

A RESEARCH INTO A CHINESE LEARNER'S PHONOLOGICAL, GRAMMATICAL, VOCABULARY, AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN THREE GIVEN TASKS WITH A VIEW TO ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SUBJECT'S CONTINUING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AS WELL AS IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Studies in Second language acquisition (SLA) seek to find answers to how language teaching and language learning takes place. Why learners make errors is one of such questions. 'Learners', Ellis (1994, p.47) points out 'make errors in both comprehension and production'. To account for this, error analysis emerged. This study was carried out at the University of Leeds recently and it focused on a Mandarin Chinese. Bo Lu, as he was called was studying Human Resources Management at Master's level at the University of Leeds. The research was an attempt by the writer to systematically investigate four areas (phonological, grammatical, vocabulary, and pragmatics) in a learner language where errors can possibly be identified. This was followed by an analysis of how the errors identified were accounted for in the literature. Next the paper discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the learner in the areas identified. Finally, the implication for the continuing language development of the learner and teaching in the language classroom was examined.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, learner errors, Chinese, phonological errors, grammatical errors, vocabulary errors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most significant impact of the findings of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies has been on pedagogy of teaching. The methodology of language teaching calls for the description of errors and how they can be remedied. Contrastive Analysis (CA) is one of such methods. It seeks to 'predict the errors that the learners make by identifying the linguistic differences between the L1 and the target language' (Ellis 1994, p.47). However errors transferred from L1 was found not to be the only errors. CA from then lost ground and eventually collapsed. Three other reasons usually given as responsible for this in the literature are that: 1) CA predicts difficulties that do not occur; 2) CA is impracticable to apply to the whole of two languages; and 3) CA predictions are not always confirmed.

Error Analysis (EA), the 'systematic investigation of L2 learner error' (Corder, 1967, p.24) came up to replace CA. The approach is different because it does not set out to predict errors; rather its aim is to give a complete analysis of the kinds of errors second language learners make in the process of understanding SLA. Ellis (1994, p.51) define error as 'deviation from the norms of the target language'. Errors may also be 'overtly or covertly idiosyncratic' (Corder, 1981, p.15). Overt errors are simple to identify because they are not 'well-formed' whereas covert errors are only well-formed on the surface (ibid: 14-25). A distinction

however, has been made between a mistake and an error. While errors ‘reflect gaps in learner’s knowledge’ mistakes ‘reflect occasional lapses in performance’ (Ellis 1997, p.17). Error Analysis like Contrastive Analysis has not gone unchallenged. Schachter & Celce-Murcia (1977) and Hakuta & Cancino (1977) cited in McLaughlin (1987, p.68) criticize it for different reasons. Schachter & Celce-Murcia (1977) criticize it for its inability to say exactly what kind of error a L2 learner is making; while Hakuta & Cancino (1977) are of the opinion that EA is based on questionable assumptions. Corder (1974) cited in Ellis (1994, p.52) however, criticizes it for not attending to ‘misuse of the code’. Whatever its weaknesses are, learners’ errors Corder (1981, p.10) maintains are important to teachers and researchers alike. For the former, it enables him/her to know learners progress and draw up a working plan to help; whereas for the latter, the samples of how language is learnt is what is important.

It is instructive to note that these two earlier pedagogical practices have failed to answer some questions and herein lay their shortcomings. In order to present a thorough explanation on the foreign language learning process therefore, a study on interlanguage emerges. Interlanguage (IL), a term introduced by Selinker (1972), is seen as “a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages.” (Brown, 2000, p.215). Ellis (1997, p.33) elaborating further says that IL of learners’ 1) consist of construct rules; 2) consist of learning strategies which they make use of and 3) are subject to external and internal influences. Tarone (1988) also suggests that IL variation do occur. This, she said, can be as a result of: psychological processes, social causes and language function.

Errors can be accounted for in the SLA in a number of ways. It could be developmental in which case learners are ‘attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from their limited experience’ (Richards, 1974, p.174). This stage is also ‘marked by the gradual mastery of the linguistic of expressing ideas’ (Ellis 1997, p.19). Selinker et al. (1975) cited in McLaughlin (1987, p.62) points out that IL may also be as a result of the strategies employed by the learner: transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and simplification. Selinker, earlier in 1972, reports that strategies of L2 communication could also form a part. The combination of these factors, it has been argued, is responsible for a learner’s IL.

Communication strategies, according to Bialystok (1990, p.22), ‘function in an improvisory manner because other competences are lacking’. According to Faersch & Kasper (1983) cited in Bialystok (1990, p.31), there are two types of strategies: reduction or achievement strategies. In the latter, she says, the learner attempts to solve a problem; while the former enables production unhindered because s/he has not ‘sufficiently automatized the retrieval process’ (ibid, p.32).

DATA COLLECTION

The interviewee was a Chinese and he speaks Mandarin Chinese. Bo Lu, as he is called, is 25 and he was studying Human Resources Management at Master’s level at the University of Leeds. Lu had spent more than 10 years studying English. The last six months before he came to Leeds was spent in a university in Manchester to improve his knowledge on the use of English language. A representative learner language of Lu was obtained using three different

tasks: conversation, retelling of a film and a discussion on a current issue. These were recorded, and about five minutes of each were transcribed. The transcription of the learner language can be found in Appendix 1.

ERROR ANALYSIS

Lu's errors revolved around grammar, phonology, vocabulary and pragmatics. Drawing from the error studies on Chinese language carried out by Jen (2001) and Chang (2001) the writer identified a number of errors in the learner language and plausible corrections were offered. Detail of the analysis can be found in Appendix 2 and all the example given were in reference to this.

L1 Interference

L1 interference can be said to manifest 'when an item or structure in the SL manifests some degree of difference from and some degree of similarity with the equivalent item or structure in the learners' first language' (Jackson (1987) cited in Carl, (1998, p.179). This can be positive when it is beneficial to the learning of TL or negative when it does otherwise.

Grammatical Errors

Grammar in SLA is 'the knowledge of language that the speaker possesses' (Cook, 2001, p.21) and as such grammatical analysis of each error, Selinker (1972, p.35) says, 'demands an explanation of different types of errors that correspond to different processes'.

(i) Word order error

Jen (2001, p.55) asserts that the 'order in which basic words and phrases occur [in Mandarin Chinese] is govern to a large extent by consideration of meaning rather than by grammatical function. In this study there were examples that proved Jen right. The following examples of word order error can therefore be plausibly accounted for as negative transfer.

a) Word order topic-comment

Here the notion of subject is not easily defined; for example, *the ground under the sea it can be changed* (124), *everything, I need to do by myself* (89); (see also 91 139,147 in Appendix 2).

b) Word order modification structure: In this case the order of modification is changed for example. *life independence* (90) *original country* (45) *other countries people* (127).

Phonological errors

Results obtained from this study suggest that some sounds pose some difficulty in production to the interviewee. For example Lu replaces /ʌ/ with an open /a/ e.g. /enaf/ for /enʌf/ and /bikam/ for /bikʌm/; these sounds being the closest counterparts of the vowels. He also replaces the fricatives /θ/ with /t/ e.g. /θink / for /tink /; and /ð/ with /z/ e.g. /ðæt/ for /zat/. The semi vowel /w/ was replaced with consonant /v/ e.g. /weri/ for /veri/. All these proved difficult for this learner. Chang (2001, p.311) says that the difficulty can be attributed to mother tongue influence. This study also confirms what Dulay, Burt, & Krashen (1982, p.97) observe in their study that phonological errors exhibit more of L1's influence.

Vocabulary errors

Chinese learners of English language Chang (2001, p.314) points out do not know that ‘certain functions in a sentence can only be fulfilled by words from certain classes’. This often results in error and it is a negative transfer. Other errors in this category were also revealed by what Lennon (1991, p.192) called ‘extra-sentential discourse’ and ‘extralinguistic context’.

(i) Collocation errors

They can be described as strange word combinations. E.g. *gather resources* (120), *people got damage* (126), *so I jusit cancel zat course* (12) *powerful competitive* (51).

(ii) Coinage

This is possibly because English and Chinese words, Jang (2000, p.321) says, overlap a great deal in meaning... [and] they rarely produce exact equivalent and therefore describes them as ‘chinglish’. This may also be what Pinker (1994, p.240) describes as ‘multipart words such as compounds and derivatives’. Examples are: *strong eye-shock* (116), *studying English* (58) (in contrast with academic English) *one year life* (1), *white* (for snow) *third English level* (14).

Developmental Patterns Errors

As stated earlier, developmental errors are characterized by learners’ attempt at trying to simplify language processing. Ellis (1997, p.21) observes that ‘the more accurately learners are able to use a particular feature the more likely they are to have to acquired that feature early’.

Grammatical errors

(i) Omission articles/ overuse of articles (a, an/the)

The learner under study tried to reduce the target language (TL) to a simpler system. The result is omission /overuse of the articles in English. E. g *When you are looking for job* (52) *it means I got a English* (17). The contrast between the definite article and the indefinite article is insignificant to the learner. He has not as yet come to the understanding of how to use the articles – an a , and the. Chang (2001, p.318) suggests that this problem might have been caused by the fact that Chinese language has no articles.

(ii) Dropping of –s plural and –s for possessive case

Lu often dropped –s in plural words and –s for possessive case; but in most cases he marked them correctly. E.g. *lots of interesting thing* (75), *last for ten month* (9) *master study* (20) *far from friends* (63) *academic tutors* (68). This is possibly a problem of attention which could be explained by variability in language use or it is possible that the learners’ ‘utterance are gradually developing to include lexical units that shows traces of inflection’ (Klein, 1986, p.93), albeit without any consistency.

(iii) Simplification /Overgeneralization of errors (*reg./ irreg. verbs* and *aux-be*)

These errors ranged from the omission of the past marker -ed, as in *before something happen* (134), omission of auxiliary -be in statement; e.g. *I doing some part-time job* (80) to the production of past forms of irregular verbs by merely adding-ed such as *rised* (102) and *camed* (4).

The learner seemed to know the rules for past tense formation in English but he has not yet understood the limitations of the rules. The frequent occurrences of the present tense especially in tasks 2 and 3 indicated that ‘learners oscillate between stages’ (Ellis 1997, p.24) of development.

There are also some covert errors which are only revealed by the context. For example, I applied for a language course in a University in Manchester (9), That course will last for ten month from September 2003 to June 2004 (18),

The students’ efforts which produced the most frequent over-generalization errors in this study are evident in the use of the coordinator *and*; and subordinators *because* and *when*.

Phonological errors

In English language, consonant clusters are problematic. L2 learners make English syllables fit their L1’s by inserting extra vowels to make pronunciation easy. The Chinese syllable structure only allows a single consonant before or after the vowel says Jen (2001). For example, Lu may insert a vowel –jusit- for (just) (12) or leave it out-fim- for (film) (98). In a string ended by a consonant and immediately followed by word beginning with a consonant the writer observed that a vowel is usually inserted *suchi mark* (26) *noti geti* (68). Diphthongues like /ou/ /ei/ are often rendered as monophthongue or ‘pronounced with quicker lip movement’ (Chang 2001, p.311) . E.g. /to:tal (1) for /'təu.təl/ /Kem/ (2) for /kɛɪm/.

Vocabulary errors

(i) Lexical mis-selection

The words apparently are available to the interviewee, but error in their use suggests that there is confusion of sense relation. His stores of vocabulary in the mental lexicon failed to produce ‘educative’, ‘shocking’ or ‘tiring’ so we have expressions such as: *it is very educational* (122), *it’s very shocked* (112), *coming back from class can be very tired* (73).

(ii) Error in the use of pronoun (I, we, you, they, & it)

Lu faced difficulty in the appropriate choice of pronouns, especially, in the subject position. Chang (2001, p.319) points out that ‘students sometimes choose the wrong category of pronouns in English; e.g. *for me and for each individual they* (50). The interviewee also drops them when he thinks that they will be understood from the context: *people ran away to the south and trying to survive*

(iii) Errors relating to fixed word patterns

The writer also discovered the problem with the use of fixed word patterns like: a lot of / lots of / kind of / kinds of/. Obviously, these have been taught in the class and possibly drilled. Still in the context of real production, the error persists. This suggests that ‘input does not necessary mean intake’ (Corder, 1977, p.165).

(iv) Formulaic expressions

This consists of ‘expressions which are learnt as unanalyzable wholes and employed on a particular occasion’ (Lyons (1968) cited in Ellis (1994, p.84). Hakuta (1976) cited in Ellis (ibid) makes a distinction between ‘routines and patterns’. The former refers to whole utterance learnt as chunks and are therefore analyzable while the latter is only partially

analyzable. Example of routines found are e.g. *I mean* (21), *I think* (44) and patterns such as: *that + was clause, at that moment* (7). This enabled him to say things he couldn't have said with his limited vocabulary.

OTHER FACTORS

Language variability

Within noun context it was observed that an order of variability - it is (53) is more favourable for contraction (Other examples are in lines 107,114,117, 118).

Evidence of variability in the way the learner attends to form was also found. The learner is seen at times producing correct forms and at other times, he produces the wrong form. This can be accounted for by the psychological processes. E.g.

people ran away to the North (111) correct form

people run away to the south (118) wrong form

It is also possible to account for variability in Lu's phonology based on social linguistic context. Take for example /θ/ is sometimes realized as /s/ or /t/ and /ð/ realized as /d/ and /z/.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The interviewee at first showed some level of fluency but as the complexity of the tasks increases, his language broke down and proved inadequate; especially, in 2 and 3 tasks. In other words the learners' progress could be said to be on the average when seen as a whole from one level of the task to the other. The more communicatively demanding the task becomes the more the learner relied heavily on strategies. Sometimes he produced expressions that are amusing:

earth quake coming very fast and gone very fast

piss- piss, uhm-uhm, a shake and then city is disappear

At other times his attempt at self-correction resulted in unclear utterance. In an attempt to explain the meaning of 'third level English', he said:

so so it means er I have er a English er third English. No. No.
I mean well- I mean when we go to master course to study we
have to had a- a English like a -you know-that is a English er
ski-er English testing system you have scoreti suchi mark
(lines 15, 16 and 17 appendix 1)

It is obvious that the interviewee has limited vocabulary. In production the interviewee struggled to express himself through his limited command of vocabulary which in turn resulted in his non target-like performance; e.g. *ice becomes water* (103) for melted; *all Canadas becomes white-* (111) for covered in snow. His vocabulary was possibly pushed to the hilt when I used the phrase head of government. All attempts by the learner at trying to explain the meaning yielded no result.

T Let us assume that you were the head of government at the time the tsunami disaster happened ehm how would you have responded to it?

B I... you mean- I am- If 'am a member?

- T You are the head of government. You head your government. How would you have responded to it? Would you have done something different?
- B ehm... I am not too sure about this question.
- T Let's say that you are the one that's ruling the country at that moment it happened- the Tsunami disaster-how would you have responded to the Tsunami disaster.
- B Does the Tsunami destroyed my country or...?
- T Thank you.

Drawing from Givon (1979) studies cited in Mitchell & Myles (1998, p.138), the writer observed 1) loose conjunction and 2) slow rate of delivery under several contours in 2 and 3 tasks. Lu's strength lies in his ability to sustain general conversation. The interviewee also showed a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confidence use of communicative strategies such as paraphrasing and circumlocution e.g the *ground under the sea* (for sea floor) (See also for example lines 27, 37 Appendix 1)

From my discussions so far, it would seem that the interviewee's problems had to do with phonology, grammar and especially vocabulary. The lack of vocabulary seems to have been responsible for his use of communicative strategies. Lu had obviously learned English in high school and the writer could see a lot of patterns of grammar which could only have been introduced to him in school. The problem however was that Lu had not mastered them. As Skehan, (1998, p.53) rightly observes, 'these underlined rules [are often] the basis for generalization and transfer' done by learners. The writer also suspected that Lu's vocabulary problem may be a result of either impoverished input or limited exposure to words in his context. Lu sometimes showed that he had the morphological knowledge of the words but when it comes to the syntactic and semantic knowledge he was faced with problems. In the area of pronunciation, Seidhlofer's (2001, p.61) observation is crucial in understanding the interviewee's problem, that is, the 'demands [pronunciation] made upon an individual by language is considerable'. Given all these, what would the writer have the learner do for his language development?

Implication for the Subject's Continuing Language Development

Firstly, during his period of stay in the UK, Lu could learn at a faster pace within such an immersion environment. Lu has confidence and he can take risks; these are two of the ways of learning a language. Secondly for him to produce well-formed sentences he would benefit from Cook's (2001, p.39) advice of raising his consciousness, being aware of language, being sensitized to language and also focusing on form. Finally the learner would benefit from being made aware of different levels and shades of meanings through word associations.

Implication for the Classroom

From experience, teachers know that no matter how much they drilled the students in the language class, error will still surface. Two implications for the classroom therefore emerge from this study: The first is that teachers need to provide regular feedback to the students. Hendrickson (1981, p.44) points out that '...most of us learn from our mistakes when we receive periodic, supportive feedback' Still, Carl (1998, p.237) re-emphasizes the importance of feedback when he says 'the result [of feedback] will be to induce learners to revise their mental representation of the rule so that this type of error do not occur'.

Secondly, it is also possible to teach explicit knowledge through conscious raising tasks in phonology, grammar and vocabulary to aid the students. Ellis (1992) writing on consciousness-raising tasks has this to say:

These tasks are assisted by the operations of noticing and comparing, which are considered necessary for acquisition to take place, and that the input can become implicit knowledge when the operation of integrating is added (p.232)

CONCLUSION

Error is inevitable and as Hendrickson (1981) rightly observes ‘all of us make mistakes when we learn any new skill’ (p.44). Considering the learner problems in the area of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, I would suggest that in the teaching of the language, all the areas should be given equal attention; and as Cook (2001) rightly suggests, there is need for teachers to ‘balance grammar against language function, vocabulary and classroom interaction’ (p.38).

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