

ERROR ANALYSIS - Contributory Factors to Students' Errors, with Special Reference to Errors in Written English

Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali
International Islamic University

ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this article is to review the current literature on factors that contribute to errors in written English as well as to make a contribution to the subject of error analysis by way of identifying and discussing additional contributory factors. This is followed by practical suggestions to minimize the occurrence of errors in formal English.

Definition of Error

The present researcher uses the term "error" to refer to a systematic deviation from a selected norm (after Burt et al. 1982) or set of norms. In the Malaysian education system, for instance, the selected norms are standard British English and educated Malaysian English, although using standard American English or other standard varieties of native English will not be considered deviant.

What is Error Analysis?

Error Analysis (hereafter EA) is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium. Corder, who has contributed enormously to EA, writes thus:

"The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process."

(Corder, 1974: 125)

Why Error Analysis?

Error Analysis is useful in second language learning because this will reveal to us - teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers - the problem areas. We could design remedial exercises and focus more attention on the trouble spots.

What are the Sources and Causes of Errors?

The following factors have been identified by various error analysts including the present writer.

Mother tongue interference

Wilkins observes:

"When learning a foreign language an individual already knows his mother tongue, and it is this which he attempts to transfer. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar - in that case we get 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation' - or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages are different - in that case we get 'negative transfer' - or 'interference'.

(Wilkins, 1972: 199)

There is mother tongue interference in the areas of syntax, grammar, lexis and pronunciation.

Teachers of English in Malaysia are very familiar with erroneous constructions such as using "although" and "but" in the same sentence. In Bahasa Melayu (hereafter BM) it is perfectly alright to write:

Walaupun Ahmad malas, tetapi dia pandai.

When a weak student attempts to transfer this construction to English he may write it as

* Although Ahmad is lazy, but he is clever.

The above sentence is an instance of negative transfer in grammar.

When someone says

* I'll spend you

there could be mother tongue interference in the area of lexis.

Saya akan belanja awak.

An example of how mother tongue interference could affect the pronunciation of certain words in English is the way some Malay students pronounce "film". They pronounce it as "filem" - the BM equivalent. Some students speak English with a strong vernacular accent, for example, as in India, Hong Kong, Ghana, etc.

* An asterisk indicates an erroneous item.

Loan Words

BM newspapers in the country are indiscriminately adopting English words into the vocabulary of the national language. Since the spelling follows the pronunciation, students would find it easier to remember the spelling of the loan words rather than the spelling of the original English words from which the former are derived. Such loan words do appear in the written work of students because of orthographic resemblance, for example,

* Everyone who's taking part are given nombors. (numbers)

* Why he was murdered is still a mistri. (mystery)

Inherent Difficulties of the Target Language

English is a rich, complex language. Consequently, certain features of the language which are there are inherently difficult for the learner. To mention just a few, in grammar, for example, we have "preached" and "reached" as the simple past tense form of "preach" and "reach" respectively. But we cannot say "teached" although the word "teach" rhymes with "preach" and "reach" and is orthographically very close.

We can form the adverb "quickly" from "quick" but we do not form "hardly" from "hard". The latter two words are different in meaning.

The plural of "tooth" is teeth, but for "booth" it is not "beeth".

In lexis, for example, the language has many words which have more than one meaning and are of different parts of speech.

Let us take for example the word "fast". It has the following meanings with different parts of speech. (Hornby, 1974)

Used as an adjective

- a. Firmly fixed
The post is fast in the ground.
- b. Steadfast; loyal; steady; close
(a fast friend/friendship)
- c. (of colours) unfading
- d. quick, rapid
a fast train

- e. (of a person, his way of living)
spending too much time and energy on pleasure and excitement
lead a fast life
- f. (of a watch or clock) showing time later than the true time
My watch is five minutes fast.

Used as an adverb

- g. quickly
Don't speak so fast

Used as a verb

- h. go without food
Muslims fast in the month of Ramadhan

Used as a noun

- i. (period of) going without food
Halim broke his fast when he heard the azan for evening prayers.

In pronunciation, for example, we have:-

chemist pronounced as /kemist/

chief pronounced as /tʃi: f/

chef pronounced as /ʃ e f/

The 'ch' in all the three words are pronounced differently.

The Model

The teacher may not be a good model of the language with regard to the way he speaks, writes or teaches the language. So, some of the errors are ironically teacher induced. For example:

The student must work more harder.

When a student sees the abovementioned comment by a form teacher who also teaches English, (in his report book), he would promise his parents *"to work more harder."

When an English language teacher uses a preposition when it is not needed, as in:

* "Now let us discuss about the unemployment problem among graduates for writing your essay" it would not be surprising if the students write * "I am going to discuss about the causes and effects of unemployment in my essay".

Teachers of English who have no training in phonetics may pronounce English words according to their spelling, for example, quay may be pronounced as */kweI/ instead of /ki:/, and etiquette may be pronounced as /etIkwItI/ instead of /etiket/.

In all the literature on EA reviewed by the writer, the possibility that errors could result from the inevitable exposure to non-native speakers of English teaching subjects such as history, geography and science in schools and colleges where the medium of instruction is English has not been mentioned. With due respect to these subject teachers, the researcher is hesitatingly compelled to state that while some are highly proficient in the language, some of them are also a source of error, especially in spoken English.

The Method

The teaching method may be at fault by overemphasizing one aspect of the language and neglecting the other. For example, if teachers are fond of only emphasizing the oral component of a course, a learner's general speaking ability would improve. But he may lag behind in reading and writing.

The audiolingual method emphasizes the acquisition of basic grammatical patterns of the language first and vocabulary development comes later.

The Materials

Materials which have teaching items sequenced in a certain way or which lack organization could lead to errors.

Norrish (1983) gives an example of material - induced errors. Although it is the simple present tense which is normally used to describe a sequence of events that take place at the present moment, some teaching materials use the present progressive aspect. This results in the use of English which is neither normal nor natural.

Inadequate Exposure to the Target Language

Students who live in a country where English is taught as a foreign language obviously do not have adequate exposure to the target language. Opportunities to use English in both the productive and receptive areas of the language are limited. Insufficient exposure to the target language could give rise to errors such as those below in the areas of grammar, lexis, spelling and punctuation.

When a student has a limited exposure to the language learnt, it is possible for him to make errors in all aspects of the language.

Overgeneralization

Richards cites overgeneralization as one of the contributory factors. He explains thus:

"Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language."

(Richards, 1974: 174)

After having read or heard sentences such as *He reached the house at 10.00 p.m.* a student may produce *He leaved the house at 6.00 a.m.*

A learner may write *She walked fastly to catch the bus* because he already knows *He walked quickly to catch the train.*

One who has read often about drug trafficking may think that there is *drug addicting.

Overgeneralization is also applied in the pronunciation of certain words on the basis of what they already know, eg. words like *Beauchamp* and *Arkansas*.

Indeterminacy

This is the term used by Jain to refer to an inconsistency or uncertainty in handling a linguistic item. He calls errors arising from such a situation asystematic errors (Jain, 1974). Below is an example given by him to show asystematic errors with respect to article use:

I started from hostel to go to see a movie. When we were still waiting at bust stopI could only get some space to keep my one leg on foot-boardI had to request conductorAt last bus moved. The bus stopped at a bus stop with a jerk. All the time I was trying to balance myself on the footboard. I was more worried about movie.

(Jain, 1974: 213)

The underlined words show that the articles have been used asystematically.

Medium Transfer

This is the term used by Tench (1983) for the learner's undue reliance on either the spoken or the written form of a word when the other medium is being used. If a pupil pronounces a word according to its spelling, then medium transfer has taken place. If a student spells a word according to its pronunciation, that too is medium transfer, e.g. *teribel, *prestigious, and *surprised.

Communication Strategies

A communication strategy is defined as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty" because of his "inadequate command of the language

used in the interaction". (Corder, 1981 : 103) Some familiar communication strategies employed by language learners are avoidance, prefabricated patterns, appeal to authority, approximation, word coinage, circumlocution and language switch. Let us look at each of these briefly.

Avoidance

Learners tend to shun lexical items whose meanings they are not sure of, sounds they have difficulty in producing, and grammatical items they are not familiar with. Their avoidance leads to replacement of erroneous items. A learner who did not know the expression *I lost my way*, said *I lost my road* instead. (Brown, 1987 : 84) This is an instance of lexical avoidance.

Prefabricated patterns

Set phrases and stock sentences for different occasions may sometimes be used inopportunely by learners. An example is **I don't understand how can you do that*, formed from two separate sentences "I don't understand", and "How can you do that?" The two sentences have been juxtaposed without deleting "can".

Appeal to authority

This strategy is aimed at referring to an authoritative source - the native speaker, teacher, or dictionary. The third source may not always be effective. A BM-English bilingual dictionary which has the meaning of *pinjam* as both "to lend", and "to borrow" is a possible contributor of error. In BM *pinjam* corresponds to the antonyms in English. Thus, if a student were to say **"Can you borrow me ten dollars?"*, it is a deviation from standard English.

Approximation

In this strategy, the learner employs a lexical item which is not specific enough, but shares certain common semantic features, for example "knife" for "breadknife", "stick" for "truncheon", and "The visiting minister met the king" for "The visiting minister had an audience with the king".

Word coinage

A learner creates a new word or phrase which is usually non-existent to convey the intended meaning. For example, a learner who is not aware of the vocabulary items "bucket" and "kettle" may come up with **"water-holder"* and **"water-boiler"* respectively.

Circumlocution

The learner who is not familiar with the appropriate lexical item, goes on to describe the characteristic of the target object or action. For example, a learner who does not know the word "clothes line" may say "the thing to hang clothes on". Similarly if one cannot

recall the word "optician", one might say "the person who tests our eyes". Although the circumlocution strategy may not lead to errors, it shows the learners' inadequate lexical competence.

Language switch

This is the strategy of weak learners. They simply fall back on their first language without attempting anything in the target language, for example: Every Sunday and Wednesday, the "Post Bergerak" will come to my village. The equivalent of the mobile post office in BM is *pos bergerak*.

Thus far I have identified the major contributory factors to students' errors in their written English and I have also included spoken English where appropriate.

Suggestions

I shall now go on to make some pedagogical suggestions in order to reduce the number of errors committed by our students in their written English, in particular, and spoken English as well.

1. Teachers must frequently remind their students that when they speak or write in English they must think in the target language so that they do not bring in any feature of their mother tongue.

The teacher should explain why certain constructions are ungrammatical. It would be ideal if the teacher has a very good command of the target language as well as a working knowledge of the first language or the national language of his students.

2. Loan words, as we have seen, contribute to spelling errors. Teachers could give dictation practice as regards words in English which have BM equivalents e.g. *positive*, *strategy* and *aspect*, which are spelt in BM as *positif*, *strategi* and *aspek* respectively.
3. English is not an easy language to master. The spelling is irregular. The pronunciation is puzzling and it often differs from the written form of a word. The vocabulary is elaborate. There are polysemous words with many meanings which can be used as different parts of speech. The complexity of the vocabulary and grammar would strain the learning capacity of many a student. So what can be done?

Teachers of English should advise their students to persevere in studying English. There are no short cuts to learning the language. When they are sufficiently exposed to the language through the various language skills of reading and listening, the possibility of making errors is minimized.

Teachers should encourage their students to write by providing helpful criticisms and not damaging ones. They should make constructive criticisms of their students' work. Over-insistence on 'correctness' hinders the learning process. The right attitude of the teacher is important for students who are grappling with the complexities of English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The language is difficult enough; let us not make it more

difficult for them. Please refer to Mohideen (1993) for a discussion on effective error correction techniques.

4. The majority of teachers of English are non-native speakers. It is not our first language. Consequently, there is a likelihood of us going wrong in some aspects of the English language. In order to upgrade ourselves professionally as good models of the language we teach, we have to try to approximate native speaker competence. Students should want to emulate the way we speak or write in the language.

Not only do students need more exposure to the language, we teachers too need to be well exposed. We need to keep ourselves abreast of current issues by reading books and journals related to our profession. Unless we take a more professional interest in our work, we may lag behind our more professional counterparts in the domain of English language teaching.

5. Teachers should make sure that there is all round language development. They should not spend too much time on one area of language to the detriment of others.
6. Students should be advised to listen to good English from whatever available source - radio, television, native speakers and good local speakers of the language. They should listen for correct pronunciation and understanding.
7. Teachers should encourage students to speak in English with their fellow students in school or on campus and create an atmosphere in class that is conducive to learning the language.
8. Teachers need to impress upon the students the importance of inculcating the reading habit. Francis Bacon said, "Reading makes a full man." Reading helps students to learn the correct spelling, enrich their vocabulary and internalize acceptable and appropriate sentence constructions.
9. Teachers must inform students of exceptions to the rule as regards grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

When teaching verbs, we should pay special attention to irregular verbs. This is an area where students are likely to go wrong.

When teaching adverbs, it must be emphasized that not all adverbs end in - ly, for example

* She studies hardly for her examination.

When teaching the degrees of comparison, students have to be told of superlatives which do not end in - er and - est.

When teaching the suffix - less, students have to be told that although it has the meaning 'not' this cannot be literally extended to all words with - less.

10. The teacher ought to provide an explanation with regard to the possible source or cause of error to bring about an awareness of what could be the potential contributory factor.

Conclusion

We ought to discuss with our students how to identify their errors and what the possible causes are. This would bring about a greater understanding of the pedagogical and psychological factors that contribute to linguistic errors.

References

- Brown, H.D. 1987. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs. N.J. Prentice Hall.
- Burt, M, Dulay, H. and Krashen, S. 1982. *Language Two*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Corder, S.P. 1974. Error Analysis in Allen, J.L.P. and Corder, S.P. (eds) *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Corder, S.P. 1981. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Hornby, A.S. 1974. *Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Jain, M.P. 1974. Error Analysis : Source, Cause and Significance in Richards, J.C. (ed) *Error Analysis*. London. Longman.
- Mohideen, H. 1991. An Error Analysis in the Written English of Malay Students at Pre-University Level with Special Reference to Students at the Matriculation Centre, International Islamic University, Malaysia. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. University of Wales.
- Mohideen, H. 1993. *Towards Effective Error Correction of Written Grammatical Errors*. H. Gaudart and M.K. David, (eds). *Towards More Effective Learning and Teaching of English*. Petaling Jaya. Malaysian English Language Teaching Association.
- Norrish, J. 1983. *Language Learners and their Errors*. London. Macmillan.
- Richards, J.C. 1971. A Non-contrastive Approach to Error Analysis. Richards, J.C. (ed). *Error Analysis*. London. Longman.
- Tench, P. 1983. The External and Internal Factors that Contribute to Linguistic Errors. *West African Journal of Education*, Vol. 24, No. 3.
- Wilkins, D.A. 1978. *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. London. Edward Arnold.