

Naureen Rahnuma, 2015

Volume 1 Issue 1, pp.143-152

Year of Publication: 2015

DOI- <https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2015.s21.143152>

This paper can be cited as: Rahnuma, N. (2015). *Revisiting Error Analysis–The Case of Bangladeshi Efl Student*. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 143-152.

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REVISITING ERROR ANALYSIS–THE CASE OF BANGLADESHI EFL STUDENT

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Abstract

Errors are ubiquitous when it comes to language learning. But the question remains, do errors signpost both progress and regress? This article attempts to scrutinize the ways Error Analysis (EA) can be re-established as a valuable tool for gathering information about how much a Bangladeshi adult EFL learner has learnt after a three month long Academic English course. Thus, a detailed EA carried out on two written texts present much crucial information about the learner’s language development - from lexical deficiency to shortfalls in grammatical knowledge and even on the sociolinguistic or discourse level. The paper concludes with the limitations as well as pedagogical implications of the study.

Keywords

Error Analysis, Evidence, Mistakes

1. Introduction

Error is intrinsic to any learning process, be it calculus or salsa or be it in learning a new language; anyone will surely miss one or two steps. But do errors speak a language to embody information about the person who makes them? The answer is yes. Errors are certainly a useful tool for a teacher since errors are the part of the learning process itself: “a way that the learner

has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning.” (Corder, 1967).

This article examines the ways Error Analysis (EA) establishes itself as an effectual tool to figure out how much a learner has learnt. The effectiveness of EA is duly ascertained by an extensive analysis of two texts which were written by a Bangladeshi university student before and after a three month long Academic English Course.

In Bangladesh most of the university students come from Bengali medium background and have very little exposure to English as a foreign language. As a result, proficiency in English is commonly at low ebb that results in errors, which in turn hinder the desired achievement level in higher studies. So to what extent do errors actually indicate a learner’s deficiency?

2. Error Analysis (EA) and its significance in Language Teaching

In the behaviourist approach to language teaching, learning was viewed as the result of habit formation, where a person who had learned one language (L1) would revert to those habits while learning a second language (L2) and the ‘old habits’ would be helpful if they were similar to the L2 habits but unconstructive if different. The principles of Contrastive Analysis (CA) were then laid down and its advocates claimed that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) could accurately predict most of the errors committed by a learner in L2 as the major source of the errors would be in the learner’s L1. However, by the early 1970s, CA and its hypotheses aroused intense criticism and were eventually replaced by Error Analysis (EA).

So, what is Error Analysis? James (1998) defines Error Analysis as the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language acquisition. In more simple terms, EA is the methodology that focuses on the errors learners make in their productive skills (writing and speaking) so as to trace out their knowledge of the language. The errors present important evidence to the language teacher so as to tell him how far towards the goal has the learner progressed and what is still deficient, thus mapping out the learning strategy involved in the process.

With the publication of Corder’s (1967) most influential article ‘The significance of learners’ errors’, EA came to be a useful procedure for the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Corder (1967) in his article claimed that errors provide evidence of the system of language which a learner uses at a certain point of time in the course of L2

development. He pointed out that errors could be significant because they provide the teacher with information about a learner's level of erudition as well as function as devices by which the learner discovers the rules of the target language besides working as evidence for the researchers as to how languages are learnt. Corder further noted that errors show that L1 and L2 learners both develop an independent system of language, "although it is not the adult system... nor that of the second language" but is evidence of a 'transitional competence' (Corder, 1967). Error Analysis has been of interest to the researchers ever since as it could "...shed light on the process of L2 acquisition" (Ellis, 1994) as well as improve pedagogy.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes the samples of essays written by a Bangladeshi student on a predetermined topic. The case study focuses on the common mistakes and errors that an adult EFL student makes in his writing in English. The student is a first year undergraduate non-English major student enrolled in Academic English Course at the Independent University, Bangladesh. The two written samples which are analyzed in this article were collected longitudinally within a span of 12 weeks; the first piece was written prior to the Academic English Course the student was enrolled in and the second piece obviously was written after the tuition. The error analyses use conventional examination papers as materials which were written by the learner under the same test conditions. The pieces are reproduced exactly the way they were written but with line numbers added for reference.

It is useful, at this stage, to reiterate the distinction between errors and mistakes. For Corder (1967), errors are failures in competence while mistakes are associated to failures in performance. Making use of the Chomskyan distinction, Corder (1967) further insist that mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning since they 'do not reflect a defect in our knowledge' but are traceable to performance failure which may be due to memory lapses, exhaustion or mere carelessness. Thus the focus in this EA is confined to the 'systematic errors' (Corder, 1967) of the learner which will enable us to chart his underlying knowledge of the language.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

To begin with the study of errors in Text I, several errors in article, punctuation, capitalization, subject-verb agreement as well as misspellings were identified, besides the loose structuring of the sentences. Following identification of errors, the next phase would be the description of errors, which involves sorting out errors in the categories of phonology, morphology, syntax, auxiliary system, negative constructions, verb forms, articles, prepositions and so on.

In Text I, there are a few usage of wrong articles in line 2 <a> ahead of the word indispensable beginning with a vowel and in line 9 <a> preceding the word easy which also begins with a vowel.

Uses of incorrect cases are evident in line 3 <C> where an uppercase is used for the words cars in the middle of the sentence. Similarly in line 4 an erroneous case <R> is used in the word rush, which is wrongly spelt. The wrong cases are also used in: line 7 <t> as for the beginning of the sentence The; in line 8 where a lower case <f> is used for the word For which opens the sentence; in line 9 where a lower case <i> is used instead of a upper case in It and lastly in line 14 <t> yet again for the opening word of the sentence The.

As for the uses of punctuation, the use of ellipsis in line 1 to suggest an apparent omission of words is quite ambiguous. Likewise the uses of semi-colon in line 3 are equally vague. The use of parentheses in line 7 and 13 also signals the ill structure of the text.

A few misspellings include: <government> in line 2; <usefull> and <helpfull> in line 3; <means> and <Rursh> in line 4 and <government> in line 7.

On the sentence structure level, Text I exhibits a few errors. The latter part of the sentence "... any government can do anything about it" in line 2 is unclear in its interpretation. However in line 3, the placement of the idiomatic phrase "as well" is incorrect as it is placed before the plural subject 'cars' which also does not conform with the singular verb form 'means'. Similarly in line 12 the use of double adverb 'just' and 'maybe' also adds to the incongruence of the writing. In line 7, the learner's use of the past verb form 'spent' is nothing but wrong. Furthermore, in line 13, the learner skips a to-infinitive after the modal auxiliary verb 'need'. Lastly, the double usage of subject-verb in "we need we have..." (line 13) is clearly a crucial error.

The next piece Text II, written after 12 weeks of tuition depicts improvement in the sense that the learner has managed to write 282 words instead of the shorter piece he had written previously. Even though the sentence construction has improved, a number of errors in article, punctuation, capitalization as well as misspellings are still evidently visible.

The wrong articles are used in line 21 <a> ahead of the word African beginning with a vowel; in line 22 <a> preceding the word extremely which also begins with a vowel, in line 24 <the> before the percentage rate of poverty and in line 26 <a> before the word easy which begins with a vowel.

Unlike in the previous text, this piece exhibits a fewer instances of incorrect case usage. The three occurrences manifest themselves in lines 17, 23 and 24 in 'latin', 'the' and 'Poverty' respectively. However, the use of upper cases in words 'Corruption' and 'Resources' is questionable.

As with the usage of punctuation, the use of parentheses in lines 11-12 prove unacceptable. However, the student has clearly made a progress in the proper use of colon and semi-colon.

The text, however, displays a greater number of misspellings compared to the previous one: absence of genitive in <people>, use of <cover*t> instead of cover, <basic*al> (line 1); <Et*iohia> (lines 4, 21 and 23); absence of genitive in <parents*>, <develop*> (line 7); <irrespons*ability>, <lack*s> (line 8); <remarkable*> instead remarkably; <wor*d>; <Et*iopians> (line 24) ; <hungr*yness> (line 25); <with*in> (line 28); <th*is> and lastly <develop*> (line 29).

On the sentence structure level, we have identified deviances in line 4 "...each country have it..." where instead of using 'has' to agree with the indefinite pronoun 'each', the learner uses 'have'. In line 7, the word 'develop' lacks the '-Ed' marker as it is used as an adjective in the context. Furthermore, the sentence in line 7 is in a passive voice but it is awkwardly written as "... poverty is cause...." The wrong prepositional use 'for', the erroneous plurality of 'lacks' and the inappropriate use of 'any' are also apparent in the same sentence. Again in line 14, the wrong preposition 'is' is used instead of 'in'. In line 16 the use of 'economical' does not convey the meaning it is intended to convey; the word 'economical' means inexpensive or reasonably priced whereas the writer actually refers to an economic crisis. Later in the same line an

adjectival ‘remarkable’ is used instead of an adverbial ‘remarkably’ preceding the adjective ‘high’. The learner also uses the wrong prepositional phrase ‘on the word’ instead of ‘of the world’ in line 22. The noun ‘risk’ is usually followed by the preposition ‘of’ but the writer uses ‘in risk to die’ in its place.

Apart from the linguistics classification of errors ‘a surface strategy taxonomy’ (Dulay, et al., 1982) can be utilized as an alternative which provides an insight of the cognitive processes that bring about the learner’s unique construction of L2. (Table 1) shows the categorizations below and explains how each can be related to figure out errors.

Table 1: *A surface strategy taxonomy of errors adapted from Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982*

Category	Description	Illustration
Omissions	The absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance.	...maybe we don’t need be so radical. (Text I, Lines 12- 13)
Additions	The presence of an item that must not appear in well-formed utterances.	...each country have it... (Text II, Line 4)
Misinformations	The use of the wrong form of the morpheme of structure.	...covert their basical necessitites... (Text II, Line 1)
Misorderings	The incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in a speech	...but as well cars means a lot of problem...(Text I, Lines 3-4)

In a similar vein, Corder (1974) erects a framework that describes errors on the basis of their systematic manifestation which can equally be helpful in identifying errors in the written texts:

- Random presystematic errors occur when the learner is oblivious of the existence of a particular rule in L2. For example, if we refer back to Text I, line 13, the learner’s dual use of subject as well as the accompanying verbs for emphasis seem to signal the notion that the learner is unaware of the rule.
- Systematic errors refer to those errors that occur when the learner has discovered an

incorrect rule. Let us take a morphological example from Text II. In line 1, the learner have actually coined a word called 'basical' which he must have thought to be linked with the word 'economical' (line 16).

- Postsystematic errors arise when the learner is aware of the correct target language rule but its use is inconsistent. Referring back to Text I, line 9, the use of the indefinite article a in front of the word easy is erroneous but if we move back to line 3 and refer to 'an example', we can be assured that the errors of articles are probably post systematic errors.

However, it is often debatable whether Error Analysis should only examine 'deviations in correctness' or 'deviations in appropriateness' (Ellis, 1994). These distinctions pose serious problems in recognition of errors. As we could see in the analyses of the two written samples, it is often quite perilous to interpret the connotation of sentences by assigning meaning derived from the rules of the target language when there is no scope of interaction with the learner to find out what he actually intended to mean.

5. Explaining Errors: Why Errors Occur

Every learner tries to get language perfect. But what causes errors? Taylor (1986) identifies that the source of errors may lie in the psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, or epistemic stratum besides the discourse structure. Since psycholinguistics is involved in the language processing mechanisms of a person, the errors originating from it are concerned with the processing of language. The grammatical slips in the use of articles can verify such processing errors. A sociolinguistic error, on the other hand, has its source in a learner's adjustment to language with respect to the social context; "...but we need... we have to do something." (Text I, Line 13) Errors shooting from epistemic sources reflect a learner's lack of worldly knowledge. For instance, the writer relates radicalism with Greenpeace (Text I, Line 13) which is a non-violent environmental organization. And errors developing from discourse result in the arrangement of information in an incoherent whole as is evident in Text I.

However imperfect language may also be produced for various reasons like fatigue, lack of concentration or a slip of memory with some errors arise evolving from the learner's lexical deficiency or slip of grammatical knowledge which can often be difficult to detect. Thus Johnson

(1988) explains, if a learner speaks or writes something in a wrong form, it could either be for two reasons - either the student lacks the appropriate knowledge or he employs the knowledge he has, which is not the right knowledge. Alternatively, errors may be caused by interference from a learner's L1 when the learner makes a choice in doubt using his L1 as a resource. It is thus imperative to limit our focus on Text II which was generated after the learner received tuition. And the best instance is explained by how the learner directly borrows from his L1 (Bengali) to coin the phrase 'around world' (Text II, Line 15) in order to mean 'worldwide'.

An analysis of the two written pieces confirm once again the fact that writing is a more contemplative process than any speaking practice, which involves a process of planning as well as brain storming to chart the course of action. The main problems have been with verb forms, sentence formation, articles and prepositions as well as spelling. In some of the cases, the rate of errors reduced sharply over the 12 weeks period tuition, while in other cases, little improvement was evident. Drawing a parallel with the studies carried out by Duskova (Ellis, 1994) it is evident in the two pieces that errors in article were most common, followed by morphology. It is also a part of reality that some developmental errors do not respond well to correction; learners will eventually grow out of these errors as their inter language develops until the phase where some of the learners will become fossilized.

6. Conclusion

A walk on the boulevard of language learning is after all never so smooth; errors are inevitable on the pathway of learning. EA, therefore, could be a useful exercise for teachers since errors are a window to the learners' mind (Corder, 1967) and the teachers must read them to evaluate the state of the learner's inter language.

However, despite its usefulness, EA has some lapses since it is never completely possible to isolate what errors are caused by L1 interference and what have their origin in other non-systematic factors. As a consequence, EA is often regarded as insufficient for its one-sided practice of 'analyzing out the errors and neglecting the careful description of the non-errors' (Hammarberg 1974). It is also valid to consider that errors alone cannot tell a teacher how much a learner has acquired since there have been instances where the learners avoid using difficult

structure at all which result in absence of errors. Schachter (1974) aptly observed learners to harbour this tendency to avoid doubtful L1 items and end up committing no mistake at all, thus often concealing useful information from the teacher.

In spite of the fact that this single case of a Bangladeshi learner cannot necessarily be generalized to a wider population of Bangladeshi EFL learners, it provides a holistic and in-depth, empirical probe of EA within a contemporary real-life English Language Teaching (ELT) context. The findings and analysis of the case study, nevertheless, indicate the necessity of emphasizing on teaching writing at the tertiary level which is developed and enhanced through extensive reading. The extent of errors identified in the two written samples at the tertiary level fairly signify the ineffectiveness of current practice of teaching writing in primary as well as secondary level. Just as language learning in Bangladesh is heavily influenced by learners' tendency to memorize textual content, teaching writing, in particular, is viewed as a product rather than process. Further action research can be undertaken to ascertain the need of a policy change in English language education and curriculum that can play a pivotal role in remodelling Bangladeshi learners' performance in writing. In the light of the limitations of this case- study, it is also recommended that further longitudinal studies are undertaken, especially for large writing classes, where EA can be an effective tool to collect and document errors on a large scale. Even though it may not be feasible at all times to assess errors in the speaking classes, depending on whether or not the class focuses on accuracy or fluency, the language teacher could, nonetheless, present the correct usage as deemed necessary from EA so as to provide the learner with opportunity to correct the errors, thus increasing their autonomy awareness.

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