

Error analysis and its significance for second language teaching and learning

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This article focuses on the errors made by a group of Xhosa speakers over a period of time in the process of learning English. Only by making an analysis of these errors can the teacher come to an understanding of why they keep recurring. By gaining insight into the reasons for the persistence of certain errors within that specific group, effective remedial action can be taken. Error analysis should therefore be an important ingredient in teacher training programmes for all language teachers.

Hierdie artikel fokus op die mees algemene foute wat deur 'n groep Xhosa-sprekers begaan is oor 'n sekere tydsverloop by die aanleer van Engels. Slegs deur 'n foute-analise te maak kan die onderwyser die redes bepaal vir steeds voorkomende foute binne daardie bepaalde groep. Daarvolgens kan dan remediërend opgetree word. Foute-analise behoort gevvolglik 'n belangrike onderdeel van opleidingsprogramme vir alle taalonderwysers te vorm.

Introduction

There are several schools of thought concerning error analysis. One maintains that:

- Errors are a by-product of the process of learning a language. If we were to achieve a perfect method of teaching, these errors would not occur.

Another school maintains that:

- We live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will occur in spite of all our efforts (Corder 1981:5).

The latter point of view is gaining support. Errors not only occur when one is learning a new language, native speakers of a particular target language do not always produce well formed utterances, in which case we speak of lapses rather than errors.

What is error analysis?

Error analysis is the study of errors made by a group of people who share the same mother tongue when studying a second or third language.

It consists of all the errors made that are peculiar to that group of people. This, however, does not mean that people with different mother tongues do not share the same type of errors.

The errors referred to in this paper are those observed over a period of time made by standard 10 pupils, all Xhosa speakers, and by some first year university students, some of whom are not Xhosa speakers, but at least speak one of the African languages.

Differences between an error and a mistake

If a language learner unconsciously breaks the rules of the target language as a result of faulty learning, he makes an error. In the second language situation, these are often habitual and systematic. When a learner breaks the rules of the language as a result of non-linguistic factors, he makes a mistake. Ill-formed utterances produced by native speakers are not the result of an imperfect knowledge of the language. A native speaker is in a position to correct the mistake made, whereas a non-native speaker may not be in the same position. This again will depend on the stage

at which the learner is. If he is in the pre-systematic stage, the learner is not in a position to see the mistake because he is unaware of the existence of a particular rule in the target language. If his errors are regular and he is able to give a coherent account of the rule he is following, he is operating a rule of some sort, but a wrong one. He is thus in the systematic stage. If he produces correct forms but inconsistently, he has learnt the rules but fails through lack of attention or lapse of memory to apply them consistently. This is called the post-systematic stage.

Learners will be at different stages in respect of any particular system of the language; for example, they may be post-systematic in the number system, systematically erroneous in the use of articles and pre-systematic in the use of the perfective aspect (Allen & Corder 1974:131). Similarity in the rules of the learners' language with those of the target language could be one of the causes of this.

Significance of errors

To the teacher, errors are significant because they tell him how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. They also tell the teacher where to lay stress when revising.

The teacher should not only be able to describe the errors linguistically but should also understand the psychological reasons for their occurrence. He should therefore be able to diagnose and cure them.

The study of errors should lead to a better understanding of the processes by which languages are learned and should thus in turn lead to the development of improved methods, materials, syllabi and so on. At a more mundane level, error analysis is seen as an activity akin to diagnostic testing, a means of ascertaining the content of a learner's control of various features of a language.

To the learner, this is a device which he uses in order to learn. Human learning involves making mistakes (Brown 1980:164).

Attitude of the teacher towards errors

A "red" book returned to the learner by the teacher can be discouraging. Whilst the teacher is in-

volved in the process of error analysis, this does not mean that he should correct all the mistakes made by learners. After all, these (mistakes) tell us little about the problems that the learners have. The teacher should also avoid focusing too much attention on the learners' mistakes to the total neglect of correct expression either oral or written. Errors should, however, be dealt with immediately.

Error analysis

The first step is to categorise the errors. There are three categories in which errors can occur (Corder 1981:36). These are:

- Graphical or Phonological
- Lexical
- Syntactical

If we take this sentence for instance:

* "I have come to enter this assignment" we first of all try to reconstruct it and find out what exactly was intended. We might agree that the person wanted to hand in his assignment. The error is neither graphical nor phonological.

Compare, for example with:

"I have come to see you".
Subject predicate infinitive object
* "I have come to enter this assignment".

There is thus no grammatical error. We therefore deduce that the error is lexical. The learner does not know the correct lexical item. Again according to Pit Corder, the second step is to classify errors at the following levels:

- Arrangement
- Selection
- Omission
- Over-inclusion

Using again the sentence already quoted as an example, there is nothing wrong with the arrangement of the sentence (Arrangement). There is no word left out (Omission), there is no unnecessary word included (Redundancy). The problem is in the choice of the word (Selection). The error is therefore at the level of selection.

The third step is to establish what process is operating in the learner to produce such an error. Selinker states that there are five control processes in the study of the second language (Richards 1974:37-41). These are:

- language transfer
- transfer of training
- strategies of second language learning
- strategies of second language communication
- overgeneralisation of the target language linguistic material.

This third step involves contrastive analysis. Going back to our sentence, we find that the process involved is that of language transfer. In Xhosa there is one verb root for “enter” and that is “ngena”.

- e.g. – “Nkqo nkqo” “Ngena”
“knock knock” “Come in”.

– “Ngenisa lo tafile”
“Bring in that table”.

– “Ngenisa umsebenzi wakho”
“Hand in your assignment”. (Submit)

There may also be a second process involved — strategies of second language learning. The learner might know that there are words like “hand in”, “submit” and “bring in” but might not be sure of their usage. He thus avoids the use of the unfamiliar words.

Words like “make” and “do” also fall into this category.

e.g. “Uzokwenza inwele”

It is very common to find:

- *“She has come to have her hair made” instead of
“She has come to have her hair done”.

The same applies also to certain English words. There is only one English word for “phatha”, “thwala”, “beleka”, “tyatha”, “singatha”, namely “carry”.

- “Uze uphathe isazisi sakho”.
“You should carry your identity document”.

- “Ebethwele inyanda yenkuni”.
“She was carrying a bundle of wood”.
- “Mbeleke uyalila”
“Carry him (on your back)—he is crying”.
- “Yityatathe”
“Carry it on your shoulders”.
- “Msingathe”
“Carry him on the lap”.

The sentences with asterisks quoted here have a lexical error in that the learner chose the wrong word. The errors are therefore on the level of selection. The verbs in the first language here have been transferred into the target language. (In reconstructing and trying to establish the process operating in the learners’ mind, it would be interesting sometimes to ask the learner to explain why he had written that.)

Areas where errors occur

Errors like the following are common:

- *The teachers writes ...
- *She go to town.
- *We sings.
- *There is many ...

These are syntactic errors and are on the level of selection. In the first error, for instance, instead of “write” the learner chose “writes”. What happened is that the learner transferred the rules of the first language to those of the target language.

In English the subject agrees with the predicate in terms of number and person:

- e.g. – He buys food.
 They buy food.

The Xhosa equivalents are:

- *Uthenga ukutya*
He buys food.
- *Bathenga ukutya*.
They buy food.

The possible reason for this type of error is that in Xhosa unlike in English, the verb form does not change to agree with the noun in number. What changes is only the prefix to agree with the class of noun or pronoun. “Buy” changes to “buys” whereas the same form, the root of “thenga” is retained.

Another difficulty occurs when the statement has been changed to a question, for example:

*“Does the teacher knows that you are ill?”

The error made is syntactic and is on the level of selection. The error is probably due to transfer of training. The learner knows that a noun in the singular has to take a singular form of the verb. In the above example, that is so:

“The teacher knows...”

The learner has probably disregarded “does” which introduces the question. Sentences like the following are thus common:

- *“Did he went to town yesterday?” instead of “Did he go to town yesterday?”
- *“Will he writes the test tomorrow?” instead of “Will he write the test tomorrow?”

Another type of error is found in sentences like the following:

“Ivy went to town and met his friend Nomsa”.
“She will submit his work in the afternoon”.

The type of error made is syntactic and is on the level of selection. The possible reason for such an error is that in Xhosa gender is not differentiated lexically. Another reason is the transfer of training. Most examples given by teachers refer to males.

Because of this “obsession” with male characters, it thus becomes easy for learners to write “he” where they should have written “she”.

The English syntactic system uses the article whereas in Xhosa there is no article. For example, to write:

“Ndiya e-ofisini” is correct in Xhosa but
*“I am going to office” (which is a literal translation) is unacceptable in English.

The learners then have a problem knowing when to use or avoid definite and indefinite articles and thus produce sentences such as:

- *Satire is form of writing.
- *Among animals, pigs had to play leading role. (*Animal Farm*)
- *There was misunderstanding between animals. (*Animal Farm*) (Vukela 1983:28)

Interference is also found in idioms. Learners have a tendency to translate idiomatic expressions in the native language to the target language. A good example is taken from a composition written by a standard 10 pupil:

*“There is no knee at this school”. This was translated literally from:

“Akukho dolo kwesi sikolo” which in English means: “The teachers of this school are impartial, straight forward-honest”.

It is also common to hear learners saying:

*“He is playing about her” when they mean: “He is messing her about”. In Xhosa the equivalent of this is:
“Udlala ngaye” which is literally translated.

There are also errors which could be attributed to poor control of the English phonological system. For instance the learner writes:

*“feedin skin” for “feeding scheme”
*“I head the news” instead of
“I heard the news”.

The first step is again to try and find out what it is that the learner wanted to say. The next step is then to classify the error.

These examples are on the level of selection. Mawasha (1982:33) states that these errors tend to cluster in four areas, which are:

- vowels e.g. ship, sheep, board, bored
- consonants e.g. feeding scheme/feedinskin
- consonant clusters e.g. o'clock/otlock especially/expecially
- voiced versus unvoiced e.g. south–southern

The explanation for the cause of these errors is simple. The sound *f* in Xhosa will always be represented by the symbol *f* whereas in English there is no consistency in the sound-to-symbol relationship. This inconsistency is a cause of confusion to many learners of English.

A certain English speaker went to a black school, looking for a certain teacher. He was told that the teacher he was looking for was late. The visitor then indicated that he was willing to wait until he arrived. The headmaster had to explain that he meant that the teacher had died.

The error is semantic and is on the level of selection. The process operating in the learner's mind is probably overgeneralisation of the rule.

In English it is correct to say:

- "The girl is beautiful" and therefore:
"The beautiful girl".
- "The man is kind" and therefore:
"The kind man".

But it is incorrect to say:

- **"Mr. X is late (for dead) and therefore
"The late Mr. X" which is correct.

"Mr. X is late" only refers to Mr. X being late for something and not being dead. The problem with the learners is that they applied the rules used in the first two sentences and overgeneralised them.

Various institutions have their own argot. At the University of Fort Hare, for instance, students talk of a "tutorial", whereas at Rhodes University they talk of a "tut", pronounced *It tI*. This is college slang. Some learners are not aware that a particular term is unique to a particular institution and even then that although when talking to their friends they can use it, it is unacceptable in formal writing. Here are a few words that appear in students' writings:

*"I will roll her in the afternoon".

Here "roll" means "entertain". "You will seldom find her in her room now that she is out of the boat". To be "out of the boat" means to "have a lover". If you are "in the boat" it means that you do not have one and you are thus a "sailor".

*"Old Major conscientized the animals".

This comes from "conscious"—"to be aware". To "conscientize" therefore is to make one "aware politically".

What must teachers do with these errors?

It is doubtful whether reteaching the structures already discussed will help the learners stop making the errors. These learners have been exposed to English as a subject for ten to eleven years and English as a medium of instruction for seven to eight years. If one looks at the school syllabi one finds that the same lexical items and structures are repeated from one standard to another.

Ellis and Tomlinson (1980:177-278) suggested that the following procedure can be usefully followed:

Attention to errors:

The learners should be presented with a number of sentences some of which are correct and some of which contain examples of a type of error. They should then indicate which sentences are unacceptable and say what is wrong with them. They further suggest that only errors which the learners commonly make should be dealt with because of the danger of the pupils learning the wrong version. This view does not, however, invalidate the concept of trial and error learning even at university level.

The next step is correct exemplification. The unacceptable sentences are corrected on the board and further relevant examples of the correct usage of the item are given.

The following step is Drill. This could be done orally or in writing. Teachers should however, refrain from using meaningless drills. Asking a pupil to write a word he got wrong a hundred times will not help.

The last step is what is called Mechanical Practice. Pupils are given practice which involves some de-

cision-making and not just the mechanical repetition of correct models. Sufficient guidance should, however, be given to enable most of the pupils to get most of the answers right.

Conclusion

Error Analysis at all levels of language teaching is essential, even though this does not mean that all the errors will be eradicated. Any remedial action taken by the teacher must be on the basis of such error analysis. There will be those errors peculiar to that particular group of students and as long as these errors do not cause a breakdown in communication, they should be tolerated in conversation but corrected in class.

Error analysis should therefore be an important ingredient in teacher training programmes for all language teachers.

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