



## Theoretical Underpinnings and Pedagogical Implications of EFL Learners' Errors

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### Abstract :

*The Error analysis is a crucial area of applied linguistics as well as second and foreign language acquisition. It is founded on the premise that errors aren't always negative; rather, they're important aspects and features of the language-learning process, and they can provide information about the complicated processes of language development. However, this theory was criticized due to many reasons. The purpose of the current paper is twofold. First, it aims at reviewing the Error Analysis theory theoretical*

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*foundations, the types of error analysis, learners' errors description and identification of their causes. Moreover, we will find out the limitations of this theory and its pedagogical implications. The second purpose has to do with revealing the fact that despite the criticism that this theory has received, it still plays a fundamental role in the foreign language teaching and learning.*

*Key words: error analysis; language teaching; language learning; pedagogy; English as a foreign language.*

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✓ pedagogy;  
✓ English as a foreign language

## **1. Introduction**

Applied Linguistics is, generally, thought to be concerned with solving problems related to language. In this vein, Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2002, p.1) declare: “Applied Linguistics is using what we know about (a) language, (b) how it is learned, and (c) how it is used, in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problems in the real world”. As a discipline of study it incorporates many branches such as Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis which pointed out that the EFL language is systematic and that learner errors are not random mistakes but evidence of rule-governed behavior (Corder 1978; Selinker 1972).

Contrastive analysis as propounded by Robert Lado in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957) has been concerned with “the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of language in

order to determine both differences and similarities between them” (Fisiak,1981,p.1). If the two languages and cultures are similar, learning difficulties will not be expected, where they are different, then learning difficulties are to be expected, and the greater the difference, the greater the degree of expected difficulty (Al-khresheh, 2013). However, CA was highly criticized because it proved that the process of L2 acquisition is not sufficiently described by the characterization of errors that do not only arise from interference. Moreover, the structural differences between the two languages are not sufficient to predict the occurrence of errors in L2 acquisition. Even more confusingly, some uniform errors were made by learners irrespective of their L1. It thus became clear that CA could not predict learning difficulties, and was only useful in the retrospective explanation of errors. These developments, along with the decline of the behaviorist and structuralist paradigms considerably weakened the appeal of CA.

These criticisms led, in fact, to the emergence of error analysis (EA hereinafter) that was first established by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late of 1970s and became a very popular approach for describing L2 errors. Corder who is the father of this theory first indicated it in his article **"The significance of**

**learner errors" in 1967** when he mentioned that L2 errors are interesting because they can reflect some of the underlying linguistic rules. His theory came as a reaction or a result of the severe criticisms which CA received. Hence, a shift of focus from potential errors to the actual committed ones is needed.

EA has been defined by James (1998, p.1) as "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language". Schaumann and Stenson (1976, p. 4) state: "the task of EA is to explain and analyze why one aspect of the target grammar has not been adequately acquired whilst a second is learnt without difficulty"

The current paper attempts to shed light on Error analysis, its theoretical assumptions, its types, and its steps, the sources of errors and finally its limitations and its pedagogical implications.

## **2. Theoretical underpinnings**

Error Analysis, as a branch of Applied Linguistics, emerged in the sixties, as a reaction to Contrastive Analysis Theory which considered native language interference as the major source of errors in second language learning, to reveal that learner errors were not only because of the learner's native language but also they reflected some universal strategies (Erdogan 2005). EA has challenged the CA

on the assumption that FL/L2 learners' errors cannot only be caused by inter-lingual interference from the L1, but they might also be caused due to intra-lingual interference from the target language itself. Accordingly, EA serves two main purposes: the first one is "to provide data from which interferences about the nature of the language learning process can be made". The second one "indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the TL students have most difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to communicate" (Dulay *et al.* 1982, p.138).

### **3. Types of error analysis**

According to Keshavarz (2003, 2006), the field of error analysis is divided into two branches:

a) **Theoretical Analysis of Errors:** In this type, analysts try to pinpoint the problems and issues related to language learning and shed light on the underlying structures employed in the process of language learning. They also look for the reasons of the errors in the process of learning.

b) **Applied Error Analysis:** In this type, analysts try to design material and other remedial courses, techniques and methodologies

for resolving those problems that are highlighted by the theoretical analysis of the errors.

#### **4. STEPS FOR ERROR ANALYSIS**

EA is carried out in four consecutive stages as stated by Ellis (1994, p. 48). These stages are as:

##### **4.1. Collection of a Sample of Learner Language**

Researchers are different from each other in their choice of data collection methods. According to this stage, learners' errors are influenced by a group of important factors. Ellis (1994, p. 49) asserts that these factors are significant in "collecting a well-defined sample of learner language so that clear statements can be made regarding what kinds of errors the learners produce and under what conditions".

##### **4.2. Identification of Errors**

a) Distinguishing between an error and a mistake: There are certain ways to distinguish between an error and a mistake.

- **Error:** It is associated with checking the consistency of the L2 learner's performance.  
if he/she always uses it wrongly, then it is an error.

- **Mistake:** If a learner sometimes uses the correct form of a certain structure or rule and later on uses the wrong one and can be self-corrected.

**b)** The second way is associated with asking an L2 learner to correct his/her deviant utterance. In case that he/she is unable to, the deviations are errors, and where he/she is successful, they are definitely mistakes. Identification of an error is different from explaining what an error is.

**c) Corder's model:** because Identification of an error is different from explaining what an error is, Corder (1981) has provided a common model for identifying errors in the utterances of L2/FL learners. According to his model "every sentence is to be regarded as **idiosyncratic** until shown to be otherwise" (p.21). His model provides a good distinction: 1) *Overt errors*, and 2) *Covert errors*.

If a sentence is ill-formed in terms of TL rules, it has been regarded as '***overtly idiosyncratic***' whilst the sentence that is superficially well-formed but does not mean what the learner intends to mean has been regarded as '***covertly idiosyncratic***'.

**d) Interpretation of learners' utterances.** Such an interpretation might reveal the main differences between '***what***

*a learner wants to say*' and *'what a learner has said'*. Corder's model shows that literal translation can be a probable indicator of the FL learners' errors which might be attributed to interference from their own MT.

### **4.3. Description of Errors**

According to Ellis (1994), this stage of EA takes place after the identification step. No description can be made without identifying the errors. Such a description of FL learners' errors is a prerequisite for a good explanation of errors. Particularly, description of errors helps in serving three major purposes. These purposes can be summarized as follows:

- Initially, would be to instinctively expound all that is unstated, so as to substantiate an individual's instinct.
- The second purpose can be as a prerequisite for counting learners' errors.
- A third purpose is to create categories and subcategories for errors which can help in the process of developing a comprehensive taxonomy of L2 errors.

### **4. 4. Explanation of Errors**

The ultimate objective of EA theory is explanation of errors. Hence, this stage is considered the most important for EA research. In order to reach to some effective remedial measures, Sanal (2007) claims that the analyst should be aware of the mechanism that triggers each type of error.

Explaining the nature of errors is a fundamental issue in SLA. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005.p, 62) declare: "explaining errors involves determining their sources in order to account for why they were made".

## **5. The sources of errors**

There are different reasons behind errors committed by the learners. One reason can be the insufficient material for language teaching or the lack of teachers' adequacy in language teaching. Some other causes of error analysis given by the researchers are listed below (James, 1998; Kashavarz, 2003, 2006; Şanal, 2007):

### **5. 1. Inter-lingual Transfer**

Inter-lingual errors result from the transfer of the elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language.

#### **a) Transfer of Phonological Elements of the Mother Tongue:**

\* /sukuul / instead of /skuul/

#### **b) Transfer of Morphological Elements:**

- \* Three clever student instead of three clever students

### **c) Transfer of Grammatical Elements**

- \* I am going to university at 8 o'clock every day.

### **d) Transfer of Lexico-semantic Elements:**

- \*He had a quarrel with his woman..

## **5.2. Intra-lingual Transfer**

The learner applies inappropriately one rule in the target Language.

### **a) Overgeneralization**

- \* I don't know how did they find my address. (Subject –Verb inversion)

### **b) Ignorance of Rule Restriction**

The learner doesn't know the restriction and exceptions of a general rule in English.

- \*Teachers always give us good advices.

### **c) False Analogy**

It refers to the use of certain elements in inappropriate contexts through analogy.

- \*I think she should remain home and grow up her child.

## **5. 3. Language - Learning Strategies:**

It refers to strategies used by the learners in dealing with the target language:

- a) Overgeneralization
- b) Transfer of rules from the mother tongue
- c) Simplification: in this strategy learner tries to simplify the rules of the target language.

\* I am student English language.

## **5. 4- Communication Strategy:**

It is used when the learner is forced to express himself with the limited linguistic resources.

### **1- Paraphrase:**

\* Air-ball" (which the learner makes it himself) instead of "balloon"

### **2- Borrowing:**

\* Don't be tired. Instead of don't work hard. (The learner translates word for word from the native language.)

### **3- Appeal for Assistance:**

\*What is this? What called? (The learner asks for the correct term)

### **4- Mime:**

Clapping his hands instead of applause (Using nonverbal action in place of lexical items)

### **5- Avoidance:**

#### **a. Lexical Avoidance:**

I lost my road.

You lost your road?

Uh...I lost. I lost. I got lost.

(The learner tries to avoid the lexical item 'road', not being able to come up with the word 'way' at that point)

### **b. Syntactic Avoidance:**

He finished his homework; he went to bed. (Instead of "Having finished his homework, he went to bed.¶)

### **6- Prefabricated Patterns:**

The learner memorizes certain stock phrases or sentences:

- How much does it cost?

### **7- Language Switch:**

Finally, when all the strategies fail, learners may resort to language switch. That is, they may simply use their native language whether the hearer knows it or not.

## **2.5. Error Correction and Attitudes towards Errors**

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant change in foreign language methodologies and teaching materials. Similarly, there has been a significant change of attitude towards students' errors. In this regard, Gass (2003) asserts: "allowing a natural process

to occur and 'interrupting' it has a greater likelihood of bringing the error to a learner's attention" (p. 232). Furthermore, Research has shown that the type of input that allows corrective feedback to occur after an error has been made is more meaningful than input that attempts to prevent an error from occurring (Tomasello & Herron, 1988). Thus, many language educators today propose that foreign language teachers should expect many errors from their students, and should accept those errors as a natural phenomenon integral to the process of learning a second language. Language teachers need to be armed with some theoretical foundations and be aware of what they are doing in the classroom. Henrickson (1978) lists the five fundamental questions that a teacher confronts in the classroom: **1) Should errors be corrected? 2) If so, when should errors be corrected? 3) Which learner errors should be corrected? 4) How should learner errors be corrected? 5) Who should correct learner errors?** And he predicts that if error correction is done according to the principles described in the literature related to language teaching and learning it will be highly effective.

## **2.7. Ways of Correction:**

Edge (1990) lists three major ways of correction that can be used in the classroom:

**a. Self-correction:**

After learner's recognition of his/her errors, s/he should be able to correct him/herself

**b. Peer correction:**

In this way, the learners can be corrected by one of his peers who his designated by the teacher. The peer correction is advantageous because it encourages cooperation among the learners, and provides the teacher with a lot of information about the learners' competencies and abilities.

**c. Teacher correction:**

In case no one can correct, the teacher can re-explain the problematic item of language, especially if he/she sees that the majority of the learners have the same problem. After correction the teacher has to ask the learner who originally made the error or mistake to give the correct response.

## **6. Implications of error analysis**

Brown (1994) argues that EA has great value in classroom research because insights gained from the study of learners' errors can provide valuable information for devising appropriate materials and effective teaching techniques as well as constructing tests suitable for different groups of learners at various stages of second-

language development. Accordingly, learners' errors have always been important to teachers, syllabus designers, and test developers. This section offers some of the pedagogical implications of error analysis (Corder, 1974)

### **6.1. Implications for EFL Teachers.**

Learners' errors identification and classification by classroom teachers can help them deal with their learners' needs, and devise appropriate materials and teaching techniques .i.e., they will be able to infer the nature of the learner's knowledge of the target language at a given stage in his/her learning career and discover what he/she still has to learn. An error-based course can enable the teacher to put more emphasis on those areas where the error frequency is higher (Corder, 1974).

Corder claims that errors can also provide the feedback that informs the teacher about the effectiveness of his/her teaching materials and his/her teaching techniques, and show him/her what parts of the syllabus he/she has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him/her to decide whether he/she can move on to the next item in the syllabus or whether he/she must devote more time and effort to the item, he/she has been teaching.

## **6.2. Implications for Syllabus Designers.**

Errors are significant to syllabus designers to see what items are important to be included in the syllabus and what items are redundant and should be excluded. An error-based analysis can provide reliable results upon which remedial materials can be constructed. In other words, analysis of second language learners' errors can help to identify the learners' linguistic difficulties and needs at a particular stage of language learning (Brown, 1994). This can serve as a basis for remedial courses and programs of re-teaching. Error analysis can also be used as a means for both assessing the student's learning in general, and the degree of overlap between the learner's learning syllabus and that of the teachers.

## **6.3. Implications for Test Developers.**

It is believed that teaching and testing do, indeed, go hand in hand and the discussion of the pedagogical implications of error analysis would not be complete without a brief note on testing. Thus, as Brown (1994) confirms, testing should be based on what has been taught and the test developers should be familiar with students' difficulties and errors. Test constructors can concentrate on parts of the teaching materials which are proved by error analysis to be more difficult for the students.

## **7. Error analysis limitations**

A large number of papers on error analysis were published. However, it lost its attention and enthusiasm gradually due to the criticisms that were made against error analysis as approach and as a method as well.

Jiang (2009, p. 118) reveals : "during the 1970s, EA was highly criticized in that it only focused on one aspect of what a learner produces of the L2/FL, namely, the errors". In the same vein, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991); Brown (2000); Gass and Selinker, (2001) also criticized error analysis because, in their view, it was unable to get the complete and right picture of the learner's competence which needs an investigation into non-errors as well.

Error analysis was beset, at the beginning, with methodological problems such as the difficulty of reliably determining what kind of error a learner is making and also the difficulty of identifying whether a learner does a mistake from overgeneralization or L1 transfer. Another worth noting criticism is its inability to account for learner's use of communicative strategies such as avoidance, in which learners simply do not use a form with which they are uncomfortable. Hence, these avoided structures cannot be studied

because the main focus of this approach is on errors (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977).

For these reasons, although error analysis is still used to investigate specific questions in SLA, it is considered less favorite by the SLA researchers.

## **8. Conclusion:**

Despite the limitations of EA, it still plays a crucial role in investigating, identifying and describing FL learners' errors. Pedagogically speaking, the EFL teachers, syllabus designers and test developers should be always aware of and also be able to deal effectively and positively with types and sources of the students' errors and, if necessary, develop their own methods of identifying and dealing appropriately with the students' errors. They should also be aware of areas of differences and similarities between the mother tongue L1 and the foreign language L2 because referring to L1 in the first stages of language learning is vital and unavoidable. Moreover, learners' awareness of cross-linguistic differences should be raised because this might be of great assistance with certain difficulties in the target language learning.

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