Role and Relevance of the Learners' Errors in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Language is an important phenomenon of socialisation process that helps to realise and experience the life and assists to convey emotions, feelings, ideas, etc. Language can be acquire or learn. Ellis (1985:292) writes, "Acquisition for Krashen, consists of the spontaneous process of rule internalization that results from natural language use, while 'learning' consists of conscious L2 knowledge through formal study.'' The present study does not make any difference between acquisition and learning. Bothe terms are used synonym. Second Language Acquisition (hereafter, SLA) refers to the acquisition of any other language, after the acquisition of the mother tongue (hereafter, MT). The process of SLA, like that of first language acquisition, is very complex and involves many interrelated factors that affect the performance of learners. SLA is the acquisition of the other subsequent language structures only to express acquired content of the first language. Learners acquire a second language by making use of existing knowledge of the native language, general learning strategies, or universal properties of the language to internalize knowledge of the second language. These processes serve as a means by which a learner constructs an interlanguage (Selinker1974:31). It refers to a set of second language learners' utterances that are not identical to the learners' L1 and L2 in the process of the learners' attempted meaningful performance in a second language. Such utterances are natural but considered as error. Error is a kind of psychological fallacy that occurs due to conscious or unconscious failure to distinguish between right and wrong judgement. Errors are not negative but progressive indicator for language learner. The present paper is an attempt to assess the role and relevance of errors in the acquisition of second language.

Keywords- Language Learning, Language Acquisition, Error, SLA

Language Acquisition/Learning

Learning is completely a psychological process that begins from the very first day of the child. Learners' surroundings provide stimuli and create conditions to initiate learning. Thus, the sociology or the surrounding of the child initiates their learning process. In the process of first language acquisition, children pick their language from their home environment, especially from their mother, father, grandfather, grandmother and other members of the family. At the earliest stage child picks simplified words as *coo-coo, ba-ba, uu-uu, pee-pee* etc. and takes around the first five years of his life to become a competent speaker of his native language. Learners' cultural and cognitive developments in their first language tremendously affect the success and failure of their second language performance. Since the post-war years till the 1960s, theorists of second language acquisitions have a strong assumption that learners' first language imposed most of the difficulties in their acquisition of the second language. This notion has come to be known as "language transfer" (Selinker1983:35). It is assumed that learner's first language interferes in the leaning of second language; where there are differences between the patterns of L1 and L2 it functions negatively and negative transfer would occur. In the case of similarities, learners' L1 helps the learning of L2, in this situation it functions positively and positive transfer would occur. For example, it would be easier for a Chinese to learn Japanese or for a British to learn French.

> The learner's L1 is an important determinate of SLA. It is not the only determinant, however, and may not be the most important. But it is theoretically unsound to attempt a precise specification of its contribution with that of other factors.   (Ellis 1985:40)

Therefore, it can be said that in certain cases L1 facilitates the learning of L2 whereas in certain cases it obstructs the L2 learning. Furthermore, Weinreich (1953) states that L1 influences L2 as well as L2 influences L1. Therefore, there is a deviation from either language. On the other hand, Cook (2003:11) claimed that languages are not held isolated in one's mind as Weinreich (1953) claims it. Cook suggests that two languages are interconnected, i.e. they are not very isolated or totally integrated. Learners L2 can affect learners L1 in different ways as positively, negatively (Language Transfer) or neutral effects. L2 can enhance L1 for knowing another language benefits learners use of first language (Translation). L2 can also have a harmful effect on L1 as in the case of tribal languages that are not in use as L1 anymore. Jarvis (2003:81) differentiates between L1 attrition and L1 maintenance. L1 attrition is the inability of a person to access, comprehend or even to produce L1 structures. L1 maintenance is the ability of a person to perform L1 language function and to express oneself in the L1. In the study of migrates' children, Stutnabb-Kangas (1981) studied Finnish children of different ages who had migrated to Sweden. All children who were ten years old mastered the two languages Swedish and Finnish well, whereas the majority of children under ten years did not achieve a high-level of competence in the second

or in their first language (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981). Some of the reasons of failure are socio-cultural and socio-economical backgrounds. When children spend the first ten years of their life in the home country, they will experience the first language in different way from those who lived there only for first six years of their life. Language learning is a creative process in which children do not only imitate their elders; they also create their own language rules and learning styles. First language (L_1, hereafter) or Mother tongue acquisition takes place in natural setup among the speech community where one's first language is spoken whereas second language (L_2, hereafter) learning is a guided process of language acquisition which requires conscious effort on the part of learners. While learning L1 or L2, children develop utterances that mismatch or deviate from the acceptable norms of the language and such utterances are known as error in learners' performance. To estimate the assumptions related to errors of the second language learners is the interest of this study. It also evaluates the role of errors in learning of second language and in what extent it can be considered relevant in the performance of learners.

Assumptions related to learners' error

L2 learners do not acquire their second language overnight; they go through several stages. Unlike L1 learners, L2 learners make conscious efforts in SLA. Learners tend to show that their speech is rule-governed. They construct grammars (interlanguage grammars), which reflect their current understanding of the rules of the target language. For example, when a learner produces utterances such as "*no speak*" and "*no understand*", and if we assume that these are consistent deviations and form a part of learner's system, then it is possible to think of them only as errors with regard to English, but not with regard to the learner's system. Despite the conscious efforts of the learners, their second language performance shows a large number of ungrammatical structures. Although a learner may have the knowledge of the second language rules, he makes errors, thereby proving that the knowledge about the language and its use in real life are different. Errors are not the sign of inability of learners but are the evidences of learners' strategies of second language learning. Corder (1974) views learner's error as

> It is a way the learner has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning. The making of errors then is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language. (Corder 1974: 25)

Errors demonstrate that language learning is not the assimilation of the target language rules but a process that involves the ability of learner to use that language appropriately with attention of both the content and the structure of the target language. In SLA, Pit Corder (1967) observes that the learners' errors in L2 performance are indicative of the state of the learners' knowledge about L2 and of the ways in which they are learning L2. Corder (1974) writes about the significance of learner's error:

A learner's errors, then, provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using … at a particular point in the course …. They are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidences of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly …they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the uses in order to learn.

(Corder 1974: 25)

SLA is a specific domain of linguistics that concentrates on the lingual transition from one language to another. There are essentially two hypotheses involved in second language to account for the learners' deviant performance. The first approach is Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis that is based on the behaviorist assumption and the second approach is Error Analysis based on the assumption that all the deviant performance of second language learners is not only the result of his Mother language interference.

Committing error is the most natural part of learning. There are different ways to define the notion of error. According to Lennon (1991) an error is 'a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not is produced by the speaker' native speakers counterparts' (Lennon 1991:181). Error Analysis defines error as a deviation from the norm of the target language. EA considers error as what takes place when the deviation arises as result of the lack of knowledge where as mistake comes up when learners fail to perform their competence. In Chapter 3 of Gass, Susan M. and Larry Selinker's *Second Language Acquisition, An Introductory Course* (2001:67) is made a distinction between an error and a mistake,

Mistakes are akin to slips of the tongue. That is, they are generally one-time-only events. The speaker who makes a mistake is able to recognize it as a mistake and correct it if necessary. An error, on the other hand, is systematic. That is, it is likely to occur repeatedly and is not recognized by the learner as an error. (Gass, Susan M. and Larry Selinker 2001:67)

Mistakes are unpredictable and non-systematic. The speakers are normally aware of such mistakes when they occur and can correct them easily. Corder (1967:167) emphasis that 'mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning'. As Miller (1966) puts it regarding the study of second language learners' mistakes, '… it would be meaningless to state rules for making mistakes'(Corder1967:167). Corder refers to mistakes as "error in performance" but his emphasis is on the study of systematic errors of learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his *transitional competence* (ibid.:166). Errors take place when the deviation arises because of lack of knowledge.

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Mistakes occur when learners fail to perform their competence. Dulay and Burt (1974b: 95) prefer to use the term "goofs" in place of 'errors' or 'mistakes'. They define goofs as 'deviation from syntactic structures which native adult speakers consider grammatically correct'. With reference to the choice of this particular term, Dulay and Burt (1974b:121) mention, 'The connotation of cuteness or ridicule, which 'goof' might evoke, are not intended at all. It seems to us that these connotations are less detrimental than the feeling of blame or a vision of red marks on a composition that 'error' and 'mistake' might evoke'. H.G.George (1972:2) defines error as 'an unwanted form, specially a form which a particular course designer or teacher does not want'. Based on all these definitions of error, we can come to a conclusion that in second language learning, errors are the progressive performance of the second language learners in an attempted effort to use second language. It can be the result of conscious or unconscious on the learner's part.

Classification of learners' error

Learners make different kinds of errors. Put all of them in a single category is not justifiable. Broadly, we can divide learners' errors in two categories as following:

1. **Interlingual error**: Such errors are the result of learners' L1 interference in his/her L2 performance. It refers to the learners' inability to separate his first language and target language rules presumably; those arise from the entrenched habits of the L1. There are many empirical studies done on this issue. Schachter and Ruthford (1979) carried out an interesting study on interlingual errors of Japanese and Chinese learners of English. They found out structures such as these:

> *Most of the food which is served in such restaurants have cooked already.
>
> (Rod Ellis 1985: 39)
>
> *Irrational emotions are bad but rational emotions must use for judging.
>
> (ibid.)
>
> *Chiang's food must make in the kitchen of the restaurant but Marty's food could make in the house.   (ibid.)

These structures show that learners have confusion between active and passive voices. They show the transfer of the means of realizing the topic/comment structure of their L1 into English.

> *A few more people got into the bus and slowly slowly it was completely filled.
>
> (Jain, 1969:31)
>
> *We want that Hindi should be the medium of instruction.   (ibid.: 34)

These sentences are obviously the result of interference from Hindi. Sentence 'A' uses slowly, slowly and sentence 'B' uses a subordinate clause after 'want' that cannot acceptable in English structures. Nevertheless, such structures are acceptable in Hindi.

2. Intralingual error: To differentiate non-contrastive errors, Richards (1974) used the term intralingual error. Errors such as- *I goes to market. What do you doing?* etc., are occurred frequently, regardless of the learners age, language and background, etc. Such deviations

cannot be explained as mere failure to memorize a segment of language, memory lapses, fatigue etc. They reflect the learner's competence at a particular level. Richards has categories them in four categories as following:

A. **Overgeneralization**: It can be described as over learning of a structure or as the use of previously available strategies in new situations. It also refers to instances where the learner creates deviant structures based on his experience of other structures in the target language.

  *We are hope.   (Richards1974:174)

B. Ignorance of rule restrictions: It refers to learners' failure to observe the restriction of language rules where they do not apply. It is closely related to the generalization.

  *The man who I saw him.   (ibid.:175)

The above example violates the limitation on subjects in structures with *who*.

  *I made him to do it.   (ibid.)

The above example ignores the restrictions on the distribution of *make*.

C. **Incomplete application of rules**: In response to teacher's question, "Ask her what the last film she saw was called." Learner writes,

  *What was called the last film you saw?   (ibid.:178)

Here, learner ignored the subject-verb agreement.

D. **False concept hypothesized**: There is a class of developmental errors, which derive from faulty comprehension of distinctive in the target language. An example of this kind of error is given overleaf:

  *One day it was happened.   (ibid.)

Here "was" is misunderstood to be a marker of past imperfect tense.

  *He is speaks French.   (ibid.:178)

Here "is" is misunderstood to be a marker of present imperfect tense. Such kind of errors has close similarity with overgeneralization.

Many scholars proposed different categories for the classification of errors. As Larry Selinker (1974) suggested the existence of a structurally intermediate system between the native and target languages in learner's mind. It is learners' own self-contained linguistic system. This system is not a native language or target language systems, rather it falls between the two. In his Interlanguage Theory, Selinker (1974:37) mentions five central processes that exist in the second language learning process. These are as follows:

A. Overgeneralization of target language rules: Many times learners make the utterances as:

  What did he intended to say?   (Selinker 1974: 38)

Here the past tense morpheme '-ed' is extended by the learner.

  After thinking little, I decided to start on the bicycle as slowly as I could as it was not
  possible to drive fast.   (ibid.)

Most of the times, learners overgeneralize the use of *drive* to all vehicles.

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B. **Transfer of training**: Learners error can be the cause of identifiable items in training procedure. For example, the problem of *he/she* distinction in the case of Serbo-Croation speakers producing in their English interlanguage *he* on almost every occasion wherever *he* or *she* would be called for according to any norm of English (Selinker1969:67-92).

C. Strategies of second Language Learning: In most of the interlingual situations, learner involves his own strategies for mastering the target language and tries to reduce it to a simpler system. As Jain (1969) mentions that, the results of this strategy are manifested at all levels of syntax in the IL of Indian speakers of English. For example:

    *I am feeling thirsty.   (Selinker1974:40)

    *Don't worry, I am hearing you.   (ibid.)

The speakers of such sentences seem to have adopted the further strategy that the realization of the aspect in its progressive form on the surface is always with *–ing* marker.

D. Strategies of Second Language Communication: Most of the time, learners have eagerness to communicate. In that eagerness, they overlook grammatical rules of his target language.

E. Language transfer: It is very much similar to interference like goofs. One might mention spelling pronunciations e.g. speakers of many languages pronounce final –er in English words as /ə/ plus some form of /r/.

Dulay and Burt (1974b) have divided errors in following categories:

A. Interference like goofs: They reflect learners' native language structures. Such structures do not find L1 acquisition data of the target language. These are the same as the interlingual errors discussed earlier.

B. L1 Developmental goofs: These goofs reflect native language structure, but did not found in L1 acquisition data of the target language.

    He took her teeths off.   (Dulay and Burt1974b: 115)

C. Ambiguous goofs: These goofs reflect such structures that cannot be categorized as either interference or L1 developmental goofs.

    Terina not can go.   (ibid.)

D. **Unique goofs**: Such goofs that do not reflect L1 structure, and are also not found in L1 acquisition data of the target language.

    He name is Victor.   (ibid.)

Nancy Stenson (1975) distinguishes between classroom-induced errors, for which the teacher is responsible, and spontaneous student errors. Stenson (1975: 67) says, 'It is crucial to bear the distinction in mind when attempting to account for student language; for, to ignore it, is to risk faulty analyses. For example:

    We look at the moon, but Armstrong looked into the moon.

                                           Stenson (1975:56)

Pit Corder (1973) classifies second language learners into two broad categories as follows:

A. **Systematic errors**: Those errors, which are predictable in nature, called systematic errors. Errors of such kind occur frequently and regularly.

>   *We does prayer daily.
>   *I am eat food.

B. **Unsystematic errors**: Those errors, which are unpredictable in nature, called unsystematic errors. Errors of such kind do not fall in any specific category.

>   *I am 4 o'clock early in the morning
>   *My always class first position.

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) classify second language learners' errors into two distinct categories which are as follows:

A. **Global errors**: It refers to those errors that cause a listener to misunderstand a message or to consider a sentence incomprehensible. Such errors effect overall sentence organization (e.g., wrong order, missing, wrong connecters etc.).

>   *I did not like took it, but my friend said that not take this bus, we are late for school.

>   (Burt and Kiparsky 1975: 74)

B. Local errors: It refers to those errors that do not significantly hinder communication of a sentence's message.

>   *I should like know.   (ibid.)

Burt and Kiparsky (1975:73) stress the importance of a hierarchy of errors: global and local. According to them, 'Global mistake are those that violate rules involving the overall structure of a sentence, the relations among constituent classes, or in a simple sentence, the relations among major constituents. Local mistakes cause trouble in a particular constituent, or in a clause of a complex sentence.'

Many scholars have done many efforts to classify errors in different categories but are unable to make any clear-cut discrimination, as F. G. French (1963:13) writes, 'Errors defy classification, for one kind merges into another, as gray shades off into blue. There is, however, a grading in complexity which can be utilized to introduce some sort of order into what most teachers will agree, is the most disorderly of all their problems.'

The above classifications are based on the sources of errors and effort to present a linguistics description of errors and their sources. The purpose of all these classification is to explain all the possible reason, "why errors arise". Errors can be divided as overt and covert error. Overt errors are deviations in form i.e. *I runned all the way. Covert errors occur in utterances that are superficially well formed but which do not mean what the learner intended them to mean i.e. It was stopped. What does it refer to? Should the analysis of errors examine only deviations in correctness or also deviations in appropriateness? Correctness errors involve rules of language use i.e. learner invites a stranger by saying I want you to come to the cinema with me. The code was used correctly it was not used appropriately. In the present research, researcher tries to examine deviation along with appropriateness with reference to specific syntactic errors in the use of the verb phrase. It is hoped that such analysis would be

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relevant to find out some findings that can assist present language learning and teaching situation.

Assumptions towards L2 learners' error

One of the most pervasive approaches concerning the error in human history is to consider it as a negative sign or the indicator of failure. In SLA, learner's errors are regarded as an inevitable part of second language learning process. It is not a problem but a normal and progressive feature indicating the learners' strategies of language in use. There are two schools of thought in respect of learners' error. First, behaviourist school of thought considers that errors would never arise if the teaching method were perfect. The behaviourist views error as symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure. They believed that to avoid the occurrence of error, teachers should use intensive drilling. They advocate teacher centered approach of language teaching. The idea that the error should be avoided, especially supported by behaviourist. The behaviourist view of language learning is strongly criticized for its concept of reward and punishment.

Second, Cognitivists or mentalist school of thought views that learners' error as a positive sign of progress in learning. They assert that without errors, there is no progress and errors are inevitable part of language learning. The error progress concept is based on Chomsky's ideas that a child has an innate capacity of language learning. They generate language through innate universal structure. Using this innate capacity, learners access different pieces of knowledge based on trial and error. They advocate student centered approach of language teaching.

Error is an important source of information about the process of SLA because it demonstrates learners' creativity to construct their own grammar and reproduce them in their own utterances. Learners can commit error of the nature repeatedly in the same context or in one context but not in other. Such random errors are unsystematic in nature. Such unsystematic errors can occur in the language use of native speakers too. However, SLA is concerned with the systematic errors that reflect a learner's transitional competence.

Therefore, it can be said that error is a natural, omnipresent, and positive indicator of learning either in the case of first or in the second language acquisition. Errors are shallow by nature because they can be avoided or corrected by discovering the acceptable or the correct.

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