

# The Second Language Learners' Errors as Potentially Important for the Understanding of the Process of Second Language Acquisition: A Brief Note

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**Abstract-** This paper purports to project English as one of the modern languages spoken by the majority of people all over in the world even though it has been a mother tongue of the people of England, even though science and technology helped to the people of England for rapid industrialization and peoples publicity and marketing have gone far and wide, English is still found to be the spoken language of people all over the world. Even if they have learnt English by heart. The language learners are bound to commit mistakes are errors either knowingly or unknowingly. That is the reason why language learners find it very difficult to understand the English language so easily as everybody thinks.

**Index Terms-** Science, technology, industrialization, marketing, errors, understanding, proses, second language, acquisition.

English is considered to be one of the modern languages spoken by a majority of people all over the world, even though it has been the mother tongue of the people of England. Science and technology are said to have helped the people of England for rapid industrialization and as such, the industries manufactured goods and the English people had to go far and wide to find market for their industrial goods and in turn they had to find raw material to keep the industries working all through the year. So they settled all over the world and dominated the inhabitants of those countries where they established their settlements. So English, their language has come to stay with the natives of these settlements. India was one such settlement of the English people. No language, ancient or modern, can be compared with of English in the number or geographical distribution of the homes, shapes, factories and offices in which the language is spoken, written and read. Thus, English alone can boast of a world-wide

distribution and an overwhelming numerical superiority. English has vastly improved as a great and powerful vernacular. It is even more important as an instrument of world language and thus an international lingua-franca. English and information are inextricably inter-woven. All the books of knowledge in the field of science, technology, law, medicine and surgery are now readily available. Thus, it has become the language of information. Further, one half of mankind have chosen English to communicate with those who do not spent in any other language expecting their mother-tongue. The total number of persons who speak English or are learning to speak it, a desire to speak and read it is increasing day by day. It is beyond computation. Thus, English has become imperative and inevitable in certain circumstances.

No doubt, the study of English is quite indispensable to the students of politics, of economics, of science, of arts, of Engineering and technology, of medicine and surgery. No nation today, however great, or however isolated, dares to rely altogether upon its own indigenous share of social, cultural and technical invention and development. The English language, possessing comprehensive literatures, American and British, ancient, modern, current and a wealth of translation for greater than those of any other language, provides the whole world with a common store-house and a common exchange which can be utilized in every field. A well-informed guess puts, "The number of would-be learners of English every year or twenty millions or more, and this demand for institution, great as it is, increases faster than trained teachers can be supplied to meet" (Palmer 42).

As English is an alien language, mastery over the language is not quite easy. A teacher who teaches

English has to surmount so many difficulties. His command of vocabulary should improve and the usage should be rather appropriate. Instruction will be effective if the teacher realizes, the objective of the taught. The teacher and the taught should have the perfect coordination to make instruction of any subject or language to be effective. If it is not so, then the instruction would be a grievous waste of effect. Especially, the teacher of English would find his job more tedious, besides the taught gets bored. Now-a-days every nation all over the world has come to realise that the learning of English is a 'must'. So, this language, English finds its place in the curriculum, in the present-day educational scene. The teacher in English is expected to keep himself abreast with the changes in the teaching, technology and innovation. As the learner is determined to attain mastery over the language, he does not mind allotting extra-time to learn the language. Since there is determined will on the part of the learner, the teacher should equip himself properly to deliver the goods expected to him. Otherwise, he would be a miserable failure causing injury in the process of learning the language. In spite of the careful teaching, the students commit mistakes at all levels, for example, in the usages of tenses, modals, verb patterns composition and even formulation of sentences.

What is generally found out is that grammar based remedial teaching does not help the learners in getting over their errors. Many of them remarkably become proficient in their knowledge of grammar. They learn the rules by heart and they perform all kinds of grammatical manipulations effortlessly and sometimes accurately. But they can neither write nor speak correctly outside the classroom. The problem for most of them is not with learning the rules but with learning how to use the rules for self-expression. As long as the learner is able to concentrate on the rules alone unhindered by considerations of what to express, he is able to operate the system of rules correctly, as in the grammar exercises, he is asked to perform in the class. As soon as there is some pressure of communication, forcing him to think of what to express, in addition to his he should express it, the system seems to break down. He cannot escape simultaneously with the content and the grammar. Naturally he is overloaded with the many of the things. What the learner reads in such a situation is using the rules unconsciously. He must learn to

progressively divide his attention between the rules and the content, to the point where the rules demand little attention. Instead of concentrating on grammar all the time, we must attempt to engage the student in language activities which force him to attend to the content of communicating, relegating to the second place.

In most of our educational set-ups, due to the examination system, a great importance is attached to written exercises. Teachers spend a great deal of time in giving the exercises and correcting them. However, hardly any attention is paid by the teacher and the learner as to whether any learning has taken place by correcting the mistakes or not. This is mainly due to two reasons;

1. The learners have formulated a habit of merely glancing at their marks/grades rather than spending time to learn from their mistakes.
2. The teachers by and large, lead to underline the mistakes and provide the correct form, thereby making the correction works a mechanical exercise.

Therefore, when the learners are asked to correct their mistakes, they do so mechanically. There is no challenge involved because the correct answer is provided by the teacher. The students make no attempt to find out how the correct answer is arrived at and therefore seldom does learn to overcome mistakes consciously. This leads to a total lack of motivation for correcting the mistakes and defeats the very purpose of correction as "correction should not be just a device related to testing the teaching device as well, because it's essential aim is to provide information which will help us to make intelligent decisions about a possible course of action" (Carroll 8). All the teaching courses in second language learning restrict themselves to just those areas of grammar which the learner seems to have failed to learn, as evidenced from the errors he is seen to commit. Such an approach, which might be called 'common errors approach' seems to be unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. "Remediation has been viewed as an essentially spot-repair' i.e. teaching a few of the 'spots' which are more obviously in need of repair and learning the most well alone such repairs are always short lived" says B.K.Das. in the book. *A Remedial Course in English for Colleges*.

Remediation should not concern itself only with the areas of failure in learning and ignore the areas of

success such an approach ‘ignores the systematic nature of language as well as learning. It is not always possible to teach something that the student has failure to learn without reference to things that he has successfully learnt. Moreover, concentrating an error enables the learnt to get into the development of healthy attitudes in learning. By this logic, he should keep track of what he has learnt in the correct way or in the wrong way. It is also unwise to constantly confront the student with evidence of his failure to learn, to remind him again and again that he has failed. The primary task in remediation is to restore the learner’s confidence in himself, by demonstrating to him there is a lot more which he has been learning often without realizing it. Most remedial courses are not imaginatively designed. They are little more than selective and intensive reviews of grammar. The common belief is that the students commit errors because they do not know that these are errors. If they are told what their errors are, why they are considered to be errors, they would have an opportunity to know for themselves what is erroneous and what is not. The pain point behind such a course should then be getting the learners understand what the rules of the language are and how best they could be operated in specific and context-prone structures. The relation that “the second language learners’ errors are potentially important for the understanding of the process of second language acquisition and consequently the planning of courses incorporating the psychology of second language learning is a current focus in the literature on modern language teaching.” (Richards 63). However, it is a crucial importance to make a distinction between mistakes, i.e. performance errors and true errors, i.e. markers of learner’s traditional competence. In the words of S.P.Corder, “In the second language learning, the learners are indicative of the state of learner’s knowledge and of the ways in which a second language is learned” (37).

A first, there are two major schools of thought functioning as far as the errors are concerned, viz., (1), those who claim that in order to achieve a perfect teaching method, the errors would never be committed in the first place and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of the teaching techniques and ii)those who believe that errors, in spite of the best concentration and efforts, are unavoidable since we

are living in an important world. The reasons for committing of errors are many. It is generally believed that the major courses may be due to

1. language transfer
2. socio-linguistic situation
3. modality
4. universal hierarchy of difficulty
5. age
6. successions of approximative system

Errors can be analysed at different levels of linguistic structure, graphemic, synthetic etc., A close study of the students’ written materials reveals the existence of different types of synthetic errors such as i)concord errors, ii)incomplete sentences, iii)casual errors, iv)erratic repetition, v)erratic addition, vi)erratic colloquialization, etc.

Every teacher of English overseas realizes that it is his prime duty to detect the common errors and labours long and unremittingly to circumvent the common errors which he knows are prompt upon the very tips of his pupils’ tongues and peas. Seeking a root and general cause, he thinks he finds it in particular construction and idiom of the regional vernacular:

“Between any two languages whatever, there is a wide gulf of different; differences of construction of word-order, of idiom; there are differences even as subtle that they appear wholly to defy formal definition In acquiring the habit of linguistic Expression in a foreign tongue, our constant Difficulty is the deep-sealed linguistic Habits already acquired” (Brown & Scragg 40)

The cross-association is due to the fact that the learned think in our native tongue and then they try to express the idea in English. However strongly they may stamp the foreign expression on their memories, the native one will always be stronger. This is evident from the well-known fact that in moments of great excitement, the learners invariably fall back on their native language or dialect. Every teacher of English never fails to stress this point, generally in that part of his discussion which deals with the problem of translation and its evil effects in multiplying errors and preventing the use of correct English form. A careful analysis of lists of errors throws light on the fact that the errors are due to cross-associations and

interference of their local vernaculars. The following list of common errors will testify the cross-associations and interference of mother tongue:

My father is clerk.  
He is a best boy in our class.  
He made me to know.  
They went some places.

There are hundreds of ‘common errors’ of which the above are only samples. Secondly, all the word is mystified by the English tenses. Even to the native Englishman using it colloquially, “I have been had” looks queer in cold print. The fact that the errors are common indicates that they have a common cause. The error does not only lie in cross-association and instinctive translation of the mother-tongue but in the usage of English itself. These usages provide the only factor which is common to all regions, all students and all methods. A good and careful study of the pupils’ written exercise books will reveal the fact that most of the ‘common errors’ are not the result of forgetfulness, carelessness and indolence. As it can be seen, the pupil does want to learn English in all earnestness and sincerity, there is less indolence in this subject than in any other. The pupil, in his own interest, with a will, will at least try to follow his instructor’s exhortation to use his brain. If the following sentence is studied properly, it will be understood.

A pupil states ‘my sister’s hairs are black’. If some dim memory makes him hesitate between ‘hair’ and ‘hairs’, his doubts are resolved by the obvious social disadvantage of alleging that his sister has but one solitary hair on her head. He takes trouble to make English translation with effort. He discards his vernacular pattern. In doing so, he unwittingly commits a great error. Discarding his vernacular in all respects, he uses his brain and sets out what he imagines to be safe, logical and grammatical arrangements. The study of the following example will support the truth of the above conclusion.

1. the sparrow is a small bird but also
2. sparrows are small birds.

The above two statements are exactly parallel, but the second should be –  
The sparrows are small birds.

Thus, he thinks of the logical and grammatical arrangement:

The sparrows .... the birds.

Then, exercises of ‘correct the following sentences’ do constitute a grievous error in teaching technique with foreign pupils. If sets of those exercises are interchanged between classes, at home and abroad, neither side will find much novelty in them. The American, British and foreign students have ‘common errors’ too often. Every teacher of English teaching foreign students will recognize old acquaintances in the examples as in the following taken from the British and American class books:

- a) They have (a, an) yearning for (there, their) back porch and it looks (gaily).
- b) Do you prefer football (than) cricket?
- c) She looked (prettily) and she sang as (good) as ever.
- d) Each of the pupils have chosen (there, their) favourite books.

Errors are due to applying rules and analogies in the wrong places. A small minority of error comes under ‘Errors to which vernacular; not English analogies apply; and the fewest of all come under ‘errors due to laziness’. Even ‘He go’ is on the pattern ‘I go; to go; will go; must go’ and the pupil has heard and used the form ‘go’ a hundred times or more but less frequently he has heard or used the exception ‘goes’.

This has been corroborated by Richards who says: “Errors are not due to the interference from the native language, but due to what he calls over-generalization ignorance of rule-restriction, in complete application of rules and building of false systems and concepts” (97).

Menyuk is of the opinion that errors occur at three levels of the grammar system, i.e. phrase structure level, transformational level and morphological level. According to him, “giving translation influences the choice of the students to a very high degree, because in most cases, the chosen answer corresponds to a word-by-word translation of given sentence in the native language” (410)

- a) Phrase – structure level:
  1. I keep it the book – Noun phrase redundancy
  2. He must go the doctor – preposition omission
  3. Take it off from there – preposition redundancy.

4. He might get in jail – verb used redundantly.
- b) Transformational level:
1. I going – omission of contraction.
  2. I know what that – relative clause transformation is.
  3. Here is two books – Lack of agreement.

- c) Morphological level:
1. She has many book – omission of plural marker.
  2. Give me some soaps –plural marker used redundantly.
  3. He writed a letter – verb form substitution.

So, it can be concluded that errors are not only due to cross-association with vernacular but also due to ignorance of rule –restrictions and incomplete application of rules.

To conclude, since language exists to be a means of communication, it is reasonable and understandable when one says that language itself is a meaningful system. It is awareness of language as a system of the concepts expressed through the system that needs to be encouraged in learners.

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