

Errors and strategies in language acquisition



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Why Correction is Necessary

Correction is necessary. The argument that students just need to use the language and the rest will come by itself seems rather weak. Students come to us to teach them. If they want only conversation, they will probably inform us - or, they might just go to a chat room on the Internet. Obviously students need to be corrected as part of the learning experience. However, students also need to be encouraged to use the language. It is true that correcting students while they are trying their best to use the language can often discourage them. The most satisfactory solution of all is make correction an activity. Correction can be used as a follow-up to any given class activity. However, correction sessions can be used as a valid activity in and of themselves. In other words, teachers can set up an activity during which each mistake (or a specific type of mistake) will be corrected. Students know that the activity is going to focus on correction, and accept that fact. However, these activities should be kept in balance with other, more free-form, activities which give students the opportunity to express themselves without having to worry about being corrected every other word.

It is to S. P. Corder that Error Analysis owes its place as a scientific method in linguistics. As Rod Ellis cites (p. 48), "it was not until the 1970s that EA became a recognized part of applied linguistics, a development that owed much to the work of Corder". Before Corder, linguists observed learners' errors, divided them into categories, tried to see which ones were common and which were not, but not much attention was drawn to their role in second language acquisition. It was Corder who showed to whom information about errors would be helpful (teachers, researchers, and students) and how.

There are many major concepts introduced by S. P. Corder in his article “ The significance of learners’ errors”, among which we encounter the following:

1. It is the learner who determines what the input is. The teacher can present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.
2. Keeping the above point in mind, learners’ needs should be considered when teachers/linguists plan their syllabuses. Before Corder’s work, syllabuses were based on theories and not so much on learners’ needs.
3. Mager (1962) points out that the learners’ built-in syllabus is more efficient than the teacher’s syllabus. Corder adds that if such a built-in syllabus exists, then learners’ errors would confirm its existence and would be systematic.
4. Corder introduced the distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors. Unsystematic errors occur in one’s native language; Corder calls these “ mistakes” and states that they are not significant to the process of language learning. He keeps the term “ errors” for the systematic ones, which occur in a second language.
5. Errors are significant in three ways:- to the teacher: they show a student’s progress
 - to the researcher: they show how a language is acquired, what strategies the learner uses.
 - to the learner: he can learn from these errors.
6. When a learner has made an error, the most efficient way to teach him the correct form is not by simply giving it to him, but by letting him

discover it and test different hypotheses. (This is derived from Carroll's proposal (Carroll 1955, cited in Corder), who suggested that the learner should find the correct linguistic form by searching for it.

7. Many errors are due to that the learner uses structures from his native language. Corder claims that possession of one's native language is facilitative. Errors in this case are not inhibitory, but rather evidence of one's learning strategies.

The above insights played a significant role in linguistic research, and in particular in the approach linguists took towards errors. Here are some of the areas that were influenced by Corder's work:

STUDIES OF LEARNER ERRORS

Corder introduced the distinction between errors (in competence) and mistakes (in performance). This distinction directed the attention of researchers of SLA to competence errors and provided for a more concentrated framework. Thus, in the 1970s researchers started examining learners' competence errors and tried to explain them. We find studies such as Richards's "A non-contrastive approach to error analysis" (1971), where he identifies sources of competence errors; L1 transfer results in interference errors; incorrect (incomplete or over-generalized) application of language rules results in intralingual errors; construction of faulty hypotheses in L2 results in developmental errors.

Not all researchers have agreed with the above distinction, such as Dulay and Burt (1974) who proposed the following three categories of errors: developmental, interference and unique. Stenson (1974) proposed another

category, that of induced errors, which result from incorrect instruction of the language.

As most research methods, error analysis has weaknesses (such as in methodology), but these do not diminish its importance in SLA research; this is why linguists such as Taylor (1986) reminded researchers of its importance and suggested ways to overcome these weaknesses.

As mentioned previously, Corder noted to whom (or in which areas) the study of errors would be significant: to teachers, to researchers and to learners. In addition to studies concentrating on error categorization and analysis, various studies concentrated on these three different areas. In other words, research was conducted not only in order to understand errors per se, but also in order to use what is learned from error analysis and apply it to improve language competence.

Such studies include Kroll and Schafer's "Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition", where the authors demonstrate how error analysis can be used to improve writing skills. They analyze possible sources of error in non-native-English writers, and attempt to provide a process approach to writing where the error analysis can help achieve better writing skills.

These studies, among many others, show that thanks to Corder's work, researchers recognized the importance of errors in SLA and started to examine them in order to achieve a better understanding of SLA processes, i. e. of how learners acquire an L2.

STUDIES OF L1 INFLUENCE ON SLA

Various researchers have concentrated on those errors which demonstrate the influence of one's native language to second language acquisition.

Before Corder's work, interference errors were regarded as inhibitory; it was Corder who pointed out that they can be facilitative and provide information about one's learning strategies (point 7, listed above). Claude Hagege (1999) is a supporter of this concept and he mentions it in his book "The child between two languages", dedicated to children's language education.

According to Hagege, interference between L1 and L2 is observed in children as well as in adults. In adults it is more obvious and increases continuously, as a monolingual person gets older and the structures of his first language get stronger and impose themselves more and more on any other language the adult wishes to learn. In contrast, as regards children, interference features will not become permanent unless the child does not have sufficient exposure to L2. If there is sufficient exposure, then instead of reaching a point where they can no longer be corrected (as often happens with phonetics features), interference features can be easily eliminated. Hagege stresses that there is no reason for worry if interference persists more than expected. The teacher should know that a child that is in the process of acquiring a second language will subconsciously invent structures influenced by knowledge he already possesses. These hypotheses he forms may constitute errors. These errors, though, are completely natural; we should not expect the child to acquire L2 structures immediately (p. 81).

In addition to studies of L1 transfer in general, there have been numerous studies for specific language pairs. Thanh Ha Nguyen (1995) conducted a

case study to demonstrate first language transfer in Vietnamese learners of English. He examined a particular language form, namely oral competence in English past tense making. He tried to determine the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of this English linguistic feature as a function of age, time of exposure to English, and place and purpose of learning English.

The influence of L1 on L2 was also examined by Lakkis and Malak (2000) who concentrated on the transfer of Arabic prepositional knowledge to English (by Arab students). Both positive and negative transfer were examined in order to help teachers identify problematic areas for Arab students and help them understand where transfer should be encouraged or avoided. In particular, they concluded that “ an instructor of English, whose native language is Arabic, can use the students’ L1 for structures that use equivalent prepositions in both languages. On the other hand, whenever there are verbs or expressions in the L1 and L2 that have different structures, that take prepositions, or that have no equivalent in one of the languages, instructors should point out these differences to their students”.

Not only was L1 influence examined according to language pair, but according to the type of speech produced (written vs. oral). Hagège (p. 33) discusses the influence of L1 on accent; he notes that the ear acts like a filter, and after a critical age (which Hagège claims is 11 years), it only accepts sounds that belong to one’s native language. Hagège discusses L1 transfer in order to convince readers that there is indeed a critical age for language acquisition, and in particular the acquisition of a native-like accent. He uses the example of the French language, which includes complex vowel sounds, to demonstrate that after a critical age, the acquisition of these

sounds is not possible; thus, learners of a foreign language will only use the sounds existing in their native language when producing L2 sounds, which may often obstruct communication.

STUDIES OF CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Corder elaborated on Carroll's work to show that the most efficient way to teach a student the correct linguistic form is to let him test various hypotheses and eventually find the right form (point 6, listed above). In these steps, Hagège points out the importance of self correction (p. 82-83). According to Hagège, it is useful to always perform an error analysis based on written tests administered by the teacher, but without informing the student of the purpose of the test. On that basis, self-correction is preferable to correction by the teacher, especially if the latter is done in a severe or intimidating way. Self correction is even more efficient when it is done with the help of children's classmates. According to teachers, the younger the children, the greater the cooperation among them and the less aggressive or intimidating the corrections. Hagège dedicates a section in his book to the importance of treating errors in a positive way. In this section, titled "The teacher as a good listener", he notes that it is useless, if not harmful, to treat errors as if they were "diseases or pathological situations which must be eliminated", especially if this treatment becomes discouraging, as occurs when teachers lose their patience because of children's numerous errors. This, of course, does not mean that corrections should be avoided; after all it is the teacher's duty to teach the rules of the L2. But the correction of every error as soon as it occurs is not recommended. The justification that Hagège offers is the following: the linguistic message that the child tries to produce

is a sequence of elements which are interdependent; immediate corrections which interrupt this message tend to produce negative consequences, even to the less sensitive children; such consequences include anxiety, fear of making an error, the development of avoidance strategies, reduced motivation for participation in the classroom, lack of interest for learning, reduced will for self correction, and lack of trust towards the teacher. Esser (1984, cited in Hagège) also made a similar point: repetitive and immediate corrections, he noted, may cause sensitive children to develop aggressive behavior towards their classmates or teacher. Thus, Hagège concludes, correction must not be applied by the teacher unless errors obstruct communication. This is the main criterion for error correction (i. e. obstruction of communication) presented by Hagège; however there have been studies which examined such criteria in greater detail, such as Freiermuth's " L2 Error Correction: Criteria and Techniques" (1997). Freiermuth accepts Corder's view (point 6) and proposes criteria for error correction in the classroom. These criteria are: exposure, seriousness, and students' needs.

In the case of exposure, Freiermuth claims that when a child creates language (for example, when he tries to express an idea by using a linguistic form he has not yet acquired), he will most likely make errors; correcting these errors will be ineffective because the learner is not aware of them. Thus, error correction would result in the acquisition of the correct form only if the learner has been previously exposed to that particular language form.

As regards the seriousness criterion, Freiermuth claims that the teacher must determine the gravity of an error before deciding whether he should

correct it or not. Here Freiermuth sets a criterion which agrees with that of Hagège's: "the error, he states, must impede communication before it should be considered an error that necessitates correction". But what constitutes a serious error? Which errors are those which should not be corrected? As an examples of non-serious errors, Freiermuth mentions those errors which occur due to learners' nervousness in the classroom, due to their stress or the pressure of having to produce accurately a linguistic form in the L2. These errors can occur even with familiar structures; in that case, they are not of serious nature and are similar to what Corder called "mistakes". Here again we see Corder's influence in error analysis, and in particular in the distinction between errors and mistakes. Freiermuth goes on to suggest a hierarchy of errors (according to seriousness) to help teachers decide which errors should be corrected: "Errors that significantly impair communication [are] at the top of the list, followed by errors that occur frequently, errors that reflect misunderstanding or incomplete acquisition of the current classroom focus, and errors that have a highly stigmatizing effect on the listeners". He also clarifies what can cause stigmatization: profound pronunciation errors, or errors of familiar forms.

Another important criterion that must be considered by the teacher is individual students' needs. The importance of this factor is mentioned in Corder, who in turn notes that this idea had been suggested previously by Carroll (1955, cited in Corder 1967) and Ferguson (1966, cited in Corder 1967). Each student is different and thus may react differently to error correction. We infer from Freiermuth's claim that the teacher must perform two main tasks: first, assess some specific character traits of students, such

as self-confidence and language acquisition capability. Freiermuth agrees with Walz (1982, cited in Freiermuth) that self-confident, capable students can profit from even minor corrections, while struggling students should receive correction only on major errors. This claim agrees with Esser and Hagège's claim that repetitive corrections are likely to decrease motivation; it is reasonable to accept that students who lack self-confidence will be "stigmatized" to a greater degree than confident students.

The teacher's second task, according to Freiermuth, is to listen to learners' L2 utterances in order to determine where errors occur (i. e. which linguistic forms cause students difficulties), their frequency, and their gravity (according to the severity criteria mentioned above). Then the teacher can combine the outcome of these tasks and decide on correction techniques for individual students.

A different approach to error correction was suggested by Porte (1993), who stressed the importance of self-correction. Porte refers to Corder's distinction of errors and mistakes and points out that many students do not know the difference. It is important, Porte notes, that students know how to identify an error in order to avoid it in the future. She agrees with Corder that it is more efficient for learners to correct themselves than be corrected by the teacher, and goes on to suggest a four-step approach for self-correction. This approach consists of questions that the teacher provides to students. After writing an essay, students should read it four times, each time trying to answer the questions included in each of the four steps. Thus, in each re-reading task (each step) they concentrate on a different aspect of their essay. In brief, the first task asks them to highlight the verbs and check the

tenses; in the second task students concentrate on prepositions; the third task requires them to concentrate on nouns (spelling, agreement between subject and verb); finally in the fourth task students should try to correct potential personal mistakes. Porte also offers some clarification of what is meant by personal mistakes, in order to help the students identify them.

The studies mentioned above are only a few examples that demonstrate how S. Pit Corder's work influenced the area of error analysis in linguistics. The concepts that Corder introduced directed researcher's attention to specific areas of error analysis; they helped linguists realize that although errors sometimes obstruct communication, they can often facilitate second language acquisition; also they played a significant role in training teachers and helping them identify and classify students' errors, as well as helping them construct correction techniques.

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