

CAUSES OF LEARNERS' ERRORS

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1. Significance of Errors

The making of errors by the EFL learner is seen as an inevitable and indeed a necessary part of the learning process (Corder 1981, and Norrish 1983). This shows that errors are significant and need to be studied properly. Corder (1981) points out that studying errors enables the teacher to have insight into a learners' stage of knowledge at any particular moment and also into the strategies of learning that the learner may be using. This understanding will help the teacher to devise appropriate corrective measures.

Dulay et. al. (1982) state that studying learners' errors serves two major purposes.

a) Errors provide data from which inferences about the nature of the language learning process can be made.

b) Errors indicate to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language students have most difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to communicate effectively.

To these, Corder (1981) adds a third purpose, saying that errors are one way a learner has for testing his hypothesis about the nature of the target language. From this we can gather that if the teacher is able to identify a learner's errors, he will be in a position to devise ways of improving his teaching. However, identifying errors alone will not satisfactorily serve the desired purpose. Corder (1981) points out that it requires a deeper analysis of errors leading to an understanding of the causes of errors.

2. Causes of Errors

A number of reasons can be suggested as to why a learner commits specific errors. Let us briefly look at some of the major causes.

2.1 First Language Interference The view that learners' errors result from first language habits interfering with learners' attempts to acquire new linguistic behaviour is based on the theory of contrastive analysis (CA) which developed out

of the behaviourist view of learning (James 1980; Dulay et al 1982; Richards 1974). R. B. Hicks (1983) points out that the whole concept of interference is based on the hypothesis that prior learning affects subsequent learning.

Although the contrastive analysis treatment of errors dominated research throughout the 1960's, learners still continued to commit errors which CA could not explain (Dulay et al 1982).

2.2 Intralingual (Overgeneralization). This covers instances where the learner creates deviant structures on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language. For example,

1.* He can sings. 2.* We are hope. 3.* He come from etc.. Richards (1974) further explains that overgeneralizations reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules do or do not apply.

2.3 Universal Rules. E. Taronne (1978) says that the universality of certain patterns within languages is the source of learners' errors. He argues that there are certain simple universal patterns underlying all languages. The target language may have sophisticated many of the basic universal features, but the learner will be induced into error by reducing or simplifying the language back to the basic universal patterns. The phonology of the syllable pattern CV and word order are examples of possible universal patterns.

2.4 Strategy of Simplification. H.G. Widdowson (1978) reduces Richards' and Taronne's ideas into one overriding strategy, that of simplification. According to this view, at any stage of his learning the learner will simplify his language in order to communicate. Widdowson (1978) says that the learner has what he calls rules of usage which he has learned through drills and which he can apply when given time. These taught rules may be too complex for the learner's use in a given conversational situation. Therefore, the learner will fall back on simpler overgeneralized rules in order to facilitate communication. For example, many learners simplify the complex system of tag questions to, 'isn't it', as in, "You saw him, isn't it", because the full system is as yet too complicated to operate.

2.5 Strategies of Communication. These were first invoked by Selinker (1972) to account for certain classes of errors

regarded as a byproduct of the learner's attempts to express his meaning in spontaneous speech with an inadequate grasp of the language system, (Corder 1981). Corder gives us a working definition of these by saying that they are systematic techniques employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty. The difficulty is due to his inadequate command of the language used in the interaction. For example, a learner wishing to ask where the barber is may say: "Where is the haircut shop," or a learner who has not mastered the past tense may say: "I go there yesterday". In each case he has achieved his communicative purpose, but at the cost of accuracy.

2.6 The Monitor. This refers to the learner's internal system which operates during one's conscious application of the target language. It is an internal mechanism which enables the learner to use the target language properly and correctly by making constant reference to the rules and patterns he has already learnt (Duley et al 1982).

The Monitor theory has been developed by Stephen Krashen (1981) who draws a distinction between acquired knowledge and learned knowledge. Whenever conscious linguistic processing takes place, the learner is said to be using the Monitor: for example, when a learner performs a drill requiring conscious attention to linguistic form (Dulay et al. 1982). But if the learner is not able to monitor his output by using his learned rules, he then commits errors. R.B. Hicks (1983) says that errors occur when the language has not yet been acquired but is only learned, and no opportunity to monitor exists. A learner may fail to monitor because of lack of time, or because he is concentrating on the meaning of his sentence and not its form.

2.7 Interlanguage. This refers to the conditions in which the learner, in an attempt to acquire the target language, creates a kind of language of his own which bridges the gap between his first language and the target language. This interlanguage system of a learner will be consistent in itself. For example, if he omits the third person 's' of the simple present tense then he will do this every time he uses it (unless he is monitoring his output), ie, it is a rule he has temporarily internalised. As the learner advances, so will his interlanguage system develop, coming ever closer to the target language.

Interlanguage, however, is not by itself a cause of errors; it is rather an explanation of how the causes of errors develop and correct themselves as the learner's interlanguage system advances.

2.8 A Summary of causes of Errors

R.B.Hicks (1983) summarizes the causes of EFL learners' errors in a simple matrix on the basis of their theoretical foundation. The following figure has been taken with slight adaptation.

A SUMMARY OF THE CAUSES OF ERRORS

	<u>Theory</u>	<u>Cause of Error</u>
1.	Contrastive Analysis (James 1980) and others)	First Language interference
2	Error Analysis (Richards 1974 and others)	Interference, intralingual Overgeneralization, Developmental, teacher induced
3	Universal Rules (Taronne 1978)	The learner reduces the language to certain universal patterns
4	The Monitor (Krashen 1981)	Errors occur when the language has not been acquired but only learned and no opportunity to monitor output exists
5	Strategy of Simplification (Widdowson 1978)	Pressure of new or difficult communicative situation will result in pupils simplifying and overgeneralizing or reverting to first language
6	Strategies of communication (Corder 1981)	Pressure of a new or difficult communicative situation makes learners stretch their resources and complicate their language leading to errors

Interlanguage
7 (Selinker 1972)

A learner develops his own internally consistent system of the language to achieve his communicative goal. Errors are seen as inevitable, necessary techniques employed by a learner to acquire the TL.

3. The Role of Input: The Teacher and his Materials

One cause of error neglected by the above theories is that of the quality of input. Language acquisition theories and all the explanations of errors summarised in chart above (except contrastive analysis) assume that learners develop sub-conscious hypotheses about how language operates based on the language they hear, ie, input in Krashen's (1982) terminology. Clearly if the input is incorrect or not typical of natural language, then the hypotheses formed will also be incorrect or atypical. Richards (1974), refers to these as teacher induced errors. Corder (1981) and Norrish (1983) express similar views, ie, that incorrect or inappropriate materials can account for many learner errors.

Incorrect sampling can mean actual errors made by the teacher. If a teacher consistently makes certain errors in normal classroom talk (even though he may monitor and correct these errors in a grammar lesson teaching this item), then his or her students, with little other input, will acquire the same errors.

Inappropriate sampling can also refer to the syllabus and materials used. If the teacher for example 'over teaches' the present continuous tense, then we can expect learners to over-generate and overuse this tense. Alternatively if learners are exposed to a language which is clearly not authentic and has been artificially created to illustrate a structure, then it is inevitable that they will develop inappropriate language use.

These causes of errors become especially relevant when we look at the classroom situations in Ethiopia and elsewhere where the teacher and the text book are often the only source of input.

4. Conclusion

These views clearly indicate that the success of learners in acquiring the target language in the classroom largely depends on the input they receive. This input in Ethiopian schools is almost entirely made up of teacher's language and the textbook. The teacher's language must be a suitable model. This means his language must be accurate and natural in use. It must not be full of artificial 'TEFLese' or 'structure speak', but simple and typical of language outside the classroom. Equally important, the text book must present language which is balanced, authentic and natural and must give pupils the sort of data that allows them to sub-consciously hypothesize the rules and gives them opportunities to experiment with the language without too much prescription. Learners must be given the freedom to make mistakes as they attempt to communicate with the reward for success in communication, not punishment for lack of accuracy.

So we have to be able to develop the language of the teacher in the classroom and ensure that he provides a reasonably good model in the TL for his students. We must explore those sides of the problem of the TL learning process at every level of our school system, as well as carefully evaluate the materials used. Only then can we expect learners to perform better. It is the data which act as the input that makes it possible for them to form sub-conscious hypotheses and develop an acquired second language system. Such improved input will not lead to an eradication of errors. Errors, as we have seen, are an essential part of learning. But the improved input will mean that learners develop valid hypotheses. Their interlanguage will move towards the target language, their overgeneralizations will develop and not just fossilize at the present level of their teachers or materials. Error analysis shows us the complexity of the acquisition process. Let us not make this process more difficult by giving learners faulty data to rely on.

Note

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