

Amita Rawley Thaman

M.Phil, Assistant Professor, Department of English

SCD Govt College, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

e-mail: amitarawley@gmail.com

Errors in Second Language Acquisition and their Types

ABSTRACT

The present paper draws attention of ESL/EFL teachers towards errors in second language acquisition and the differences between lapses, mistakes and errors. The focus is on some errors in use and what they convey. A hierarchical classification of types of errors is attempted, stating the common sources of errors. When learners speak or write, they invariably form patterns of errors regarding particular concepts. The teacher should look for such patterns and then correct the assignment. Red-marking the same mistake several times will not only demoralize the learner but will also prove tedious for the teacher/examiner. Errors are essentially viewed as an evidence for the ongoing learning process and in no case they should be brushed off as something undesirable. Errors are crucial aspects of language learning and seriously indicate the positive flux of the learning process. Errors play an imperative role in the learning process. They have to be taken seriously not only by the language learner but also the ESL/EFL teacher. They signify that the learning process is still going on and the learner is making progress on the Interlanguage continuum. He is achieving closer and closer approximation to the L2 system. The teacher has to intervene at various points and facilitate the learner in achieving his goal.

KEY WORDS: Errors, lapses, mistakes, types of errors, sources of errors, some errors in use

INTRODUCTION

When a child is born, he learns to crawl and walk, falling and rising time and again, and finally perfecting his gait. Similarly, humans learn language as part of a natural process. They learn language in bits and parts from family, from caregivers, from friends, teachers and everywhere around. They try to master the language. They falter, make mistakes and keep on trying until they are fully conversant with the system of the language. They internalize the mechanism, the code of the language and end in perfecting the target language TL or second language SL. The linguists as well as the teachers are interested in these errors so as to determine strategies to overcome them.

WHAT IS AN ERROR?

During the course of learning the second language, the L2 Learner makes several *breaches of code* and produces utterances which are *unacceptable*. This shows that he has not yet attained mastery of the code and has not yet internalized the formation rules of the second language. Errors indicate the learner's attempts to figure out the L2 system. Let us throw a glance at some of the definitions of error given by important linguists. Most of the linguists see errors as being relative to and deviant from the utterances of a native speaker. They owe their origin to ignorance and partial and incomplete learning of the learner. 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 be produced by the speakers' native counterparts.

Stephen Pit Corder (1973) used the term *error* to

refer to those features of learners' utterances which differ from those of any native speaker.

Jack C. Richards (1992) used the term error to refer to

(in the speech or writing of second language or foreign language learner) the use of a linguistic item(e.g. a word, a grammatical item, a speech act etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning.

H. Douglas Brown (2000) defined linguistic errors as

a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of the native speaker reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner.

Errors committed by a language learner depict:

1. The level of learning that the learner has reached or the proficiency of the learner in the target language.
2. The progress of teaching/learning process.
3. The supposed interlanguage of the learner.
4. The steps whereby language learning takes place.
5. Interference of mother tongue or L1.
6. Learning strategies employed by the learner at various stages.

So errors are systematic deviations generated in learner language by learners who have not yet mastered the rules. They indicate the learners' attempts to figure out the L2 system. Errors are essentially viewed as an evidence for the ongoing learning process and in no case they should be brushed off as something undesirable. Errors are crucial aspects of language learning and seriously indicate the positive flux of the learning process.

LAPSES AND MISTAKES VIS-À-VIS ERRORS

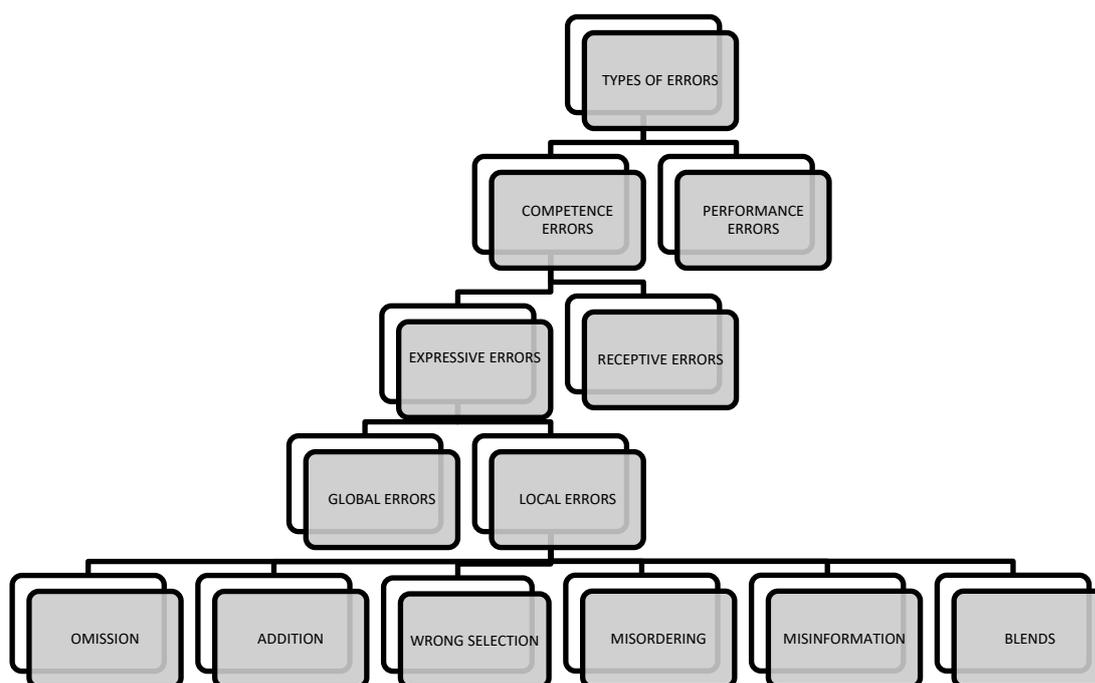
Lapses and mistakes are both performance errors. Lapses are typically attributed to the native speakers or SUEs (Successful Users of English). They are random performance slips caused by either an abrupt *change of plan* whereby the speaker starts an utterance but jumps to another structure leaving the previous one in-between or a *slip of tongue* in which he inadvertently omits and substitutes a segment of an utterance, such as a phoneme, a morpheme, a lexical item or even a phrase. These slips or false starts or confusions of structure are almost immediately recognised by the speaker. The main reason behind these slips/ false starts is that the speaker is at times not able to compensate his utterances with the racing thoughts in his mind.

Mistakes are more serious than lapses though both are unintentional. They may be caused by various external factors like

1. Fatigue
2. Nervousness
3. Stress
4. Anxiety
5. Uncertainty
6. Divided attention

Mistakes are usually self-corrected whereas errors need the intervention of the teacher. Errors occur due to inadequate learning.

TYPES OF ERRORS



Noam Chomsky introduced the concept of **competence** and **performance** whereby competence depends on the whole system of language acquired by the learner and the performance is the way a language is used for communication. So errors can be most broadly classified into Competence and Performance errors. Competence errors occur due to inadequate language learning whereas Performance errors occur when the language learner actually uses the language for communication. Performance errors can occur invariably or due to some external reasons listed above. They can be made by native speakers or language learners whereas competence errors are characteristic only of language learners who have not achieved full proficiency in the target language. They reflect the learner's *interlanguage* and are the result of either the use of wrong rules or misuse of the right rules. Performance errors are comparatively less serious in nature than competence errors. Competence errors tend to be more systematic than performance errors. Hence the latter are never the object of study for a linguist or a teacher. The speaker is normally aware of them and can correct them.

Competence errors can be further subdivided into **expressive** and **receptive** errors. Expressive errors when the language learner expresses himself that is while speaking or writing. These can be detected simultaneously. However, receptive errors are confined to the perception and interpretation of the learner. They are those errors which result in the

listener's misunderstanding or wrong perception of the speaker's intentions. Receptive errors are related to listening and reading skills.

Expressive errors can be classified into **global** and **local** errors. Global error occurs when the sentence construction is totally faulty. It is a serious error which involves the overall structure of a sentence. It interferes with the communication and disrupts the meaning of the utterance. It can be neither *acceptable* nor *appropriate*. Global error occurs usually due to wrong order of words in the sentence.

Examples of global errors:

1. *I not want go school today.*
2. *My mother no money have.*
3. *I eating fast food, then go we.*
4. *You happy, I happy.*

On the other hand, local error occurs when any specific feature of the sentence is added or omitted or changed. It affects a particular grammatical constituent only. Local error does not hinder the communication or the meaning of the sentence. Locally erroneous sentences may not be *appropriate* but they are *acceptable*. Local errors can be broadly classified into the following:

1. Omission of elements

I go school everyday. (preposition *to* has been omitted)

Ganga is a sacred river. (article *the* before Ganga has been omitted)

My sister very pretty. (copula *be* omitted)

A strange thing happen to me yesterday. (inflection for past form of verb omitted)

2. Addition of elements

I had my dinner(s).*

He has gone(to) abroad.*

I thank(s) you.*

He returned (back) home.*

**Letters/words in brackets are superfluous.*

3. Wrong selection of words

She is a proudy (proud) girl.

He is oldest (older) than me.

He is the boy which (who) topped in class.

It has been raining since four (for) hours.

4. Misordering of words

He is a dear to me friend. (He is a friend dear to me)

She fights all the time with her brother. (She fights with her brother all the time.)

Half done, well begun. (Well begun, half done.)

What he is doing?(What is he doing?)

5. Misinformation

(use of wrong form of morpheme or structure)

Do they be happy? (Are they happy?)

The dog eated the chicken. (ate; irregular past)

I have not any pen. (don't have)

He hanged his head in shame. (hung)

6. Blends

(learner's uncertainty as to which form is required)

The only thing which I want is the only thing I want.

He leaves no opportunity of paying.

Why did you done that?(have/do)

You going home, I going market.

SOURCES OF ERRORS

Errors can originate from several sources. They can be based on cross-linguistic comparison. For example, unconscious *interference from mother tongue* can cause transfer errors which may be phonological, syntactic or semantic. Transfer may be positive or negative. If it facilitates language learning, it is positive transfer; if it hinders learning, it is negative transfer. Such errors are called INTERLINGUAL ERRORS. Due to poor acquisition of target language, learners fall back on others languages of proficiency. It is pertinent to mention here that when Larry Selinker coined the term **Interlanguage**, he made it clear that the mother language of the learner is a strong base of linguistic as well as life experiences for him, so constantly refers to it every time he comes across a new element/concept of learning. Interlanguage refers to a separateness of every learner's language system. Interlanguage has a structurally intermediate status between the native and the target language. It is a system based on the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. Selinker also suggested the concept of **Fossilization** wherein he meant the stage when the language proficiency of the learner has come to a standstill and the learner seems to be stuck at a certain level on the interlanguage continuum. Certain erroneous constructions or pronunciations have become permanent features of his speech. Thus incorrect language has become a habit of the learner and this situation can be overcome only through conscious efforts on the part of the learner or special efforts of the teacher. When learners do not value accuracy and feel that their communicative needs are sufficient, they are likely to fossilize. Lack of motivation and lack of corrective feedback also brings about fossilization.

Errors can also be based on the language being learnt. These are INTRALINGUAL ERRORS. One such error is *overgeneralization* when the learner inadvertently extends the application of a rule to the items excepted from it. For example, the child uses the plural morpheme *-s* to words like *sheep* or *ox* which are not pluralized in the regular manner. Learners create deviant structures on the basis of their own knowledge and experience. One major reason is inadequate learning experience or partial exposure to target language.

Errors in language are mainly caused due to LANGUAGE LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES. He may coin a new phrase in order to express himself. He may follow avoidance strategy to forego a difficult structure. He may circumlocute over the features/characteristics of the object because he does not

remember the exact word or term. He may apply non-verbal techniques to approximate the desired expression.(eg.clap for applause, finger on the lips for Keep quiet).

Then there are CONTEXT OF LEARNING ERRORS which owe their origin to faulty teaching, misleading explanations or false perception of the learner. These are **induced errors**, the onus of which rests basically on the goings-on in the classroom, that is on the teaching-learning process, or faulty teaching material procured by the learner from unauthentic sources, ambiguous/misleading explanations provided by the teacher, or wrong perception of the learner.

SOME ERRORS IN USE

When learners speak or write, they invariably form patterns of errors regarding particular concepts. The teacher should look for such patterns and then correct the assignment. Red-marking the same mistake several times will not only demoralize the learner but will also prove tedious for the teacher/examiner.

a) ARTICLES

EFL/ESL Teachers have always been teaching to the learners that the articles *a* and *an* are used before vowel sounds which are typically represented by words beginning with letters *a, e, i, o, u*. But learners perceive the easy way out and often place *a* or *an* before vowels and not vowel sounds. Eg. *an* university professor instead of *a* university professor; *an* European instead of *a* European.

b) SUBJECT-VERB CONCORD

Language learners tend to get confused about this concept pretty often. The fault herein lies in their perception of some collective nouns as singular because the learners are trained to look up for the morpheme *-s*.

Eg. *The police have arrived* and not *The police has arrived*.

c) TENSE

The second/ foreign language learner takes a lot of time to learn to express time in his constructions/ utterances. Many learners conveniently stick to the present tense and achieve *fossilization* because their utterances are acceptable this way.

I go to the party last night for *I went to the party last night*.

d) VERBS

Learners make a number of errors concerning tense, mood and voice.

Learners overgeneralize the past forms of certain exceptional words:

I goed home early for *I went home early*.

I comed to college for *I came to college*.

e) PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are one of the most difficult parts of speech to learn.

They laughed *on* the child.(at)

I am surprised *with* your behaviour.(at)

f) NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Many times the learner applies double negative and makes his sentence construction faulty.

I don't know nothing for *I don't know anything*.

I never owed nothing to no one for *I never owed anything to anyone*.

g) COLLOCATIONS

Collocations are words that invariably occur together. It takes the language learner many years to figure out that it is *tea leaves* and *coffee beans* and vice-versa is not allowed. Similarly, *fast food* is a variety of food and not food that is eaten fast.

h) PRO-FORMS

These are substitute words or support systems that the learner resorts to when he suddenly falls short of words for accurate expression eg. *like, you know* etc. By using these words, the learner buys time to get to the right expression. These redundant words/ phrases camouflage his faltering expression with fluency.

i) LITERAL TRANSLATION

The inexperienced and ignorant learner falls back on his mother language and translates it verbatim to target language. The Hindi/ Punjabi speakers are accustomed to double adjective/adverb constructions.

Slowly slowly I will learn it for By and by/ Gradually I will learn it.

I am sipping hot-hot tea for I am sipping hot tea

j) POSSESSIVES

Possessives are mostly learnt at the final stage. It is considered a difficult concept.

For eg.

This is *Pranav* book. (Pranav's)

We celebrate *Teacher's* Day on 5th September. (Teachers')

k) QUESTION TAGS

The most easily learnt question tag is **isn't it?** Learners in the initial stage apply it practically everywhere.

You are not well. Isn't it?

He has done his work. Isn't it?

Errors play an imperative role in the learning process. They have to be taken seriously not only by the language learner but also the ESL/EFL teacher. They signify that the learning process is still going on and the learner is making progress on the Interlanguage continuum. He is achieving closer approximations to the L2 system. The teacher has to intervene at various points and facilitate the learner in achieving his goal.

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