

The Important Part of Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition

Ming Zhu^{1,a*}

¹Longre, Guanxia Bridge Xinhua Mansion, No.55 Zhongshan Road, Gulou District, Nanjing, PRC, 210009

^azhuming940829@163.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Error analysis is one of the important factors in acquiring a second language. It indeed reveals the various causes of error and summarizes the different forms of error. This paper intends to illustrate the close correlation between error analysis and second language acquisition in the classroom setting. Besides, the L1 transfer will be analyzed briefly as the key element of errors in accordance with some examples of students' errors. Furthermore, teaching implications in the speaking class will be given in order to guide teacher to focus more on teaching methods in the future.

1. Introduction

In the process of learning a second language, it is inevitable for students to make errors from time to time. Sorts of factors may be existed, however, the most important reason may be the lacking of language competence or the deep influence from the L1. Actually, making errors has a positive effect on students' learning process since it is a good opportunity for them to find out their own problems and it will teach them knowledge to improve their language accuracy. Furthermore, error analysis is also a great way for teachers to have a deeper understanding of the error genres of students and identify how to make error corrections in the classroom properly. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to find out those errors in the class, analyze the reasons of making errors and give priority to how to reduce the possibility of making errors.

This paper falls into five parts: part one is a brief introduction of the whole paper; part two presents the theoretical framework, which are second language acquisition, error analysis and L1 transfer; part three aims to demonstrate how second language acquisition and error analysis exert on each other, and some examples that occur in speaking class will be mentioned as well; part four elaborates on some teaching implications based on the error analysis, and how the teacher should employ error corrections properly; and the last part emphasizes the significance of error analysis in second language acquisition.

2. The overview of second language acquisition, error analysis and L1 transfer

2.1 Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been hotly debated as an important issue for a long time. Second Language Acquisition is also called the target language (TL), which means the destination that we are bound to arrive at (*Saville-Troike, 2005, p. 2*). It is said that SLA involves learning L2 informally in a social context, learning L2 formally in classrooms, or mixing these settings and circumstances together (*Saville-Troike, 2005, p. 2*). Thus, knowing about SLA is also a way to understand different learners' acquisition of a second language in diverse environments. In addition, SLA consists of a broad range of variables that may affect the learner's language proficiency. For example, SLA has close relationship with cognitive variations, one's personhood, second culture learning, interference, the creation of new linguistic systems, the learning of discourse and communicative functions of language (*Brown, 1994, p. 275*).

2.2 Error Analysis

Basically, it is quite common for humans to make mistakes in the learning process (*Brown, 1994, p. 204*). In order to analyze the different reasons that may affect second language acquisition, it is necessary to distinguish errors from mistakes. According to *Brown (1994)*, a mistake refers to a learner committed randomly, which means the learner failed to use the language structure properly while she or he knows the correct form (*p. 205*). In contrast, error is different from mistake, which is closely related to a learner's language competence (*p. 205*). Sometimes, distinctions between error and mistake may be not obvious enough as their expressions are too short and not typical enough, while the differences can be found when learners convey adequate information. Furthermore, the inevitability of errors makes it possible to observe, analyze, and classify errors in order to make clear the process of learners' application of language (*Brown, 1994, p. 206*).

2.3 L1 Transfer

Over the past century, first language transfer has played an important role in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and language pedagogy (*Karim, Nassaji, 2013, p. 117*). According to *Karim and Nassaji (2013)*, the transferability of L1 has been regarded as the effect of mother tongue habits on L2 learning (*p. 118*). L1 transfer is a part of the process of SLA that cannot be ignored. There are two genres of first language transfer, namely positive and negative transfer. As *Saville-Troike (2005)* stated, positive transfer refers to the proper use of L1 structure or rule in L2 utterance, while negative transfer refers to the inappropriate use of L1 in L2, which can be seen as equally as an error (*p. 19*). Under these circumstances, whether L1 transfer has a positive impact on target language acquisition has become a research hotspot. Different researchers hold different views toward this issue. Some researchers considered them as the interference of learning L2. For example, *Fries (1945)* stated that L1 has an adverse effect on learning a second language (*p. 23*). Besides, *Lado (1957)* regarded L1 as a negative effect on L2 learning (*p. 39*). However, others regard them as part of cognitive process. For instance, *Selinker (1983)* and *Odlin (1989)* viewed first language transfer as the 'interlanguage' and 'cross-linguistic process' respectively. In fact, the emergence of L1 transfer is bound to bring both positive and negative transfer at the same time. Therefore, it is necessary to fully understand the negative transfer and try our best to turn it into positive transfer.

3. The correlation of error analysis and second language acquisition in the speaking classroom

In the second language speaking class, students are more likely to make errors because sometimes they need to make classroom interactions in second language. On this account, errors should be identified and classified in order to gain a deep insight into the difficulties and challenges of acquiring a second language. In order to identify different errors of students, *Brown (1994)* defined the source of errors into four categories, which are interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, the context of learning, and communication strategies (*p. 213-217*). The following examples in the speaking class are closely related to interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer.

The main source of errors for students belongs to interlingual and intralingual transfer. According to *Lott (1983)*, interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer make up of grammar and vocabulary errors, and learners tend to commit errors because of word distinction (*p. 257*). *Brown (1994)* identified some causes of errors as interlingual transfer due to the L1 interference (*p. 213*). It can be also regarded as the negative mother tongue transfer in second language acquisition. There are two genres of errors that will be mentioned, namely lexical interference and grammatical interference, which are related to collocation, word order, word formation, L1 thinking pattern, singular and plural, tense, and sentence order.

In terms of lexical interference, students tend to create some phrases like city people, common people, review information, study area to express citizens, ordinary people, reference book or study material, self-access center. As can be seen from the above examples, these errors are all directly from the translation of their L1. When they intend to convey some messages, learners are more inclined to

generate ideas in Chinese, and then translate Chinese into English word by word. In this way, it is easy to result in the negative transfer from their mother tongue. Furthermore, they are not familiar with the meaning of different words. Therefore, they mix common with ordinary, and book or material with information. Similarly, the meaning of words sometimes varies, such as study. When it acts as a noun, it means learning, research and discipline, and when it is used as a verb, it can be considered as learning something or carrying out a study. However, learners only focus on the meaning of frequent use. By this way, the meaning of the collocation becomes an area that needs to be studied rather than a field where students can learn.

Additionally, learners' L1 thinking pattern sometimes plays an adverse impact on their L2 expression. Literally, problems of L1 thinking pattern are closely related to the problems of lexis above. However, they vary from collocation to sentence order. For instance, if a learner wants to express she did not prepare for the exam, she would describe it as took the exam naked. Obviously, this is not the authentic English, nor does it conform to the thinking pattern of the L2. Sometimes, this error is associated with cultural difference and gives rise to misunderstanding. The same example is showed as follows: if a learner originally wants to express she failed to make full use of her time before the exam, she would say she did not catch up with the time. Apart from this, it is also a common problem to use if I have enough lucky to express if I am lucky enough because in Chinese, we tend to use this sentence order. However, in English, enough in the sentence is regarded as an adverb that should be put after the adjective lucky. Hence, if learners stick to the order of Chinese sentence, they are bound to make errors.

In some cases, negative interlingual transfer can also leads to word formation and word order errors. For instance, if a learner intends to express that students are enforced to attend Chinese class, she would say students attend compulsory course in a Chinese class. As seen from this example, students cannot clearly distinguish verbs and adjectives, nor do they know that adjective is used to describe a noun where it cannot be treated as a noun.

As for the grammatical errors, some learners tend to make errors like redundancy, omission of prepositions, singular and plural, inappropriate use of tense, and incorrect sentence order. For example, when a learner attempts to express there are no rooms available in the hotel for now, she says all the rooms in the hotel are fully occupied now. In this example, learner deemed occupy as not available because we tend to say so in Chinese. Furthermore, this negative L1 transfer would lead to redundancy, and some students have been aware of this problem. However, they have no idea of how to deal with it. Beyond that, some students would omit the preposition. For instance, I return dormitory. This problem is also related to their L1 transfer that Chinese has fewer prepositions than English, so not all sentence need prepositions. If they fail to grasp different usages of prepositions, they are easy to commit this error. Except these, some learners are not sensitive to singular and plural and tense, and reasons are the same as above. For instance, they said mid-autumn festival is Chinese traditional festival, and they are not aware that they omit a. And another example related to tense is I lived in university flat until I graduated. Actually, the learner originally tries to express she is living in university flat now and she will not leave the university flat until she graduates. Besides, another student said my last week is terrible. Hence, it can be seen that most students tend to misuse the past tense, present tense and future tense, even though sometimes they are clearly aware that they want to express something happened in the past or what will occur in the future.

Apart from the negative L1 transfer, some errors made by learners are viewed as intralingual transfer since sometimes it is difficult for students to distinguish and understand the synonym, homograph and grammar clearly. And accordingly, these errors are mainly caused by overgeneralization and cross-association. Some examples related to these are: when the learner plans to express I have already spent a whole week preparing for the test, she says I have ready spend all week to prepare the test. At first, this example reflects that the student misused the word formation, like ready and already, and whole and all. And, this is because these vocabularies have the similar meaning. Another example is do action and takes action. Some students use do since they consider that do has the same meaning with the take. They can both express to carry out something. Similarly, they also tend to use let somebody do something to express allow or have somebody do something.

On top of that, most learners are normally confused about intuition and tuition, effective and efficiency, because they suppose that those vocabularies have the similar form, which is easy for them to be abused. In addition, part of students are confused about whether wind heavily is a correct collocation or not. Actually, some learners are easy to link it with rain heavily. Therefore, they reckoned that if they want to express too windy or the wind blowing heavily, they could use the form of wind heavily. Furthermore, when wind act as a verb, it does not include the meaning of wind blowing.

In short, interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer are the main factors leading to the second language acquisition. In real life, both high achievers and poor learners can be affected by these factors. Through the above analysis, it can be concluded that both teachers and students should do a good job of identifying and analyzing errors in the process of learning in order to completely clear the obstacles of second language acquisition. Therefore, in return, the teacher's teaching implication should be highly presented in order to raise awareness of the importance of the error analysis.

4. Reflection

Being an English teacher, it is vital ability to have an in-depth understanding of the different sources of students' error. At the same time, the reasons for committing errors should also be analyzed in order to solve the dilemma encountered by the learners. For most learners in the speaking class, they are unable to use L2 to think because they rely heavily on their L1. They tend to use L1 to think, and then translate it into L2. By this way, their L1 may bring the adverse effect on their L2 expression. Sometimes, some students are affected by their peers' errors. Due to the lack of language competence, they take their peers' expressions for correct. Some of them would bear those errors in mind and use these wrong expressions next time. Besides, sometimes, teacher needs to do some presentations in the speaking class in order to show students how to answer questions structurally. However, in the process of listening, students tend to pay more attention to words or collocations that they are not familiar with, instead of putting emphasis on the usage of words or collocations in the context. As a result, this leads to their failure to use some rules of affix to guess the meaning when they do not catch the meaning of some words. In the course of expressing, the learner's word coinage errors also occur frequently. And this may be boiled down to their inadequate input of L2, such as listening or reading. Therefore, when they are in an attempt to voice their ideas, they are prone to commit some errors relate to Chinglish.

In accordance with the causes of errors, it is crucial for teachers to get to know how to make error corrections properly in the speaking class. No matter how proficiently they speak, no one will be ungrateful for the teacher taking time to point out their errors. Therefore, the way of correcting errors is of great importance. First and the most important thing is to tell the students how to hold positive attitudes to errors, even sometimes teachers need to guide students to build positive attitudes. It plays a significant role in a language class since teachers' positive guide will influence students' learning motivation towards the target language. Second, teacher should have a better understanding of different students' preferences because students learning process indeed vary greatly. Hence, if the teacher intends to help learners achieve higher language proficiency, it is important to take different strategies of correcting errors. For example, instead of pointing out the error directly, teacher can ask for other learners' opinions about this error, and have them vote for it. And, most students who vote for it will be asked to share their opinions. In this way, not only the teacher can interact well with the students, but also, some introverted students would engage in the discussion naturally. Importantly, the learner who commits errors will not feel less embarrassed. On the other hand, some study techniques should also be imparted to students. For instance, the settings of acquiring a second language are not limited in the classroom. They can also create language environment in the real world via listening English news, watching English documentaries, meeting foreign friends or joining in some English corners, etc. In the end, both teacher and students should be aware that acquiring a second language in a native-like level is a long-term task. Besides, teacher should tolerate the student's errors and have enough patience on them. The successful L2 learning hinges on integrated effort of both teacher and students.

5. Conclusion

In short, error analysis plays a significant part in the second language acquisition. Having a good grasp of different genres of learners' errors and being fully aware of how to make error corrections are of great importance during the instructing process. This paper also presents the opinion that being conscious of the correlation of error analysis and SLA is essential for all teachers. Furthermore, error analysis will also make teachers focus more on their teaching methods, so as to make adjustments to meet the needs of different students.

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