

**INNOVATIVE APPROACHES  
TO  
EDUCATION  
AND  
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

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**LECAPS Publishers**



**EDUCATIONAL AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT CONSULTANCY SERVICES**

# 9

## Error-Correction as a Tool in Language Teaching and Learning: The case of English and Ibibio

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Many theories of language learning have been advanced. For a long time, research based on *contrastive analysis* was very popular. Comparisons were made between first language ( $L_1$ ) and second language ( $L_2$ ), and on the basis of differences found between the two systems, potential problem areas for language learners were identified. The assumption in *contrastive analysis* is that all errors must be caused by interference. Underlying this theory was the behaviourist's notion that language learning meant acquiring new habits. As such, reinforcement in the form of drills and exercises was thought to be the answer.

However, this trend ignored another aspect of errors, i.e. errors caused by the  $L_2$  being learned. This class of errors could not be handled by drills and exercises. Besides, research in the late sixties gave support to the theory that learners have a kind of built-in syllabus which they use in learning a second language.

This kind of thinking gave rise to *error analysis*. There have been basically two schools of thought regarding the learner's errors. One school attributes errors to poor teaching methods. The other school of thought is based on the assumption that we live in an imperfect world and errors are part of that imperfection. For that reason they can never be eradicated completely in spite of the best teaching methods. Therefore, we should pay more attention to errors themselves and look for ways of dealing with them rather than attempting to correct them, for they will still occur (Corder 1981). This is the basic rationale of *error analysis*.

Before we go further, let us briefly look more closely at the following terms which are very relevant to our discussion. These are "errors" and "mistakes". Errors are the unacceptable deviations from the native speaker's grammar produced by an  $L_2$  speaker or learner. It is primarily concerned with second or foreign language learning. The general assumption is that errors systematically reflect the level of competence of a learner (Crystal, 1991). In other words, an error, or a series of errors, indicates that the target language system has not been mastered. The stage of learning of the language is related to whether the learner can correct the error or not.

Mistakes, on the other hand, are performance limitations. This implies that mistakes are features of either the  $L_1$  or  $L_2$ . They can be regarded as more of social slips. They are induced by many non-linguistically related features such as slips of the tongue/pen, hesitations, anger, stage fright, etc. This means that the system is known, but it is not properly used for some of the reasons given above.

The distinction between errors and mistakes is a bit subjective. However, we shall attempt a little illustration here. A deviant form qualifies for the term mistake if in a speech or writing the form is correct in more than one instance and wrong in only one instance. For instance, if a learner says "with regards to" consistently, then we know that is an error because he has not mastered enough English structure to realise that it is a wrong construction. If another learner says, "John will return", "Ekaete will go", and "Okon wills come", then the use of "wills" in the third sentence is merely a mistake for it could have been a slip of the tongue or pen. If, however, there are more of such cases in his speech or writing, then it is an error for he is still confusing modals with verbs.

These two categories of lapses can cause alarm to the language teacher. While the mistakes can be ignored depending on how frequently they occur, the errors cannot be so ignored. Errors are our major concern here. However, they are no longer to be considered as problems which must be eliminated at all cost, but rather as normal and inevitable features which indicate the learner's strategies in second language learning.

## ERROR TYPES

There are two main types of errors, intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. Intralingual errors are caused by interference of items within the  $L_2$ , while interlingual errors are caused by interference of items from  $L_1$ .

**Intralingual Errors** This group of errors are errors made in the attempt to learn the  $L_2$ . Confusion is sometimes caused by items within the target language. This leads to errors. The degree of these errors indicates the state of the learner's development in the  $L_2$  and as such they are often of varying degrees and are usually grouped into categories such as *over-generalisation* and *ignorance of rule restrictions*. These two categories will be discussed after the different stages of language learning have been outlined. There are different stages of language learning and different categories of errors are made at these different stages. Corder (1971) groups the errors according to the following three stages of learning:

1. **Presystematic Stage.** This is the stage at which the learner is just vaguely aware that there is any systematic order with regard to an item. Sometimes he is not even aware at all of such a system.
2. **Systematic Stage.** At this stage the learner is aware that there are underlying rules for the errors he makes. However, he cannot correct all of the errors he makes at this stage.
3. **Post-systematic Stage.** At this last stage the learner becomes quite consistent. He can explain and even correct the errors he makes by himself. Most learners at this stage are fluent in the target language.

Now let us discuss the two categories of errors learners make.

**Over-generalization** This involves a condition where related or similar patterns are transferred from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$  on the basis of a knowledge of the item by the learner. For instance, pattern drills and transformation exercises can lead to over-generalization by learner. Learners sometimes over-generalize the rule of pluralization in English to produce the following errors:

- He was always finding *faults* with her.
- The fat man has a lot of *hairs*.
- When we got home we carried our *languages* into the house.

The words in italics are exceptions to the rule that countable nouns have plural and singular forms. Unfortunately, learners can over-generalize on the basis of such a rule, disregarding the exceptions.

Another example of over-generalization is found in the use of nouns which are used in singular because they are modified by *one*. These are errors involving concord and number and they are very common, particularly in the Nigerian context. The following examples are some of the errors the author has come across in marking students' scripts in the University of Uyo.

- The village was one of the smallest *village* in our area.
- It was one of the most interesting *holiday* I have had.
- She was one of the tallest *woman* I have seen.
- One of the books I bought recently *have* been stolen.
- One of the houses *are* green.

Other errors, as shown in the examples below, are errors made in comparative constructions.

- Ekaete is not as poor as Etim *does*.
- Udoh liked me more than Adiaha *was*.
- She was very tired *than* her sister.

**Ignorance of Rule Restrictions** Most rules have exceptions. Sometimes learners do not realise that there are such exceptions. Over-generalization, analogy and rote-learning of rules are common causes of this category of errors. Such analogies are very common, for example, with prepositions and tenses. A rule concerning tense formation in English involves the addition of the morphemes /-t/, /-d/, /-ed/. A learner could transfer past tense morphemes to irregular verbs which take the zero morpheme  $\emptyset$  as shown in the examples below.

- The boy *beatted* the girl.
- Then one of them *lossed* his temper.
- Mummy *goed* to market.

Examples of a similar type involving the use of prepositions follow:

- We laughed *with* her words.
- I met *with* my sister I have not seen for a long time.
- I saw him *in* TV yesterday.
- *On* the end of the holiday I went home.

### Interlingual Errors

This group of errors originates in the mother tongue or  $L_1$ . These features are usually from all levels of language: phonology, syntax and semantics. And this is usually characterised by interference.

Interference refers to a situation where a feature in the  $L_2$  is perceived through a familiar and already understood feature in the  $L_1$ . This kind of situation is common only to bilinguals where two languages are in contact. This is particularly pronounced at the early stages of learning a second language. At these stages, the learner has not acquired enough of the target language, so he falls back on his  $L_1$  and merely transfers  $L_1$  patterns to the new language.

One of the commonest forms of interference is the substitution of a sound in  $L_2$  for a sound in the  $L_1$ . This may be due to the fact that the sound in question is present in the  $L_1$  but absent in the  $L_2$ . Sometimes the distribution of the said sound might be different in both languages. However, the familiar sound is usually substituted for one that is not familiar. For instance, the voiced velar stop /g/ is absent in Ibibio in all positions. The Ibibio speaker finds it difficult to pronounce this sound, he substitutes /k/, its voiceless counterpart in words with /g/ as shown below.

"Ogoja" is pronounced as (Okoja)

"go" is pronounced as (ko)

### ERROR TREATMENT

We have said that errors can be used as a strategy for teaching a second language. The best way to go about this is to base what the teacher intends to teach on what needs to be taught. Bell's Fault's Analysis is considered a useful tool for this purpose.

Fault's Analysis involves the analysis of the  $L_2$  faults produced by learners in a kind of step-by-step procedure. This procedure involves four steps which will be discussed shortly. The procedure will show the teacher very clearly not only when an error has been made, but also help to describe and explain the error. This makes a lot of sense because apart from easing the work for the teacher, the learner will also make more sense out of it.

The following four steps of error analysis are taken from Bell (1981), which is based on Corder (1981, p. 23). The steps are recognition, description, explanation and correction.

**Recognition** The first stage in error analysis is recognition. There is a need to find out if a sentence is faulty or erroneous. An erroneous sentence can be either overtly

erroneous (i.e. obvious) or covertly erroneous (i.e. superficially well-formed but deviant in interpretation). Here the formal structure of the sentence is considered. The words might be correct; words which conform to the morphology of the  $L_2$ , but they might not conform to the syntax of the  $L_2$ . The ordering of the words might be erroneous. If, however, the sentence conforms to  $L_2$  grammar in terms of its structure, sound and meaning, then the sentence is correct and there is no need for the analysis. This process is the recognition process. The error must first be placed or recognised. If the input (the erroneous sentence) is possible, then you need to find out if it is acceptable. If it is not acceptable, then it must be covertly erroneous. But if, on the other hand, it is not possible, then it must be covertly erroneous.

**Description** The next step is describing the nature of the error. Questions are asked regarding the intelligibility of the sentence and a knowledge of its translation equivalent with the  $L_1$  (if known) is required. At this stage, the deviant form, its translation equivalent and its grammatically correct form in the target language are compared. Note that this step and the last step show the description of the errors and they involve linguistic information.

The comparison in this step is to help the teacher list the errors. Contrastive analysis comes in here, for the attempt is made to see if there is any relationship between the error and the learner's  $L_1$ . If there is no relationship between the error and the  $L_1$ , then there might be some connection with the target language. Where, however, the  $L_1$  is not known or the literal translation does not make any sense, then there is not much the teacher can do here and the error is stored. If the error(s) can be listed at this stage, then we can move onto the next stage.

**Explanation** The explanation involves information regarding why a deviant form is said or written. This is a more difficult task than the first two stages discussed above. This stage is a psycholinguistic one. The explanation could be one of two types or both. The error could be an  $L_1$  dependent error and therefore caused by interference. This is a result of the learner's attempt to handle the new features of the  $L_2$ . In doing this he transfers some  $L_1$  habits to  $L_2$ . The errors, on the other hand, could be caused by over-generalization or any other developmental process. An explanation is necessary to be able to plan out how to handle the errors.

**Correction** A study of the deviant forms of the learner from recognition to explanation is necessary to ultimately correct the errors. However, eradication of these errors is not the only concern of the teacher. The teacher merely uses the errors to arrive at the root of the problem, i.e. the built-in strategies used by the learner. Corder (1981, p. 25) sums it up thus:

*The "correction" of error provides precisely the sort of negative evidence which is necessary to the discovery of the correct concept or rule. Consequently, a better description of idiosyncratic sentences contributes directly to an account of what the learner knows and does not know at that moment in his career and should ultimately*

*enable the teacher to supply him not just with the information that his hypothesis is wrong, but also, importantly, with the right sort of information or data for him to form a more adequate concept of a rule in the target language.*

Errors and mistakes might be rampant. But some of the errors occur randomly. It is important to note that the emphasis should be on those errors that appear regularly. Once such errors are established, attempts should be made to correct them. These errors can be located at two levels, in writing and speech. The method of correction of these two would vary only slightly as the preceding discussion will show. Whichever of these two is the case, there is the need to trace the origin of the error as a prerequisite for correction. The traditional method of attacking the errors wherever they occur on script or in speech needs to be improved upon. This method involves either circling the error (in writing) or underlining the error and then leaving the learner to correct himself, or a general correction is done in class, or correcting the error right on the script, or introducing drills in an attempt to eradicate the errors.

The first thing to do in error correction is to process them through the four steps discussed above. This will enable the teacher to locate the type of error and possibly the cause of the error. Such detailed explanation will also help the learner, for he can make a conscious attempt to avoid the condition that created the error in the first place. For instance, the difficulty to pronounce certain sounds like the /g/ by an Ibibio learner of English can be approached from the history of the problem. An explanation of the mechanics involved in the production of voiced and voiceless sounds might be necessary. Such that at the end, the learner with the problem will attempt to produce some vibration when pronouncing the sound. Drills of the sound in isolation may not be enough. Perhaps such drills can come after the above explanation.

In correcting most errors, there is need for situational context. That is to say that the context surrounding the error can help the learner to correct the error himself. Simply providing the correct form might not make enough impact to correct the error or mistake. Consider the following exchange between Ekaete and her teacher.

- Teacher: Did you do your assignment yesterday?  
 Ekaete: Yes Madam, I did the assignment.  
 Teacher: You did what?  
 Ekaete: I finished the assignment.  
 Teacher: Repeat what you said before.  
 Ekaete: I did the assignment, Madam.

This exchange shows that Ekaete has learned the past tense rule. Perhaps she has not yet got used to the exceptions to the rule. Merely providing the form would not make as much impact as to first of all give her a chance to remember and correct herself first. If she had been unable to correct herself, then the teacher would know that she had not learned the rule in the first place and would, therefore, need some instructional intervention. The Ekaete example shows that she merely made a mistake.

In written text, self correction can also be employed in correcting learner's errors. Student's essays are treated in a systematic way without any hurry. After writing, the students should be given extra time to formally read over their work with the intention of correcting their errors and mistakes without any help from the teacher. The teacher can then mark the essays. He could either underline the errors or circle them. Sometimes the linguistic category of the error can be indicated on the margin. The essays are then given back to the students to do the corrections. I prefer this method of underlining the error and then providing linguistic category of the errors to merely providing the correct form. Symbols could be used by the teacher to indicate the linguistic category and they could vary from teacher to teacher. For instance, "sp" for wrong spelling "T" for wrong tense, "/ /" for paragraphs, "R" for Repetition, "✓" for good point, "W.O" for wrong word order, etc. Omojuwa (1979,p.178) also support this method:

Psycho-linguistic classification is essential for error explanation, which in turn determines the instructional strategy required for the error to be extinguished. The need for psycholinguistic classification of errors quite often escapes the attention of the majority of language teachers, with the result that marking becomes unnecessarily tiring and correction unrewarding and time wasting for both the learner and teacher.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEARNERS' ERRORS

The learner's errors show a systematic pattern. These errors are quite significant for many reasons. The patterns of errors might be wrong, but they are helpful. For instance, the learner who says, "*The boy beatted the girl*", has a system, although not a very correct one. He has learned the past tense formation in English. This error shows that although the learner has learned the rule, he is still ignorant of rule restrictions in English. This information places such a learner in Corder's systematic stage.

Errors are particularly significant to the learner, the teacher and the researcher for the following reasons:

- i. The kind of systematic analysis of errors discussed above tells the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has gone and what is left.
- ii. Analysis of errors helps the teacher to draw up a programme to remedy the deficiencies of the learner's efforts at second language learning.
- iii. Errors show the teacher what and how a learner learns a second language.

Even the student can benefit from the errors he makes in the following ways:

- a. They are a device that helps him learn.
- b. They form a test of his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning. On the basis of one or more items he can generalize to others that are similar. But he should be careful not to over-generalize.

Errors help the researcher in the following ways. (a) They provide evidence of how language is learned. (b) They show what strategies or procedure the learner employs in his discovery of the language.



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