



Review

Revisiting causes of grammatical errors for ESL teachers

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Abstract

Despite the endeavors of error analysis studies, confusing terms and abundant articles fail to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher's concise and attainable knowledge. The present article is to revisit examinations on Second Language (L2) grammatical errors in previous studies and provide ESL teachers fundamental knowledge to assist ESL learners approaching their second language proficiency. In terms of ESL pedagogy, Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Interlanguage (IL) serve as investigation means of error analysis for effective ESL instruction. For instance, teachers can utilize CA to guide L2 learners to identify differences between First Language (L1) and L2 and form new habits in their L2 by reinforcement instruction. Complementarily, EA then aims at studying L2 learners' error productions, that display their internalized rules of L2 and error features in every level of developing order, and establishing systematic rules on L2 development. At last, IL means a L2 learner's transitional competence between L1 and L2 and this competence shows a unique linguistic system varied with learners' learning backgrounds.

Keywords: Error analysis, ESL teaching, grammatical errors.

INTRODUCTION

From Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), to Interlanguage (IL), researchers attempt to provide ways of analysis, examinations of L2 errors, and effective methods for second language acquisition. According to Corder's (1967) statement on the usefulness of error analysis, language teachers can utilize error analyses to instruct Second Language (L2) learners to notice their errors, examine First Language (L1) and L2 linguistic systems, and monitor L2 productions. Through embedding error analyses in process of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching, L2 learners' errors could be diagnosed, anticipated, eliminated, and corrected.

However, despite the endeavors of error analysis studies, confusing terms and abundant error analysis articles fail to provide ESL teachers concise and attainable knowledge (Mahmoud, 2013). The present article is to review examinations on L2 grammatical errors in previous studies and provide ESL teachers fundamental knowledge to assist ESL learners approaching their second language proficiency. The review covers the definition of grammatical errors, error studies including (CA), (EA) and (IL) in second

language acquisition, and sources of grammatical errors.

The definition of grammatical errors

What are grammatical errors?

Grammar is regarded as a whole system and structure of a language. It consists of syntax, morphology, and sometimes also phonology and semantics (Oxford Dictionaries, N/A). Larsen-Freeman (1997) indicates that grammar encompasses the three dimensions of morphosyntax (form), (meaning), and pragmatics (use) as shown in Figure 1. Grammatical errors thus mean inaccurate forms, semantics meanings, and use. L2 learners will use L2 accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately after mastering these three dimensions.

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) then point out that grammatical errors belong to "local errors" which are linguistically morphological, lexical, syntactic, and orthographic errors, while global errors means communicative errors which show L2 learners misinterpret conversational messages.

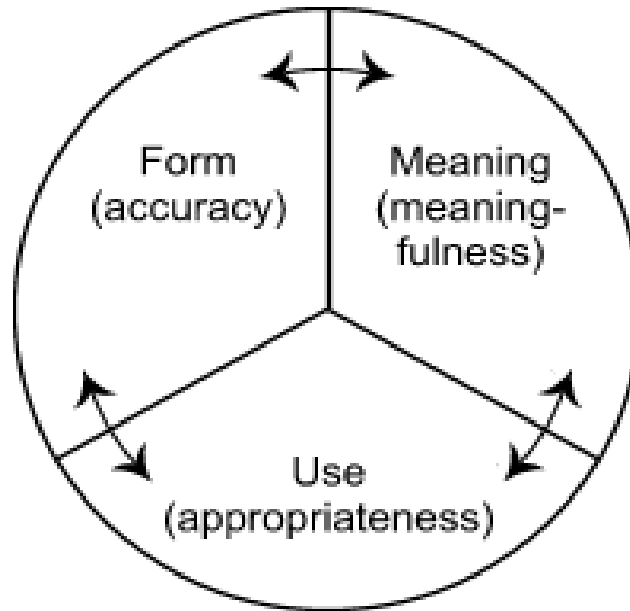


Figure 1. (Retrieved from Larsen-Freeman, 1997, N/A)

The distinction between error and mistake

Scholars (Brown, 2000; Corder, 1967) suggest that distinguishing mistakes and errors can appropriately analyze learner's L2 learning performance. Corder (1967) states that mistakes are categorized as non-systematic errors out of chance circumstances, such as slips of the tongue, while errors refer to systematic errors which often occur in second language learning.

Brown (2000) further regards mistakes as a failure which learners neglect on correctly utilizing a known system and learners can self-correct once concentrating. Errors can reveal learners' insufficient competence in producing sentences with correct grammar (Brown, 2000). Accordingly, learners non-systematically make mistakes due to deficient attention on utilizing a known system and can self-correct. By contrast, error performance, generated out of learners' systematical understanding of the target language, can indicate a learner's linguistic competence. Error studies, therefore, play a necessary role to demonstrate L2 learners' learning problems and indicate the level of learners' L2 proficiency.

Error studies in second language acquisition

Since the 1950s, scholars (Corder, 1974; Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1972; Richards, 1974; Wilkins, 1968; and many more) have been striving for analyzing grammatical errors in ESL from Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), to Interlanguage (IL). These ways of analysis, as introduced below, aim to investigate errors

and provide reasonable examinations on causes of the errors.

Contrastive analysis

Behaviorism is often linked to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). According to CAH, while a L2 learner, who has already established the formation of habits in L1, learns other new habits in L2, L1 system will dominate the L2 learning process. This indicates that similar features between L1 and L2, such as grammar and phonics, would ease L2 acquisition or form the new habits in L2 easily. Oppositely, when features are different, the formatted habits in L1 would interfere with new habits in L2 (Lado, 1957; Weinreich, 1953). Lado (1957) first introduces CAH and asserts that L2 learners make errors due to L1 interference (Ellis, 1995). L2 learners thus need to identify differences between L1 and L2 and form new habits in L2 by reinforcement.

Yet, CAH fails to predict all of L2 errors and many actual errors are not caused from L1 interference (Lems, Miller, and Soro, 2009; Lightbown and Spada, 2006). From the strong version of CAH, the weak version now is more acceptable and belongs to cross-linguistic influence which partially applies contrastive features of L1 and L2 to L2 acquisition (Brown, 2000).

Error analysis

CAH assumes that L2 errors are due to negative L1 transfer but fails to explain all L2 errors. Instead of

identifying the linguistic features between L1 and L2, Wilkins (1968) claims to look at the actual errors made by L2 learners. Error Analysis (EA) is thus used to study L2 learners' errors and analyze the errors from all possible sources (Brown, 2000).

EA can be traced back to the innatist perspective. The innatists state that human beings are born with a specific innate ability to discover the rules of a language system on the basis of the surrounding language environment. One popular theory is Chomsky's (1950s) Universal Grammar (UG) that contains the general rules and principles which are common to all human languages. In addition, children are born to have the ability to learn any language they are exposed to in their environment. Based on Chomsky's theory, Lenneberg (1967) further asserts that the linguistic competence has its biologically developing order and process despite of drilling learners with numerous amount of imitation or repetition.

Krashen (1985) believes that this biological language acquisition device (LAD) "is available in L2 acquisition and LAD treats the input in various predetermined ways to derive knowledge of language" (Cook, 1993, pp. 54). Krashen (1982) then proposes the Monitor Model. This model refers to the learner who can monitor his/her L2 productions after learning relevant rules, such as self-correction on his/her grammar in speaking sentences. In addition, natural order hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) indicates L2 learning also passes through predictable stages of development like L1. Even though the grammatical rules seem simple, L2 learners still have to go through the developing stages.

As discussed above, innatists agree that L2 language acquisition has its sequentially developing order. EA aims at studying L2 learners' learning performance, that indicates L2 learners' internalized rules, error features in every level of developing order, and establishing systematic rules on L2 development (Brown, 1976; Chesterman, 1977). Corder (1981) concludes that EA serves as psycholinguistic and pedagogical functions. In other words, EA provides the structural description of L2 language acquisition and suggests linguistic remedies on L2 teaching. Yet, EA cannot thoroughly examine why L2 learners still make errors while approaching L2 proficiency.

Interlanguage

EA describes errors based on the target language, ignores L2 learners' linguistic competence, and hardly notices L2 learners' avoidance of producing difficult structures (Yip, 1995). While EA is criticized by focusing on sources of L2 grammatical errors, IL emerges to analyze the transitional language system of L2 learners (Yip, 1995). Richards (1974) asserts that IL shows a L2 learner's linguistic competence located at somewhere between L1 and L2.

Selinker (1972) hypothesizes that interlanguage exists as a separate linguistic system through observing a learner's target language production. Corder (1971) further states that while learning a target language, a L2 learner is establishing his/her own grammatical system varied with learning environments and experiences of L2 exposure. Hence, IL displays a L2 learner's transitional competence between L1 and L2 and this competence shows a unique linguistic system varied with learners' learning backgrounds.

In addition to tracing L2 learners' transitional language development, researchers (Adjemian, 1976; Yip, 1995) study L2 learners' ability of achieving L2 proficiency. For instance, Adjemian (1976) claims IL has a unique linguistically characteristic, permeability, which is associated with both L1 and L2 features. This permeability is related to learnability that indicates learners' ability to progress in approaching L2 proficiency (Pinker, 1984; Yip, 1995).

Selinker (1992) defines L2 learners who are not linguistically native-like as "attempted" learners while learners who possess native-like competences as "successful" learners. When a L2 learner expresses more and more similar features to a target language, it shows that the learner is going to achieve the target language proficiency.

Nevertheless, Selinker (1992) points out that L2 learner may stop changing features of their IL, to which he named "fossilization." Lightbown and Spada (2006) therefore call for the need of teaching L2 learners to distinguish differences between their interlanguage and the target language (p. 80). What remains to be explored is a thorough examination by compiling CA, EA, and IL analyses. With respect to ESL pedagogy, a full consideration of the aforementioned three analyses provide a sufficient explanation to identify sources of grammatical errors.

Sources of grammatical errors

Richards (1974) classified errors into two types: interlanguage errors (as indicated above), and intralingual (also named developmental errors). Richards (1971) addresses that overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized are major causes of intralingual errors. These errors appear when L2 learners are developing L2 structure knowledge. Spada and Lightbown (2006) further explain overgeneralization, which L2 learners overly apply L2 structure rules while producing the language. For instance, learners apply the -s ending or -ed ending the verb in "I runs or I raned." (pp. 81). Also, simplification means that L2 learners leave out number, tense, or preposition and have all verbs in the same form (Spada and Lightbown, 2006, pp. 81).

Richards and Sampson (1974) then present seven

factors involved with L2 learners' linguistic system: language transfer, intralingual interference, sociolinguistic situation, modality, age, successions of approximative systems, and universal hierarchy of difficulty (cited in Huang, 2002). Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) proposed six error taxonomies, including linguistic (e.g., phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, lexicon, and discourse), surface strategy (e.g., omission and addition errors), misformation (e.g., regularization, archi-forms, and alternating forms errors), misordering, comparative (e.g., developmental, interlingual, ambiguous, and unique errors), and communicative effect (e.g., global and local errors) taxonomies.

Brown (1980) categorized four sources of errors: interlingual transfer which errors are interfered by L2 learners' mother tongue, intralingual transfer which errors occur from L2 development of a new linguistic system, context of learning which errors are caused by misleading explanations or contexts, and communication strategies which wrong techniques cause errors (as cited in Huang, 2002). As indicated above, research reveals that the sources of L2 errors can be interlingual, intralingual, or socio-linguistic.

Regarding error identification, Ellis (1997) identifies errors through two ways. One is to compare L2 learners' original sentence with a reconstructed sentence. The other one is to analyze the errors of L2 utterance including omission, misinformation, misordering, and overgeneralization. However, it is hard to analyze what L2 learners' linguistic thinking patterns are and what makes them produce the errors.

For instance, L2 learners may avoid using uncertain features of language, which is termed error avoidance (Odlin, 1989; Schachter, 1974; as cited in Spada and Lightbown, 2006, p. 82). Learners often repeat correct sentences in a target language they have heard to avoid errors, thereby not showing learners' current understanding of the target language unless learners produce new sentences (Corder, 1967). Further, Corder (1967) based on Mager's (1961) work asserts that the teacher-generated syllabus, which is used to teach L2 learners, does not match the "built-in syllabus," which is what a L2 learner needs to acquire with respect to the target language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

The article has reviewed the definition of grammatical errors, error studies including CA, EA, and IL 'in second language acquisition', and sources of grammatical errors. It is hoped that through the fundamental knowledge given by the article, ESL teachers can accurately enhance ESL learners' language competence by distinguishing between errors and mistakes and diagnosing causes of grammatical errors in ESL instruction.

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