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Error Analysis for English Language Teaching at Primary Level

Abstract

The prime concern of every language teacher, and to some extent every linguist, is to devise pedagogical methods and strategies which facilitate language acquisition. The concern of any teacher or applied linguist is, though not explicitly stated anywhere, to equip the learners with “correct” features of the language being learnt. Emphasis on “correctness” is due to the presumption that erroneous structures or deviations from linguistic code will lead to incomprehensibility and impediment in communication. As a result of such convictions Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) focussed their attention on “correct” grammatical, lexical and syntactical features of Target Language (TL), in this case English. Both Contrastive Analysts and Error Analysts analysed the language and tried to predict areas of ease or difficulty. This was often achieved with ‘some’ degree of success. However, in the present socio-educational milieu of Indian schools, where English language teaching is a significant stake, insights from CA and EA, particularly the latter, are either not taken into cognizance, or found inadequate. CA is taken into consideration, though obliquely, indirectly and cursorily, where English language is taught resorting to bilingualism. EA is usually ignored completely. Even when teachers correct students’ assignments and copies, they point out mistakes/errors, suggest corrections, but neither take into account why these mistakes/errors have occurred, nor how to prevent such cases in future. With the ever

growing importance of English as a global language and a second language in India, no stakeholder in education can afford to undermine the significance of ELT. The time is therefore ripe to take a fresh look at Error Analysis (EA) and assess how it can be deployed as a powerful tool in school teaching.

Keywords: English Teaching, english language, language teacher, ELT, Language Learning

The concept of Contrastive Analysis came into existence in the works of C.C. Fries (1945) but it was propounded as a linguistic theory by Robert Lado in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). Lado studied the process of second language acquisition and tried to find ways of making the process simpler and easier. According to him, "those elements [of the target language] which are similar to (the learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". The concept had always existed among language teachers, but it was Lado who first provided a detailed theoretical framework and a systematic methodology for the contrastive study of languages. His methodology was to describe languages using a structuralist approach, then comparing them and finally predicting learning difficulties. His methodology was used widely in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) during the 1960s and early 1970s. Following Lado, Contrastive Analysts tried to explain with some success why some features of a target language were more difficult to acquire than others. Contrastive analysts compared learners' languages i.e. the mother tongue and the target language. They identified similar or dissimilar areas and presumed that similarities led to ease and dissimilarities led to difficulty in language learning. Therefore, the difficulty in acquiring certain structures in a target language (TL) depended on the difference between the learners' mother language and the target language they were trying to learn. Such studies were a good step in ELT particularly. However, actual results sometimes were on the contrary, thereby refuting the hypotheses.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, another approach to second/foreign language acquisition called Error Analysis, gained popularity. During this period, several studies were undertaken which established that the language of second language learners is systematic, had a definite pattern and that learners' errors were not random but showed evidence of a rule-governed behaviour (Corder 1976; Adjemian 1976; Nemser 1971; Selinker 1972). Error analysts examined the language samples of the learners. They identified deviations from standard linguistic code and classified them into 'lapses, mistakes or errors'. They classified the errors into types and attempted to predict the causes of these language/ linguistic deviations. They usually tried to classify the erroneous data collected from language samples according to:

- modality (level of competence in the four skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing)
- linguistic levels (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, style)
- grammatical forms and structures (omission, insertion, substitution, wrong analogy)
- type of error (systematic errors/errors in competence vs. occasional errors/errors in performance)
- causes of errors (psychological, socio-cultural, pedagogical, mother tongue influence etc.)

An Error Analyst, who was either a language teacher or an applied linguist, also studied the “idiosyncratic dialect”(Corder 1971), ‘approximative system’ (Nemser) or the ‘interlanguage’ (Selinker 1972), of learners with a view to facilitating second or foreign language acquisition. The purpose was to collect, classify and explain errors, because as Corder(1981, p.10)says, they tell us something about the learner's ‘idiosyncratic dialect’, or underlying knowledge of the rules of the language being learned.

Though EA has been quite successful in second language pedagogy and ELT, it has been observed that the method is not foolproof. There are several reasons for it. We must bear in mind that in this process of an error analysis, there may be more than one possible way to reconstruct learner errors. (Tarone&Swierzbins, 25) Moreover, many a times communication strategies are used by the learners to get their meaning across, even if they know that the form used is not correct (Selinker,1972). Lightbown&Spada have also observed, "... while error analysis has the advantage of describing what learners actually do ... it does not always give us clear insights into why they do it." (45). Another aspect of learners’ interlanguage/ approximative system/ idiosyncratic dialect is ‘avoidance’ (Schachter,1976). He opined that learners can avoid using features of a TL that they find difficult and use alternative features. So we cannot truly assess their language ability.

Besides these shortcomings, there are certain issues that are typical for ELT and ELL (English language learning) situation in the schools of India. English is a second and not a foreign language in India. As such, it is taught even in vernacular medium schools from an early age. However, it is only students in English medium schools by and large, who are able to communicate proficiently in English. Those studying in vernacular medium schools are at varying levels of competence. They are able to read their text books and are able to comprehend what is written to some extent, depending upon their exposure to the language outside class, the pedagogical skill of their teacher, their attitude to the language, their motivation to learn, the opportunities available to them to practice their language skills etc.

Some of these factors are beyond the control of the teacher, though they are pertinent. A serious teacher therefore, though desirous of eradicating the errors of his students' language, cannot do much about the external factors governing ELL. Moreover, there is the question of 'correctness.'

What constitutes correct language/ English? In an age where computers and IT are bringing about widespread and drastic changes in language structure and use, and code mixing (especially English and Hindi in India) is increasingly becoming popular, particularly in the media, the concept of correct English is precarious. Consider the following cases:

1. SMS and Whatsapp messages are leading towards simplification in spellings.

Doing away with vowels, for example:

working	wrkng	written	Wrtn
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2. Another type of simplification and brevity is replacing a word with a letter according to pronunciation, for example, you = u, are = r, the = d.
3. Then parts of words are replaced by letters or numbers, for example, great = gr8, thanks = thanx, with = wid/vid.
4. Certain abbreviations or acronyms have become so popular that students either do not learn the full form or do not use it even if they know it, for example, ASAP = as soon as possible.
5. Some acronyms are very popular but their full forms were not there earlier, LOL = laugh out loud.
6. Portmanteau words are increasingly being coined to express new ideas, for example, infotainment (information + entertainment),

Students studying in English medium, so called elite schools, use such language on electronic media. They have acquired standard English i.e. RP which is now identified as Indian English. Even those in vernacular medium schools are not untouched by this change even though they may not have acquired standard English proficiency. The problem faced by the Error Analyst in this situation is, which model of English to use as a reference point for identifying errors; whether to consider these deviations from the linguistic code as 'errors' or not; how to decide whether a deviant form or structure has been produced after knowing the correct one, resorting to the deviation for the purpose of communication or simplification or brevity.

To conclude, Error Analysis has not lost its relevance in second language pedagogy and ELL, but its nature and scope has widened, and so has the task of an English language

teacher as well as an Error Analyst become more complex. There is an urgent need for reconsidering its nature, scope and procedures in order to facilitate ELT and make it a meaningful exercise.

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