



Exploring Errors in Target Language* Learning and Use: Practice Meets Theory

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Abstract

The paper tries to answer the question--to what extent the English Language Teaching theory informs the ELT practice in a reflective case study. It argues that even if it is challenging considering what is beyond the theory in practical use of theory, yet if teacher educators in the field of ELT have a solid academic foundation, they will have the responsibility and capacity to challenge the theory, rethink it critically and even revise it.

Keywords: Rethink, ELT, Theory, Practice

I. Introduction

Through this paper I intend to consider the following question: to what extent does the theory on errors inform approaches to analyses of errors**, and how do the approaches impact the teacher's attitude towards errors, which is a vital factor in conducting error correction?

In order to answer this question, the paper begins with a case study, explicating the teacher's attitude towards errors occurring in the process of learners' target language (TL) learning and use, and illustrating the teacher's response and behaviours at the errors. Learners' reaction to the teacher is slightly mentioned. Secondly the paper reviews literature of theory as a concept in order to understand a skeletal analysis of how and why TL learners commit errors in the process of learning and use. In order to answer the target question, thirdly it is necessary to examine a number of commonly used terms such as interlanguage, habit, transfer, interference, Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis, which play an important role in the paper.

II. Case study: changing teachers

In the 1950s, my father was a student. In his memory, when his Russian teacher confronted the class-wide errors, he was always feeling frustrated and tortured. The teacher explained to my father that the 'public' errors were caused by the failure of his teaching, which led to students' 'ill-formed habits'. Consequently, he would do re-teaching as remediation. When he found that his re-teaching still did not reach a satisfying outcome finally, the students of his would be punished for committing the repeated errors. In the 1970s and 1980s, when I was a student from primary schooling to the completion of BA, what was unforgettable was that lots of my classmates' English assignment-books and English test papers were fully corrected by 'responsible' teachers, with red marks between lines and on margins.. To the teachers' disappointment, his students committed the same errors constantly. Those who made consistent errors would be criticized publicly or privately. I hated to learn English then, for psychologically speaking, more than once, my self-esteem was hurt by the red marks and the 'lessons' from the English teacher. From then on, I have not stopped throwing doubts on teachers' attitudes towards learners' errors and teachers' behaviors at learners until I became a teacher of English.

From the first day being a teacher, I have been in charge of more than two classes of English language teaching, each of which were made up of around 60 students. The school requirements read that students' compositions should be corrected not less than twice a week, as a result, I had to spend around 20 hours a week to challenge the heavy work by scanning students' written work carefully and 'correct' errors.

Totally differently from what Father's teacher and my teachers did, I used the technique called 'gentle-correction'. For instance, certain symbols were always used to indicate what kinds of errors which learners had made. The focus of marking in this way was to help learners to realize their errors consciously. When the learners got their written work back, they were asked to do self-correction basing on the indications in a given time. What I have done for years was that the common errors committed by my students were sorted and registered in my correcting process. The catalogued

errors was kept in a book named "Students' Error Portfolio", which was once shown on the fourth National Education Annual Conference held in Beijing in 1999. Usually most of the 'global' errors were re-dealt by the peer correction as reinforcement. The 'local' errors occurring individually were remedied by the learner himself/herself at the aid of me. "The errors committed in oral communication were always neglected unless they did affect the communication to a large extent" (Wu, 1990).

As a target language teacher, he/she is unavoidably faced with the task of analyzing learner's errors. No matter how much creative freedom he/she might like to give the learner, no matter how much he/she may dislike the focus traditionally placed on error, and no matter how much he/she may dread the act of correction, he/she eventually find himself/herself with pen in hand, especially diligently scanning the errors in learners' course work. As a result, analysing learners' errors becomes one of teachers' primary responsibilities. This responsibility is a heavy one, especially when a teacher considers that learners' errors range from sentence-level problems to topic development to essay structure and from oral to literacy (Nunan, 1996). In respect to this, errors are significantly worth studying.

III. A review of theory and its implications for analyses of errors

The literature which I have referred to focuses on two major approaches to analysing errors committed by a target language learner: Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA). "The theoretical base of CA lies in **Behaviourist Learning Theory**; while the EA is closely related with the emergence of **Interlanguage Theory**" (Ellis, 2005).

1. Behaviourist learning theory accounts of errors

One of the most important advocates of behaviourism, B.F. Skinner (1957) developed S-R theory into a learning theory, which describes learning as the formation of associations between responses. A stimulus is that which is produced as a reaction to an individual organism. A response is the behaviour which is produced as a reaction to a stimulus.

The behaviourist learning theory illustrates the TL learning is a mechanical process of habit formation. In the 1950s and early 1960s, in the heyday of Behaviourist Psychology, it was thought that children learned their correct L1 habits by copying, even more exactly, the sentences that they heard adults use. Ellis (2005) reviewed, "a behaviour becomes a habit when a specific stimulus elicits an automatic response from the learner. It can be formed either through classical conditioning or through instrumental learning. Habits entail 'over-learning', which ensures that learning of new habits as a result of proactive inhibition. Thus, the challenge facing the L2 learner is to overcome the interference of L1 habits". Basing on the habit formation, Contrastive Analysis sought to identify the features of the L2 that differed from those of the L1 so that learners could be helped to form the new habits of the L2 by practicing them intensively. It suggested that the greater the difference between L1 and L2, the more difficult it would be the L1 to learn L2: the more the L1 would 'interfere' with the learning of the L2. Most errors that L2 learners were the result of differences between L1 and L2 structure (Martin, 1996).

Interference, the CA insists, is the result of unfamiliarity with the rules of a TL and psychological causes, such as inadequate learning (Swan, 2001). 'Transfer' can be positive or negative: linguistic features of the L1 that are similar to those of the TL will facilitate learning (positive transfer); those aspects of the L1 that are different to the TL grammatical and phonological system will hinder SLA and cause the learner to make numerous production errors (negative transfer). Thus differences between the L1 and the TL create learning difficulty which results in errors, while the similarities between them facilitate rapid and easy learning (Ellis, 1985 cited Corder). According to behaviourist learning theory, both types of transfer are the outcome of automatic and subconscious use of old habits in new learning situations (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982).

Rod Ellis (1985) assesses, "Errors, according to the theory, were the result of non-learning, rather than wrong learning. But in either case, there was almost total agreement that errors should be avoided. To this end, attempts were made to predict when they would occur. By comparing the L1 with the TL, differences could be identified and used to predict areas of potential errors. In this way classroom practice could be directed on the problem areas in order to help the learner overcome the negative effects of L1 transfer."

2. Interlanguage (IL) theory accounts of errors

To my joy, Rod Ellis (2005, 54) views Error Analysis is based on emergence of IL theory. Before that, in my understanding, IL is not a theory, but it is known to be used to explain effectively the errors committed in SLA process. As a leading representative in the IL research field, Selinker coined IL in 1972. Ever since then, he has devoted himself to developing and discovering and exploring IL theory. Initially, Selinker (1972) tried to "find a way to explain the errors that some students make have nothing to do with their foreign language, for example, a Spanish speaker, an Arabic speaker and a Japanese speaker might all make the same mistake in English which was not related to their respective languages".

At its simplest level, Selinker (1992) describes IL as a "between language", a learner language which exhibits an increasing proximity to L2. The approximation of IL to L2 is a dynamic, often fluctuating process, influenced by

changes in knowledge about and how to use L2, as well as transfer of and hypotheses based on L1 structure applied to L2. The learner's current state of IL manifests itself in an ability to communicate in and understand the L2.

According to Selinker, L2 learners go through a process of making and testing hypotheses about the target language. They begin with knowledge about language in general, gained from their native language, and move toward the target language. Bit by bit, they readjust their mental model of the new language, improving their communicative competency in that language. Successful hypotheses become mental constructions that correspond to the rules of the new language. Unsuccessful hypotheses are revised or discarded. At any particular moment, the language student is located on an IL continuum between the native language and the target language. Brown (1993) viewed, "Truly successful students make the journey to a high level of competency in the target language, while less successful students become 'fossilized' somewhere along the IL continuum". "Central to the concept of IL is the concept of fossilization which generally refers to the cessation of learning.... Because of the difficulty in determining when learning has ceased, one frequently refers to stabilization of linguistic forms, rather than fossilization or cessation of learning. In SLA, one often notes that IL plateaus are far from the TL norms." (Gass & Selinker, 2001)

For around 35 years Selinker has viewed learner errors as evidence of positive efforts by the learner to learn a new language. This view of language learning allowed for the possibility of learners making deliberate attempts to control their own learning and, along with theories of cognitive processes in language learning. In 1992, he revised this notion of IL processes by including training and learning strategies as part of his IL hypothesis. Therefore, Selinker attests that transfer plays a role in IL construction as a strategy employed by learners (Brown, 2000).

Errors are indispensable to learners since the making of errors can be regarded as 'a device the learner uses in order to learn' (Selinker, 1992). A modern definition of language transfer is provided by Selinker (1992): "Language transfer is best thought of as a cover term for a whole class of behaviours, processes and constraints, each of which has to do with CLI [=Cross Linguistic Influence] i.e. the influence and use of prior linguistic knowledge, usually but not exclusively NL knowledge. This knowledge intersects with input from the TL and with universal properties of various sorts in a selective way to help build IL".

IL study results, as noted above, can better be understood to explain analyses of errors currently. The above views mainly from Selinker (1984, 1992) have validity captured the indefinite status of the learner's system between his/her native language and the TL. It also accounts for the fluid nature of the systems -- the rapidity of change. And it focuses on the rule-governed systematic nature of the learning process. The teacher can use IL approach pedagogically to formulate more reasonable expectations of TL performance from the student and should come to expect variability as the student continues to redevelop his/her language systems. So, the views reflect not only 'errors' but also the learners' possible IL systems (Selinker, 1992).

Selinker (1992) pointed out the two highly significant contributions that Corder made: "that the errors of a learner, whether adult or child, are not random, but are in fact systematic, and are not 'negative' or 'interfering' in any way with learning a TL but are, on the contrary, a necessary positive factor, indicative of testing hypotheses. In 1994, Gass & Selinker defined errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language.

IV. A brief review of approaches to analyses of errors

1. Contrast Analysis (CA):

Contrastive Analysis, an approach was generated from behaviourist learning theory. Through CA applied linguists sought to use the formal distinctions between the learners' first and second languages to predict errors.

The basic concept behind CA was that a structural 'picture' of any one language could be constructed which might then be used in direct comparison with the structural 'picture' of another language. Through a process of 'mapping' one system onto another, similarities and differences could be identified. Identifying the differences would lead to a better understanding of the potential problems that a learner of the particular L2 would face (Corder, 1983).

Primary tenets of CA are: 1. Prime cause of difficulty and error in foreign language learning is interference coming from the learner's native language. 2. Difficulties are chiefly due to differences between the two languages. 3. The greater the differences, the more acute the learning difficulties will be. 4. The results of a comparison between the two languages are needed to predict the difficulties and errors which will occur in learning the target language. 5. What needs to be taught is discovered by comparing the languages and subtracting what is common to them. (Corder, 1981)

Purists of CA advocate strongly: "development of teaching methods based on a comparison of phonological, grammatical, and syntactical features of the native language and target language." (Corder, 1981) A "weaker" version emphasizes analyses of errors after they occur. Some researchers believe the latter method to be the more valid of the two, and it is certainly a more realistic pedagogical approach (Ellis, 1994).

Two versions of CA can help the teacher, although the teacher should not expect him or herself to practice the "strong" version. The teacher ought to be aware of some basic language differences, and anticipate and recognize errors that

frequently result from L1 interference or, at least, consider L1 interference as a possibility (Hughes, R., & Heah, C. 1993). For example, Chinese students will have great difficulty with the indefinite and definite articles since they are not used in Chinese. And shared the reason, the English verb-tense errors made by Chinese learners cover the large area in the English learning process. The Chinese teacher of English should consciously be aware of the differences through the patient comparative or contrastive analysis between Chinese and English. Then the teaching well-prepared for differences will lead to providing an efficient instruction, especially in the input process.

As a result of the behaviourist learning theory illustrated in the above, it is inadequate for CA to account for why different people learn the same L2 so differently.

2. Error Analysis (EA):

EA emphasizing “the significance of errors in learners’ IL system” (Brown 1994) may be carried out directly for pedagogic purposes.

Carl James (1998) viewed, “EA 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.”

In the book “Error and Interlanguage” written by Pit Corder, the “Father” of Error Analysis (1981), he stated that various classifications of these error systems have been developed by error analysis researchers, three of which can be helpful for the teacher and are as follows. 1. Pre-systematic -- errors occur before the language learner has realized any system for classifying items being learned; the learner can neither correct nor explain this type of error. 2. Systematic -- errors occur after the learner has noticed a system and error consistently occurs; learner can explain but not correct the error. 3. Post-systematic -- errors occur when learner is consistent in his or her recognition of systems; can explain and correct the error. The second classification also relies on three major groups: (1) interference errors; (2) intralingual errors; or (3) development errors. Interference errors are caused by the influence of the native language, in presumably those areas where the languages differ markedly. Intralingual errors originate with the structure of TL itself. The complexity of the language encourages over-generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions for rule application. Development errors reflect the student's attempt to make hypotheses about the language -- often independently from the native language. Again according to Corder, the following steps are distinguished in conducting an EA: “collection of a sample of learner language; Identification of errors; description of errors; explanation of errors; and error evaluation” (Ellis cited in 2005).

From my current reading, I have seen that a number of examples have been cited regarding to the classification of errors. So far the classification mentioned above by Corder helps me gain a better understanding of the processes of the TL which is learned as an **interlanguage**.

3. From the analyses of errors to the practice of error correction

From the case study in the beginning of the paper, we know that in the traditional TL language learning and teaching, because the focus of classroom instruction is laid on accuracy, errors are frequently corrected because the teacher thinks the errors as a thorn in his/her flesh. Yet with the understanding of IL theory, the role of error correction has changed. Errors are considered natural products in language learning and in fact reflect the modes of learners' developing IL system. Thus, errors are no longer the thorns in the teachers' flesh that need immediate picking.

It is significant that the TL teachers form the concepts that not all errors need to be corrected right after they are made. Some errors are infrequent and may be ‘slips’, which do not bar the communication either in an oral form or in a written form. These errors mostly can not be corrected. According to IL continuum, in order to help learners make progress, for persistent errors, especially those shared by most students, teachers should correct them consistently in varieties of ways. Another consideration concerning about learners' individual reactions towards error correction is that some students may emotionally over-react to this kind of face-threatening act.

Positive affective comments should be offered first to encourage learners and to decrease the tension caused by error correction. In my correcting practice, I managed to mainly list out learners’ ‘sparking points’ (merits), and after ‘but’ some of the suggestions will be given to them. To avoid potential risk of discouraging students, students' self-correction with teachers' or peer's help is encouraged. By doing so, students are provided with more opportunities to complete his or her task and thus to obtain a sense of achievement (Swain, 2001). From many years of my teaching practice, this kind of activity can create a friendlier atmosphere than a teacher’s correction. However, this does not suggest that teachers’ correction would always hurt students' feelings and should always be avoiding to use. And the peer’s correction sometimes can not avoid copying each other’s errors. Teacher correction can be beneficial when errors are repeatedly made by most students. In fact, it can be applied without necessarily making students feel embarrassed or threatened.

In a word, both approaches provide the teacher with workable methods for reasonably determining the source of error. But the EA works more effectively.

V. Discussion

From the case study, I find a gradual shift in error correction practice, from the immediate correction of every error affected by behaviourist learning theory to a more 'tolerant' approach related with IL theory. "Yet error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the TL language teaching profession" (Wu, 1990).

"The analyses of errors are undoubtedly valuable teaching tools, and the teacher should handle them cautiously and with the awareness that all have their faults, on which researchers have also validly criticized Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis" (Tarone, 1983).

"Not correcting errors sounds scandalous even irresponsible to some language educators and many students, so teachers may think they are doing the right thing by not correcting immediately and frequently" (Wu, 1990). But from the learners' aspect, they may assume those teachers do not know English well enough to give appropriate feedback. Thus how can they acquire the TL or L2 effectively or in a faster pace?

From my experience, too much error correction could frustrate students and even overwhelm students' motivation and interest of learning the TL language. Therefore, it is really necessary for teachers to consider the practical situation of learners and teachers' own linguistic background, and then conduct the correction in 'good timing' using 'appropriate' correction strategies.

VI. Conclusion

The analyses of errors are coherently related with teachers' attitudes towards errors, and the attitudes directly result in the teacher's behaviours in the process of error correction. The analyses of errors are generated from two different theories: CA is based on Behaviorist Learning Theory and EA is on Interlanguage Theory. If the analyses are regarded as practice, the practice meets the theory. From the operation level, the analyses work as a bridge between the theory and the error correction practice, which 'constitute a unified whole' (Kumaravabivelu, 2003). On the other hand, one the road from theory to practice, practice unbrokenly informs theory by the way of reflection.

The two approaches to the analyses of errors are undoubtedly valuable in error correction field. Not only should teacher educators work as practitioners to use them well and but also we should understand that the two approaches has just touched the TL learners' sentence-level errors, but not all kinds of errors occurring frequently like in the development and structuring of writings. "Technical errors can occur in both comprehension and in production, but the comprehension errors are not detected as well in either of the analyses of errors." (Ellis, 2005)

My personal understanding is that in practical use of theory, it is challenging considering what is beyond the theory. From the rational explanation, some well-accepted theories, like interlanguage theory, which is thought to be the best theory to explain the errors at present, should be persistently upgraded. Again from the practice level, teacher educators are more expedient to do teaching and learning research. My suggestion is that as the premise we teacher educators should study about theories, fully understand them, then we can select and apply and conduct them in multi-dimensional ways. If we, teacher educators, have a solid academic foundation, I think then we will have the responsibility and capacity to challenge the theory, rethink it critically and even revise it.

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Notes

*Target Language (TL): the language that the learner is attempting to learn, for instance, the foreign language (FL) or the second language (SL). It comprises the native speaker's grammar. (Rod Ellis, 1985).

**analyses of errors: Because error analysis is an academic term in the SLA field, which has its specific definition, I use the term 'analyses of error' in my paper, which accounts of the two major approaches for analyzing the errors occurring in the TL learning and use.