consonants together at the beginning of a word, learners tend to place a vowel between them as in the example of *'sitation', instead of 'station'.

At morphological level, Turkish students tend to omit the plural suffix at the end of the word as Turkish does not put it in adjectival phrases indicating numbers as in the following examples:

    * three book
    * Three student is coming. In Turkish it is "Üç öğrenci geliyor."

It is also possible that students transfer some lexical items to the target language. For instance, the verb 'sigara içmek' can be expressed in one word in English: 'smoke'. That is why students tend to say * drink cigarettes, or *smoke cigarettes.

Intralingual Transfer and Developmental Errors

Interferences from the students' own language is not the only reason for committing errors. As Ellis (1997) states, some errors seem to be universal, reflecting learners' attempts to make the task of learning and using the target language simpler. Use of past tense suffix '-ed' for all verbs is an example of simplification and over generalization. These errors are common in the speech of second language learners, irrespective of their mother tongue.

Intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer. They may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. For example, learners attempt to use two tense markers at the same time in one sentence since they have not mastered the language yet. When they say: * "He is comes here", it is because the singularity of the third person requires "is" in present continuous, and "-s" at the end of a verb in simple present tense. In short, intralingual errors occur as a result of learners' attempt to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it. Learners may commit errors due to this reason in many ways as in the following examples:

> * He made me **to** smile.
> * I want **learning** English.
> * The meat smells fresh**ly.**
> * Doctors always give us good advice**s**.
> * I don't know why **did** he go.

Pedagogical Implications of Error Analysis

The studies regarding errors are carried out in order to (i) identify strategies which learners use in language teaching, (ii) identify the causes of learner errors, and (iii) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or in development of teaching materials (Richards et al.1992). In fact, the first two are also useful for the third aim, which includes the teaching-learning process. Thus, it can be inferred that language teaching cannot stand away from the findings of error analysis. Students' errors have always been of interest and significance to teachers, syllabus designers and test developers. This may lead educators to devise appropriate materials and effective teaching techniques, and constructing tests suitable for different levels and needs of learners. Hence, the implication of error analysis to language teaching can be viewed from the aspect of language teachers and syllabus designers.

Implications for Foreign Language Teachers

Teachers can benefit from the findings of error analysis in many ways. Errors tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn (Corder, 1987). Following the student's progress, the teacher is able to carry on his studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy to chance or reconstruct. Errors are a means of feedback for the teacher reflecting how effective he is in his teaching style and what changes he has to make to get higher performance from his students. Furthermore, errors indicate the teacher the points that needs further attention. Additionally, errors show the way to be treated when their sources are identified correctly.

Implications for Syllabus Designers

Syllabus design of an English teaching course is a very important component of teaching-learning process. There are many factors to be considered to decide on what to teach to what level and age group. At this point, errors are significant data for syllabus designers as they show what items are important to be included or which items needs to be recycled in the syllabus. Keshavarz (1997) maintains that an error-based analysis can give reliable results upon which remedial materials can be constructed. In other words, analysis of second language learners' errors can help identify learners' linguistic difficulties and needs at a particular stage of language learning. It is essential for a syllabus to provide with the needs for learning appropriately and errors are important evidence for that. Corder (1973) reminds of de Sassure's words that language is a 'self-contained system', in which each part is systematically related to another part. Then learning of some new item requires the learning of all items that are already studied. Eventually, this requires the necessity for a cyclical syllabus in language learning.

Error Correction and Error Analysis

At the beginning of the study, the question "why students make mistakes or commit errors" was held. Now, some other questions rise: How should teachers correct students? What kind of feedback should they give? Does each error need to be treated? Error analysis has an important role in finding the answers to these questions.

In general, the teacher's job is to point out when something has gone wrong and see whether the student can correct himself, then, to find out if what the student say or write is just a mistake, or it is global or local. However, the technique of correction is not simply presenting the data repeatedly and going through the same set of drills and exercises to produce the state of over learning. On the contrary, it requires that the

teacher understand the source of the errors so that he can provide appropriate remedy, which will resolve the learner's problems and allow him to discover the relevant rules. Thus, the source of the error is an important clue for the teacher to decide on the sort of treatment. Harmer (1998) suggests three steps to be followed by the teacher when errors occur. The teacher first listens to the students, then identifies the problem, and puts it right in the most efficient way. Corder (1973) states that knowledge of being wrong is only a starting point. Skill in correction seems to lie in determining the necessary data to present to the learner and what statements, descriptive or comparative, to make about it.

Since no teacher has time to deal with all the errors of the students, a hierarchy should be established for the correction of errors according to nature and significance of errors. In such a hierarchy, priority should be given to errors which may affect communication and cause misunderstanding. If a teacher knows about all these items, he can direct himself accordingly. For example, Brown (2000) suggests that local errors as in the following example usually need not be corrected as the message is clear and correction might interrupt a learner in the flow of productive communication:

        * I gave **she** a present.

On the other hand, global errors need to be treated in some way since the message is not comprehended clearly:

        * Daddy my car happy tomorrow buy.

Errors in pluralization, use of articles, tenses, etc. are less important than errors regarding word order, the choice of placement and appropriate connectors in terms of the comprehensibility of the sentence. Therefore, it is implied that priority in error correction should be given to global errors in order to develop the students' communication skills. The knowledge of error analysis enables the teacher to monitor the students' errors in this frame and take precautions where needed.

Different kinds of tasks may require a different treatment. The reaction of the teacher towards errors and the type of feedback to be given is usually determined by the position of the error in the objective of the task.

Oral works are at crucial point in terms of corrections and feedback time. For oral works, it is usually recommended that students making mistakes during a fluent speech should not be interrupted, but be reminded of the mistakes and talk about the reasons. The type of the feedback- form or content should be decided on according to the goal of the study. If the goal is to make the students practice a certain grammar point, it may be necessary to give a form feedback. Or else, if a pronunciation item is being practiced, the teacher should correct the related mistakes without interrupting the speaker (Ur, 1996).

For correcting written works, it is accepted that the teacher should not correct the students' mistakes directly but instead, should put marks indicating there is something

wrong with that sentence, word, or punctuation. There are symbols to show the kind of mistake that teachers use. For example, it is better to write 'sp' for spelling mistake near the wrong word, to write 'rw' for the sentences need to be written once again, etc. than writing the correct form. Thus, students are able to correct themselves looking for the source of their mistakes.

The existence of errors has been subject to all language-teaching theories as they represent an important aspect of second language learning. There are different opinions by different language teaching approaches regarding error correction (Ur, 1996). Below is what they suggest for the correction of errors:

> *Audio-lingualism*: There is little need for correction at first sight. Latter one is not useful for learning.
> *Cognitive-code learning*: Mistakes should be corrected whenever they occur to prevent them occurring again.
> *Interlanguage*: Mistakes are important part of learning. Correcting them is a way of bringing the learner's interlanguage closer to the target language.
> *Communicative approach*: Not all mistakes need to be corrected. Focus should be on message rather than mistakes.
> *Monitor theory*: Correction does not contribute to language learning.

What Corder points out below summarizes the view of error correction in language teaching (1973):

> Language learning is not parrot learning; we do not 'learn' or 'practice' examples. They are the data from which we induce the system of the language. Skill in correction of errors lies in the direction of exploiting the incorrect forms produced by the learner in a controlled fashion.

Conclusion

This study has been devoted to introduce what error analysis is and what sort of relationship it has with language teaching, and what contribution it provides for language teaching studies. The aims of the studies regarding error analysis can be summarized as follows:

- Error analysis identifies the strategies that language learners use.
- It looks for the answer of the question 'why do learners make errors?'
- It determines the common difficulties in learning and helps teachers to develop materials for remedial teaching.

In short, error analysis has twofold aims including theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretical objectives contribute to the linguistics studies and the most obvious practical use of the error analysis is to the teacher. Errors provide feedback about the effectiveness of his teaching techniques and show him what part of the syllabus he has

been following needs further attention. They enable him to decide on whether to move on to the next item or not.

Studying the learner language in terms of the errors is something that teachers have always done for very practical reasons. Through the results of tests and examinations, the errors that learners make are a major element in the feedback system of the teaching-learning process. For this reason, it is important that the teacher should be able to not only detect and describe the errors from a linguistic view, but also understand the psychological reasons for their occurrences. Therefore, the diagnoses and treatment of errors is one of the fundamental skills of the teacher.

Correction of errors is as important as identification and description of them. In fact, the last two are preliminary for error treatment. The sources and the sorts of the errors are determiners for the sort of feedback. In conclusion, the inevitable existence of errors has led researchers to study on them and find out the natural steps for language learning. Findings of error analysis function as facilitator in language teaching in many ways only if the teacher is aware of them and able to make use of them in the teaching process appropriately.

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