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Current research interests in learner errors

Abstract

Despite numerous controversies concerning Error Analysis as a procedure, errors in learner language continue to attract both researchers' and teachers' attention. The present paper discusses the recent research interests in learner errors, such as computer-aided error analyses of learner corpora, evaluation of corrective feedback in teaching L2 writing, and learner response to feedback. The review of published research is then followed by a presentation of selected unpublished MA projects conducted by Jagiellonian University graduate students (2007–2010). As teachers of English, they not only recognised errors as a valuable research area, but they were truly interested in possible pedagogical implications of their studies. The projects fall into three thematic areas: cross-linguistic influence (comparison of errors in L2 English produced by Polish and Spanish learners, the influence of L2 English on Polish learners' L3 Russian), perception of error gravity (expert vs. novice teachers, native speaker vs. non-native speaker teachers), and response to written and spoken errors (native speaker vs. non-native speaker teachers). The paper concludes with suggestions for possible research areas which are both relevant and accessible to Polish graduate students.

1. Introduction

Error Analysis (EA), an approach to the study of Second Language Acquisition popular in the 1960s and 1970s, has been severely criticised for its limitations. The major criticism has been that by focusing on errors only, researchers ignored the remaining area of learner production, which resulted in obtaining an incomplete or even misleading picture of learner linguistic behaviour. Moreover, there is not a single step in the procedure itself that would not be widely discussed as problematic. As regards the collection of data, samples of learner language are typically elicited through specific tasks, which do not necessarily reflect learners' natural L2 use in spontaneous production. Their linguistic behaviour may be

affected by the task: either their errors may be task-related or their error-free sequences may result from avoidance strategy use rather than their general proficiency. Identification of errors involves a reference to a specific norm of the target language, which in the case of English, with its current status of an international language and its numerous varieties, may be particularly problematic. Description and explanation of errors involve taxonomies in which categories, classes and subclasses are endlessly multiplied in different ways by different researchers. For example, James (1998: 200) develops a daunting multidimensional classification with as many as 60 error types to conclude that “it is unusual to be able to ascribe with confidence a given error to a single cause. Generally errors are either compound or ambiguous.” Lack of an effective, universal taxonomy, in which it would be possible to classify items uniquely under a particular category, is a serious methodological weakness of EA.

And finally, error evaluation, i.e. investigating the effect of errors on addressees in terms of their comprehension or affective response, depends on the choice of judges and the criteria for error gravity. Although there have been attempts to establish a universal hierarchy of errors (e.g. McCretton, Rider’s 1993), problems are caused by the multiplicity of factors involved, such as characteristics of judges in terms of native vs. non-native speaker, teacher vs. non-teacher status, as well as their age, gender, attitude, etc. Moreover, it is emphasised that perception of error gravity heavily depends on contextual factors, which are completely ignored if errors are judged in isolation (Ellis 1994: 67).

Still, despite various difficulties in identifying errors, ambiguity in classification, the speculative nature of error explanation, the relativity of the concept of error gravity, learner errors continue to attract researchers’ attention.

2. Current research areas

Recent research interests in learner errors seem to lie mainly outside the procedure of Error Analysis. Instead of describing, explaining and classifying errors, many researchers are primarily interested in very practical aspects, namely how teachers respond to errors, how learners respond to feedback and, what is actually most important in educational contexts, whether corrective feedback is effective.

Learners’ response to feedback frequently involves computer-aided techniques. For example, Gaskell and Cobb (2004) examined attempts to make concordance information accessible to lower intermediate L2 writers and they concluded that “The case in principle for concordancing is strong. Concordancing is not so much a trick way of giving learners error feedback, as an attempt to compress and parse the linguistic universe itself so that learners can make sense of it. It is not so much the latest idea in feedback as the last idea in feedback” (Gaskell, Cobb

2004: 317). Heift and Rimrott (2008), on the other hand, used computer technology to investigate learner responses to 3 distinct types of corrective feedback for misspellings produced by English learners of German and they found that the number of correct responses was significantly higher when a correction list was provided while “there was significantly less learner uptake for the feedback type that did not provide any correction suggestions” (Heift, Rimrott 2008: 196).

Learners’ response to feedback is also examined from a different perspective, namely whether learners are assisted while revising their drafts. The aim of Diab’s (2010) study was to compare the effects of peer- vs. self-editing on students’ revision of language errors in revised drafts. It turned out that the experimental group, which received peer feedback, significantly reduced their rule-based errors (subject/verb agreement, pronoun agreement) in revised drafts but not the non rule-based errors (wrong word choice, awkward sentence structure). Diab (2010) suggests that these results may be attributed to peer editing and encourages teachers to use peer-editing in the writing classroom.

As to teachers’ response to errors, there is still interest in teachers’ perception of error gravity, which continues the tradition of error evaluation studies popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Ellis 1994: 63–66). Hyland and Anan (2006) examined beliefs and practices of three groups: native speaker teachers, non-native (Japanese) teachers, and educated native speaker non-teachers. They found that non-native speaker teachers were more severe, considering rule infringement rather than intelligibility as the major criterion for error gravity. They were also likely to regard stylistic variations as errors. Native speaker teachers, on the other hand, turned out to be more sensitive to formality and academic appropriacy.

The research area that apparently attracts most attention is the effectiveness of corrective feedback. A number of studies compare the effectiveness of various types of feedback: selective vs. comprehensive, direct vs. indirect, explicit vs. implicit. Analysing L2 writing teachers’ practices, Lee (2003, 2004) discovered that although selective marking is recommended (in the local syllabus and in the literature), both students and teachers prefer comprehensive error feedback and the majority of teachers mark errors comprehensively. The aim of Chandler’s (2003) study was to find out which is more effective for student self-correction: correcting errors or indicating them (their location or/and type). The results showed that both direct correction and indicating the location of the error were superior to describing the type of error; direct correction turned out to be the best for accurate revisions, it was also the fastest and easiest for the students, but at the same time the students felt that they could learn more from self-correction.

Different feedback conditions for self-correcting were examined in Ferris and Roberts’s (2001) study. They discovered that both groups receiving feedback (errors coded, errors underlined) had significantly outperformed the no-feedback group, but interestingly there were no significant differences between the two feedback groups, showing that the less explicit feedback had been equally effective.

Although error research seems to show a preference for written language, some researchers are interested in spoken errors. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) investigated the effects of correction of learners' errors in spoken language on learning grammatical features. They found that explicit correction during or following the interview was more effective than implicit correction in the form of recasts: explicitly corrected learners turned out to be more successful on subsequent individualised grammar tests.

What is particularly interesting in the recent learner error research is that while a number of studies aim to measure or compare the effectiveness of various types of corrective feedback, the most controversial questions concern potential evidence of effective correction. As Truscott and Hsu (2008) argue, successful error reduction during revision is not a predictor of learning, i.e. improving learners' writing ability. Surprisingly, the current error-correction debate involves some extreme views. While Russel and Spada (2006) conclude that correction is quite effective, Truscott (2007) claims that correction is a clear and dramatic failure. His question is how correction affects learners' ability to use the language in realistic ways, i.e. in writing or speaking for communicative purposes, not to perform on artificial grammar tests. Bruton (2010), on the other hand, argues the opposite. Reviewing the L2 correction research, he observes that in no case do both accuracy and complexity decrease over time (both may increase, or one or other may deteriorate). He also makes an interesting point about how motivation or effort to improve may affect the results of studies; in the research cited the subjects are given no real objectives (e.g. grades), so it cannot be assumed that they are really motivated and ready to do their best. Although this may be very true, one might wonder if such an observation questioning the validity of those studies is safe to make, considering the amount of published research involving volunteer participants.

3. MA research projects

Graduate students of English are frequently in-service teachers improving their qualifications. Since they have access to a plethora of data coming from learners of various ages and levels of proficiency, they are naturally interested in learner errors, with which they have to deal on a daily basis. The MA projects selected for this discussion come from three areas of learner error research: cross-linguistic influence, perception of error gravity, and response to errors.

3.1. Errors and cross-linguistic influence

Cross-linguistic influence with interlingual errors in particular becomes even more interesting if more than two languages (L1, L2) are involved. This was possible in the case of two students who apart from studying English also had a degree in a different foreign language.

Being a teacher of Russian, Joanna Mazur (2007) got interested in the influence of English as L2 on Polish learners' Russian as L3. She collected samples of written Russian produced by her students, which constituted a corpus of over 8000 words. The corpus was searched for interlingual errors which could be ascribed to the influence of English. The majority of errors were spelling errors, such as capitalising days of the week, months, or the personal pronoun Я (I). Other spelling errors resulted from misselection of the following letters:

ю/у

* *стюдент / студент* (student)

* *мюзыка / музыка* (music)

о/ы **сон / сын* (son)

ю/ж * *юрналист / журналист* (journalist).

Among grammatical errors, there was use of the nominative instead of the accusative:

а/у * *пью кола / пью колу* (I drink cola).

Lexical errors resulted from confusing English-Russian false cognates:

* *юрист* (lawyer) / *журналист* (journalist)

* *фамилия* (surname) / *семья* (family)

* *магазины* (shops) / *журналы* (magazines).

Having also collected the data concerning her students' attitude to learning English and Russian, Mazur (2007) concluded that the strong influence of L2 English on L3 Russian may have been caused by students' negative attitude to Russian, their strong preference for English and their exposure to English as a global language, incomparable with learners' exposure to Russian.

Another project on cross-linguistic influence in learner English was inspired by the student's experience of teaching English to speakers of different L1s, i.e. Polish and Spanish. Małgorzata Kurek (2010) analysed a corpus of over 7500 words consisting of 60 texts, picture stories based on the same prompt, written by Polish and Spanish learners of English. As regards interlingual grammatical errors, article errors (mostly omissions) turned out to be the largest category in the Polish texts. In the Spanish group article errors were not frequent, and if they did occur, they were mostly additions used with names:

* *the Peter/John/Mary* (*el Juan, la Eva*).

In the case of prepositions, a larger proportion of errors was identified in the Spanish group. Here are some examples:

* *asked (the car) to his father* / *pidió el coche a su padre*

* *stopped for saw, *for picked her up* / *pararon para mirar and para buscarla*

* *return to home* / *volver a casa*

* *telephone to Mary* / *llamar a Mary*.

In the Polish texts the typical problems with prepositions included the following:

* *called / phoned / rang to Peter*

* *came back /drove them /arrived to home*

* *listen him*; **lied him*.

As far as lexical errors are concerned, a larger proportion was observed in the Polish group. For example:

* *caught a rub / had a flat tyre*

* *he pleased his dad / he asked his dad*.

The influence of L1 Spanish can be seen in the following lexical errors:

* *returned phone Peter / phoned Peter once again / volver a llamar a uno* (lit. *return to phone someone*)

* *discussed / argued* (Spanish *discutir* = English *argue*).

It turned out that although L1 influence on the students' written production was strongly visible in both language groups, transfer from L1 was not the major source of errors. Interestingly, L1 influence affected Polish learners more.

3.2. Perception of error gravity

Teachers' perception of error gravity has serious consequences in educational settings, namely it directly affects learner assessment. It is not surprising then that this area attracts graduate students' attention.

In her investigation of teachers' perception of error gravity, Kamila Kulak (2008) focused on the variable that is probably most commonly examined¹, i.e. native vs. non-native status of the teacher. But at the same time this focus is very relevant to Polish language schools, where in many cases the same group of learners is taught by a team of teachers: a Polish teacher and a native speaker, and Kulak's study was actually inspired by her own teaching experience. She was told by her students that they received different corrective feedback from the two teachers in the team, with the Polish teacher being always more severe and critical in her judgment. Interestingly, the results of her study were in a number of ways congruent with published research. Overall, non-native speaker teachers turned out to be more severe in their judgment and less homogenous as a group. As regards the hierarchy of errors, for non-native speakers the most serious errors were grammatical, for native speakers lexical, which was also consistent with the most important criteria for error gravity, i.e. rule infringement in the case of non-native speakers and intelligibility in the case of native speakers.

A different perspective on error gravity was taken by Sylwia Sula (2010), who decided to explore a less researched area, i.e. the differences between expert and novice teachers. Although the results confirmed her hypothesis and other researchers' findings that novices are less tolerant of errors and more severe in their judgment, the difference was surprisingly small. The hierarchy of errors was nearly the same for both groups with errors in the use of tenses being the most serious and spelling errors the least serious. These results are, of course, very comforting considering the need

¹ E.g. Hyland and Anan's (2006) study discussed earlier

for consistency in learner assessment. What is perhaps a little disturbing is that there were noticeable differences between female and male teachers, with female teachers being much more severe in each group.

3.3. Response to errors

How teachers respond to learner errors both in written and spoken language directly affects learners' immediate behaviour and eventually their overall development. Since their response is connected with their perception of error gravity, again a lot of research focuses on the differences between native and non-native speakers, the difference, as has already been mentioned, which is also very relevant to the Polish context.

In her study of teachers' response to learners' written errors, Małgorzata Żyglowicz (2010) found that native and non-native speakers used different criteria for error gravity and, as a result, different correction practices. For non-native speakers the most important criterion was grammatical accuracy (morphology, syntax), while for native speakers intelligibility, so they focused much more on lexical errors and were much more sensitive to lexical and stylistic nuances.

Agnieszka Miernik (2008), on the other hand, investigated teachers' response to spoken errors. Similarly to other researchers, she found that non-native speaker teachers tend to focus on form, they correct more often, even when correction is not indispensable to understand the message. They are also consistent and meticulous in giving feedback on form.

Native speaker teachers, on the contrary, focus on meaning rather than form, they frequently show approval after correct and incorrect utterances, they often ignore students' errors and continue the topic if they find it interesting. They rarely correct learners' error and if they do, they use implicit correction (recasts used 3 times as often as by non-native speaker teachers).

Here are some examples of native speaker teachers' response to meaning and form (implicit correction – recasts):

Learner: *The girl **don't** fits me.*

NS teacher: *Yeah, she wasn't your type.*

Learner: *She's got curly **hairs**.*

NS teacher: *Curly? She has curly hair, oh.*

Learner: *I can see **flower, flowers**.*

NS teacher: *Some plants, aha; just the plants?*

The following examples show native speaker teachers' response to meaning only despite serious errors in the learners' output:

Learner: *Giertych **say us that** we must wear uniforms.*

NS teacher: *Yeah, do you like Mr Giertych?*

Learner: *She's **doings** her homework and **she's** computer.*

NS teacher: *Yhm, yhm yes, and anything else?*

Learner: *I wish I go to law.*

NS teacher: *Law? Where would you like to study law?*

Learner: *A girl's eyes and her hairs...*

NS teacher: *Yeah, green eyes, brunette?*

Having found substantial differences between native and non-native speaker teachers' response to learner errors, Miernik (2008) found a similarity as well, namely both groups hardly ever used elicitation.

4. Conclusions

As can be seen, despite criticism of error analysis and disillusionment with the procedure, learner errors are still a legitimate area of research and, what should be emphasised, this research has a lot of relevance for educational settings. How teachers perceive and evaluate errors has very strong implications for learner assessment, from short classroom quizzes to high stakes exams. How teachers respond to errors substantially affects the process of teaching. Having a better understanding of the subjective nature of error evaluation, and of the differences between various types of corrective feedback, teachers become better professionals, which for learners may only mean more and faster benefits.

Graduate students who are in-service teachers in different types of schools in different areas of Poland, some also working as teacher assistants in Ireland and Great Britain, have access to a variety of unique contexts, and if well prepared and well guided by their supervisors, they can collect and analyse interesting data and conduct valuable research that is very relevant to their own teaching and assessment practices.

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