A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO ERROR ANALYSIS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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O abordare lingvisticã a analizei erorilor în predarea limbii engleze (Rezumat)

Analiza erorilor în predarea unei limbi strãine presupune patru etape bine determinate cu obiective precise, cuantificabile, mãsurabile şi care trebuie atinse până la sfârşitul etapei, şi anume: depistarea şi colectarea erorilor, studiul, clasificarea lor şi explicarea cauzelor posibile care stau la baza acestora.

Studiul de faţă are ca principal obiectiv examinarea erorilor din punct de vedere lingvistic, oferind o altã perspectivã asupra evaluãrii, dincolo de abordarea strict metodologicã. Studiul este totodatã o investigaţie a procesului de analizã a erorilor, obiective şi mod de folosire, plecând de la un corpus de date culese de la studenţi, individual şi pe grupe, la diferite nivele de învãţare a limbii engleze.

O clasificare lingvisticã a erorilor în învãţarea limbii engleze este utilã şi totodatã edificatoare tocmai pentru cã cei mai mulţi dintre profesorii de limbã englezã par sã ignore aceastã etapã, concentrându-se asupra evaluãrii competenţelor studenţilor (de a şti, a face şi a fi). Cu toate acestea, în orice abordare de testare şi evaluare a limbii strãine, clasificarea lingvisticã a erorilor, din punct de vedere fonologic, ortografic, sintactic, lexico-semantic, socio-lingvistic, etc., reprezintã condiţia de bazã în logistica didacticã.

Errors are studied in order to find out something about the learning process and about the strategies employed by human beings learning another language. Error analysis (EA) involves collecting errors, studying them, classifying them in various ways and suggesting possible causes. Language teachers have been doing this for years but recently, partly as a result of increased interest in psycholinguistic research, attempts have been made to make more systematic and formal analyses of errors.

Most linguists on EA divide the process into three stages: (i) recognition, (ii) classification, (iii) explanation. These stages are, in fact, interdependent.

(i)   **Recognition.** In many cases what is regarded as an error varies according to circumstances and takes into consideration factors such as: the age, ability, motivation of the students, the amount of the time available, a realistic assessment of the possibilities of improving performance in that time, etc.[1]

Recognising errors is not quite difficult, and most teachers have a highly developed sense of error detection as they know that their students are prone to that particular mistake, even when the context makes an alternative, correct interpretation possible. Often the linguistic context helps teachers to determine whether an error has been made or not. Consider the following sentence:

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[1] Cf. Jeremy Harmer, *English Language Teaching*, Longman, Cambridge, 2002, p. 99-101

e.g. *I used to clean my teeth every night before I go to bed.*
If the general context employs the Present Simple tense, then *used to* is probably wrong; but if the context employs the Past Simple, then *go* is probably wrong. Context is very important in recognising an error.
Sometimes, non-linguist context has to be considered. This is most obvious in the case of "situational" errors, such as using a style, which is too formal or too familiar for the situation. For example, there is nothing wrong with ending a letter:
e.g. *Hope you are all well there. Give my love to all at home.*
But if it is used to close a formal business letter it is surely an error.
(ii)   **Linguistic classification**. There are many ways in which errors can be assigned to classes and one should use whatever system or combination of systems is the most useful and enlightening according to the purposes of the analysis.
Some people omit the stage of linguistic classification and classify errors immediately in terms of their assumed causes, e.g. errors of hypercorrection, cross-association, etc. that will be discussed later in this paper.
Jerry Abbot argues that a linguistic classification of errors involves assigning them to various levels of linguistic description, i.e. phonological (both speaking and listening), ortographic (spelling and punctuation), syntactic (grammatical), lexico-semantic (choice of vocabulary, which in turn affects meaning), situational or socio-linguistic (appropriacy).[2]
e.g. **Go to the shop and get a bread.*
Is this syntactic: substitution of *a* for *some*, or lexical: substitution of *bread* for *loaf*. It is not always possible to assign an error to only one level of description. Errors involving prepositions, for example, sometimes involve both syntax and semantics; certainly the substitution of one preposition for another can have important consequences as in:
e.g. *He threw a coconut at his friend.*
where the context implies *to.*
An error like:
e.g. ** She said that yes you can go.*
May be regarded as a combined error of syntax and punctuation, addition of *that* and omission of punctuation:
e.g. *She* said*, "Yes, you can go."*
Or it may be regarded as an error of syntax alone, i.e. lack of knowledge of the rules of reported speech:
e.g. *She said that I could go.*
As it has been mentioned above, errors at one level of linguistic description may cause related errors at another. This can be seen most clearly in the case of spelling errors,

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[2] Cf. Jerry Abbot, *The Teaching of English as an International Language,* Nelson, Edinburgh, 1992, p. 224-226.

which are related to phonological problems, e.g. the substitution of *leave* for *live* or *sot* for *short.* These are still errors of spelling of course, but it may be useful to sub-classify them as "phonologically related" errors, since remedial work on these may involve trying to improve perception and pronunciation of the sounds concerned.

        Classifying errors involves assigning them to linguistic systems but not necessarily to the whole linguistic systems but to the individual items which just have to be learned separately. Some of the uses of the prepositions fall into this category and errors in this area are particularly difficult to remedy as there are no general rules which can be given or induced by the learner.

        e.g. **She was angry on me.*

shows substitution of *on* for *with.* Tatiana Slama-Cazacu considers 'preposition' errors in terms of frequency and due to L1 interference such as: *thinking at* [of]; *thinking to* [of]; *desire of* [for] *peace; looked to* [at] *her; told to her mother* [+] *; my view upon* [of] *Sh.; told them with* [in] *a loud voice; happened with* [to] *her; the same opinion with* [as] *me* [mine], etc. Other 'preposition' errors are due to the influence of the previous stock acquired by the students from L2, as there is no correspondence in their mother tongue: *on* [in] *my opinion; arrived to* [at] *her parents.*[3]

Although we can classify such errors in terms such as 'preposition (incorrect substitution)' it should be remembered that such a category is something of a rag-bag of individual errors.

        In view of all the difficulties in classifying errors outlined above, it is probably best for both teachers and researchers to use a system of multiple classification with cross references. This is discussed in the recommended article by A. Etherton on EA.[4] Thus an error could be listed under individual lexical items, linguistic systems, semantic areas, etc.

Here are some examples:

(i)   **Cow is a useful animal*, could be classed under:
      (a) article usage (omission)
      (b) number system
      (c) generic reference

(ii)   **She came on last Monday*, under:
      (a) on
      (b) last
      (c) preposition (addition)
      (d) time phrases

(iii)   **She was angry on me*, under:

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[3] Cf. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, *The Psycholinguistic Approach in the Romanian-English Contrastive Analysis Project,* Bucharest, University Press, 1975, p. 5-34.

[4] Cf. A. Etherton, '*Error analysis : problems and procedures',* ELT Journal 32, 1, 1997, p.16-19.

(a) on
(b) with
(c) angry
(d) preposition substitution

By studying errors and instances of correct usage it should be possible to tell more precisely whether students are unsure of a whole system, find certain parts of a system difficult or have trouble only with a few isolated examples. Whatever the reason for these errors, the analysis shows where most remedial teaching is need and may suggest ways of approaching it. This is very often done informally from week to week and is based on the common errors thrown up by various written tasks. e.g. "I see from this week's composition that this class/group of students are still having problems with conditional clauses. I'd better do something about it."

This is often based on a general impression rather than any objective count and many teachers do not have much time to do very much else. However, for class teaching purposes, it is sometimes a good idea to check just how many students actually did make a particular error and how many used that language item correctly. This often reveals that there is only a small group of students involved and saves you from having to bore the whole class/group unnecessarily.

A survey of the errors of one group may help one to predict the likely problem areas of a future similar group, as well as may indicate learning items which will require special attention and extra practice. This is a major aim of contrastive analysis.

(iii)   Apart from problems of interpretation, classification. The analysis of errors is basically an objective procedure involving explanation the possible causes of errors. According to J.Harmer[5] it is now widely accepted that there are two distinct **causes for the errors** which most if not all students make at various stages:

➢ **L1 interference** for the students who learn English as a second language often leads to confusions which provoke errors in a learner's use of English. This can be at the level of grammar where a student's first language has a different system, or vocabulary problems such as true or apparent homonyms, semantic false friends, etc.

➢ **Developmental errors** noticed in child language development. There is a phenomenon of "over-generalisation". This is best described by J. Harmer, when a child who starts by saying: *Daddy went, They came, etc.* perfectly correctly suddenly starts say: **Daddy goed, They comed, etc.* What seems to be happening is that the child starts to "over-generalise" a new rule that has been (subconsciously) learnt, and as a result even makes mistakes with things that he or she knew before.

Foreigner language students make the same kind of "developmental" errors as well: e.g. **You didn't enjoyed.*

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[5] Cf. J. Harmer, *op.cit.*, p.112-113.

*She is more nicer than him.

Where the acquisition of grammatical rules is over-generalised and the mixed up. Errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process and T. Slama-Cazacu reinforces this idea by saying that 50% of errors are due to "the initial acquisition of a stock in the target language"[6],or as J. Harmer points out that errors are part and parcel of the students' interlanguage.

➢ **Other possible causes:**

(a) Carelessness. Some linguists on EA such as G. Abbot, P. Wingard, J. Greenwood et al.[7] outline that we should distinguish between errors and lapses.

Errors result from the learner following rules which he believes, or hopes, are correct but which are actually wrong or inadequate in some way. The learner may find it difficult or impossible to correct an error of this type as he is following the only rule he knows.

Lapses also called 'careless' mistakes result from failure to follow a known rule, usually because of haste and tiredness. For example, my own error **What I read it doesn't seems very original,* although I know the rule very well.

(b) Faulty rules given by the teacher. Teachers sometimes give students rules which are far from adequate, when students follow them they make errors similar to those caused by the "over-generalisation" as I mentioned before. Particularly common is the rule: "If the action is in the past, the verb must be in the past tense." This is obviously well intended, but it results in a form of hyper-correction and errors like:

e.g. **I saw him opened the window.*

My own view is that a knowledge of the difficulties in learning a foreign language and a consideration of the possible causes of error should lead a teacher to develop an attitude which is sympathetic but non-permissive. Sympathetic and helpful, on the one hand, because if students know that their teacher has such an attitude they should not be so worried about error avoidance. On the other hand, non-permissive, because I consider it is important part of a teacher's job to help students to eliminate errors and they cannot eliminate errors which they do not know they are making.

Furthermore, a full-scale piece of research into errors of a particular group of students is complex and time-consuming, but this should not discourage teachers from making their own less formal surveys which can be still illuminating.

Unfortunately, some researchers actually discourage teachers from doing this by referring to their effects as "mere collections of errors". As long as the

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[6] T. Slama-Cazacu, *Psiholingvistica, o ştiinţă a comunicării*, Ed. All Educational, Bucureşti, 1999, p.728-742.
[7] G. Abbot, P. Wingard et al*., op.cit.,* p.232-233.

tentative, speculative nature of all error analyses is born in mind there is, on the contrary, much to be learnt from small-scale informal surveys carried out by teachers. By describing and classifying students' errors in linguistic terms, we build up a picture of the features of the language which are causing learning problems.

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