

Third Lecture

The Nature of Learner Language (Features of Learner Language)

3.1. Identification of errors

The definition of 'error' is problematic. The difficulty centres in a number of issues.

The first is whether 'grammaticality' (well-formedness or 'acceptability') should serve as the criterion. Example: an utterance may be grammatically correct but pragmatically unacceptable. EA has attended to 'breaches the code' and ignored 'misuse of the code'.

Grammaticality itself is not easy to determine. Phonological and semantic well-formedness can vary considerably depending on the variety of language. What constitutes rules of well-formedness differ for spoken and written language.

The second concerns whether a distinction is to be made between 'errors' and 'mistakes'.

An error has to deal with lack of knowledge. And mistakes are performance phenomena (regular features of native-speaker speech reflecting processing failures that arise as a result of competing plans, memory limitations, and lack of automaticity).

Corder argues that EA should be restricted to the study of 'errors'. Traditional EA ignored the problem of variability in learner language.

The third issue concerns whether the error is overt or covert (Corder, 1971). An overt error is easy to identify because there is a clear deviation in form. A covert error occurs in utterances that are superficially well-formed but which do not mean what the learner intended them to mean (e.g., it [wind] was stopped).

A fourth issue is whether infelicitous (inappropriate) uses of the L2 should be considered erroneous; e.g., a grammatically correct sentence (i.e., conforms to the norms of the code), but may not be the form preferred by NSs.

3.2. Justification of language learner errors

3.2.1. Description of Errors

It involves a comparison of the learner's idiosyncratic utterances with a reconstruction of those utterances in the TL, or with a baseline corpus of N-S language. The simplest type of description taxonomy is one based on linguistic categories. A very general distinction can be drawn between lexical and grammatical errors. Lexical errors

generally exceed grammatical ones. Grammatical errors are typically subdivided into categories (auxiliary system, passive sentences, temporal conjunctions, sentential complements).

An alternative to a linguistic classification of errors is a 'surface strategy taxonomy'. This 'highlights the ways surface structures are altered' by omissions, additions. It is considered as a promising approach as it provides an indication of the cognitive processes that underlie the learner's reconstruction of the L2. However, sometimes it is a doubtful claim because it presupposes that LLs operate on the surface structures of the TL rather than creating their own unique sentences. In fact, few attempts have been used to describe learner errors using such a taxonomy. Whatever taxonomy used, each sheds light on how LLs learn an L2. Corder's (1974) framework for describing errors is one more promising. Three types of errors were distinguished :

1. Pre-systematic errors occur when the learner is unaware of the existence of a particular rule in the TL. These are random.
2. Systematic errors occur when the learner has discovered a rule but it is the wrong one.
3. Post-systematic errors occur when the learner knows the correct target language rule but uses it inconsistently (makes a mistake).

3.2.2. Explanation of Errors

It means establishing the source of errors (i.e., accounting for why it was made). It is the most important stage in SLA as it involves an attempt to establish the processes responsible for L2 acquisition. Taylor (1986) claims that the error source may be psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, epistemic, or may reside in the discourse structure.

1. Psycholinguistic: the nature of the L2 knowledge system and the difficulties LLs have using it in production.
2. Sociolinguistic: LLs' ability to adjust their language in accordance with the social context.
3. Epistemic: LLs' lack of world knowledge.
4. Discourse sources: problems in the organization of information into a coherent text.

However, SLA research has attended only to the first, i.e., to provide a psychological explanation'.

Causes/ Sources of Psycholinguistic Errors

1. Interference errors: the use of elements from one language while speaking another.
2. Intralingual errors: reflect the general characteristics of rule learning (faulty generalization, incomplete applying rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply).
3. Developmental errors: occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the TL on the basis of limited experience.
4. Unique errors : neither developmental nor interference. A possible source of it is instruction that LLs receive.

Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) state that a large number of LLs' errors are ambiguous with regard to the source.

3.2.3. Evaluation of Errors

It has to deal with the effect that errors have on the person(s) addressed. They can be gauged according to :

1. The addressee's comprehension of the LL's meaning.
2. The addressee's affective response to the errors.

Error evaluation studies have often been pedagogically motivated. The general conclusion is that teachers should attend most carefully to errors that interfere with communication. Error evaluation is influenced by the context in which the errors occurred. It is not all clear what criteria judge use when asked to assess the 'seriousness', 'intelligibility', and 'acceptability' of an error.

3.2.4. The Limitations of Error Analysis (EA)

The criticisms levelled at EA fall into three main categories :

1. Weaknesses in methodological procedures.
2. Theoretical problems (it is theoretically flawed in that it takes some TL variety as its reference point. LLs are targeted on NS-norms and as such perform cognitive comparisons in the process of learning an L2. EA fails to provide a complete picture of learner language, i.e., what they do correctly and incorrectly. Most studies are cross-sectional not longitudinal).
3. Limitations in scope (it is more substantive. LLs may resort to avoidance if they find a structure difficult).

EA lost popularity because of those weaknesses.

3.3. Error Analysis (EA and) Contrastive Analysis (CA) Hypothesis

Learner errors and Error Analysis (EA)

According to Ellis (2008), the study of 'bad language' has a long history in L1. In the context of foreign/ second language pedagogy, we are concerned with the use of EA as a tool for investigating how LLs acquire a second language (a shorter history) from the 1960's. Corder (1960s-1970s) spelt out the theoretical rational and empirical procedures for carrying out an EA.

- Errors provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, and also that they served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the TL.
- L2 LLs are not alone in making errors.
- Children learning their L1 also make errors.
- Whereas L2 LLs' errors are generally viewed as 'unwanted forms', children's errors are seen as transitional forms, and adult native speakers' errors are treated as 'slips of the tongue'.

CA is a way of comparing languages in order to determine potential errors for the ultimate purpose of isolating what needs to be learned and what does not need to be learned in a second-language-learning situation. In other words, one does a structure-by-structure comparison of the sound system, morphological system, syntactic system, and even the cultural system of two languages for the purpose of discovering similarities and differences. The ultimate goal is to predict that will be either easy or difficult for LLs.