

Error analysis and its' implications in communicative English language teaching

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Abstract

Error Analysis involves identifying incorrect language forms produced both in speaking and writing. In general error analysis is valuable for identifying strategies which learners use in language learning, examining the causes of learner's errors, obtaining information on common difficulties in language learning, and preparing teaching materials and methods. Furthermore, it is increasing being use in lesson and curriculum planning by educators. Suggestions based on research studies in writing, and speaking will be explored to confirm the positive implications on communicative language teaching.

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Introduction

As we are approaching the year 2015, ASEAN nations are moving top gear in their preparation towards the establishment of the ASEAN community. Language is considered to be the key that opens the door to all areas of collaboration. Despite their own distinctive languages and dialects, a common language for communicative use is English. English is the language which is widely accepted, taught in schools and used as the governmental language in many ASEAN nations. For countries like Thailand in which the National language is not English, equipping the people with effective communicative language skills are among the country's top priority. Schools and universities are now investing great efforts in providing efficient and effective language training.

Training people to be able to communicate well is not an easy task to teach since it is an active skill which involves ones' ability to convey meaning and being able to make oneself understood. Learning the active skills does not only involve the mastery of the knowledge of a language in the area of lexical, grammar and phonology as in the spoken skill, it also. Incorporate the ability to use the knowledge in real communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). In order to communicate naturally and successfully the language learner needs to engage in intensive language practice overtime to yield satisfying results.

Gaining communicative competence is the ultimate goal that every language learner strives to achieve. Achieving communicative competence involves a balance between fluency and accuracy. That is, the language learner must have the knowledge of both how to use the language correctly and appropriately. To foster students communicative ability, in recent years many educational institutions in Asia are swinging to a more fluency focused teaching. As a result of this, many educators are neglecting the grammar-based curriculum. A glaring example of this occurred in 1994 when the Japanese English Education system was reformed and geared towards the fluency side. Ano (2005)'s observations of Japanese Senior High School English classes revealed that even though students are more fluent in their communication, they are less accurate in their grammar usage. Takashima (2000) as cited in Ano (2005) suggested that the reason behind this is that teachers put too

much emphasis on forcing students to engage in fluency activities while not paying enough attention on grammatical accuracy. Studies in SLA recently have proposed that communicative competence can be achieved through fluency and accuracy hand in hand. This concept is reinforced in Doughty and Williams (1998) as cited in Ano (2005) mentioning that “the aim of focus-on-form studies is to determine how learner approximation to the target can be improved through instruction that draws attention to form but is not isolated from communication”. Hence, grammar instruction from time to time is also suggested to be taught explicitly in context with attention and care since it is one of the means that facilitate students to express themselves effectively (Hu, 2006 as cited in Bootchuy, 2008). Beretta (1989) as cited in Ano (2005) supports this idea by claiming that grammar can be acquired while the focus is on meaning therefore teachers should focus the learners on form while carrying out communicative activities.

This article will discuss the nature and type of *Error* as well the benefits of *Error Analysis* in communicative English language teaching.

What is Error?

Over the years, linguists have devised different definitions to the term error. According to Johansson (1975) an error occurs when “a native speaker hesitates about the acceptability of word or construction when it should be considered as error”. Klassen (1995) as cited in Arakkitsakul (2008) refers to error as “a form or structure that a native speaker deemed unacceptable because of its inappropriate use”. On the contrary, Richard and Platt(1997) also cited in Arakkitsakul (2008) characterize error as the wrong use of a language item such word item, grammar in spoken or written production of a foreign language learner. Moreover, error can be seen as the formation of students’ bad habits when viewed from contrastive analysis perspective. Klassen (1995) further proposed that errors occur naturally and is the result of L1 interference which often occurs at the early stages of the transitional period of learning the target language.

Despite the different definitions of error proposed by different scholars, we can conclude that errors are grammatically incorrect forms as determined by the native speaker to be unacceptable.

In the next section, we will discuss how errors are classified and its' implication in language teaching

Classification of Errors (types of error)

Richard and Platt (1997) as cited in Arakkitsakul (2008) classified errors into sets of linguistic items for EFL writing error analysis. Errors in written EFL work are often classified into 1. Grammar or structure errors 2. Lexical errors 3. Style errors. Nevertheless in most error analysis studies, grammatical errors are usually focused on since researchers believe that L1 transfer is the main cause for this type of error. In general errors are commonly classified into one of the three main categories according to its' anticipated cause. They are: interlanguage errors, intralingual errors and developmental errors (Richards, 1971: 173-181 as cited in Bootchuy 2008). Interlanguage errors are “errors which are caused by the interference of the learner’s mother tongue.” On the other hand, intralingual errors refer to “errors which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning.” This type of error can further be subdivided into three types which are: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, and incomplete application of rules. While developmental errors refer to “errors which appear because the learners try to build up hypotheses about the English language from his or her limited experiences of it in the classroom or textbook. Developmental errors often occur at the initial stages of language learning and are positively viewed as a channel towards improvement. Dulay (1982) mentioned that error classification yield benefits to teachers by allowing them to record data, observe progress and plan remedial lessons.

In the following section, the term error analysis and its' usefulness will be discussed in the context of communicative English instruction.

What is error analysis and who will benefit from it?

Error analysis is the conduct of examining language data for faults or incorrectness of grammar usage mostly for the purpose of providing corrective feedback or for remedial instructions. Ellis (1985) as cited in Arrakkitsakul (2008: 19) stated that error analysis involves the following stages: 1. collection of student's samples 2. Error identification of samples 3. Error classification according to the source of error 4. Improvement of teaching material and method to minimize error and difficulty in language learning.

Data on error analysis is becoming increasingly valuable for stakeholders as well as teachers in curriculum and material planning. Richards et al., (1996:127) proposed that error analysis give aid to the teaching field in the following areas: 1. Use for identifying strategies which learners use in language learning 2. Use for examining the causes of learner's errors, obtaining information on common difficulties in language learning 3. Use for preparing teaching materials and methods. Correspondingly, Michaelides, (1990:30) affirms that the systematic analysis of student's errors can be of great value to many parties concerned including teachers, students and the researchers. He further explains that for teachers it can offer clear and reliable picture of his students' knowledge of the target language. Students will benefit from error analysis in terms of corrective feedback that they will receive; eventually helping them to become aware of their errors and avoid incorrect usage.

On the other hand, researchers will be interested in errors because errors are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language. As a result, research findings will benefit the education system as whole (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, (1974). Richards and Sampson, (1974:15) supported that, "At the classroom level, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determine priorities for future effort." Corder, (1974) viewed error analysis as having two objects: one theoretical and another being applied. The theoretical object serves to explain what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language; while the applied object enable the learner to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes.

In summary, Error analysis is valuable in the language learning process since it provide teachers with insights as to where and how the error occur and most importantly understand the students' learning problems. Beneficial information gained from error analysis is very helpful for educators in planning their future lessons as well as aid in the selection of appropriate materials and methods of teaching.

In the following sections, we will explore the application of error analysis in communicative writing and speaking classes.

Error Analysis in written EFL class

Research studies on error analysis in the English written genre have widely been conducted worldwide throughout the years. Several studies representing different student population ranging from secondary school, undergraduate as well as the postgraduate level will be discussed.

Jimenez (1996)'s observation on errors in the use of English prepositions of 290 essays written by third year EFL Spanish state secondary schools suggested that English prepositions are the area in which students have the most difficulty in. Preposition errors are very common; however, they are of different types. The researcher concludes that though prepositions errors do not seriously hinder communication, accuracy is still an important component in language as Norrish (1980: 111) remarks, "we cannot pretend that accuracy is totally unimportant." Additionally, Jimenez maintains that "it is realistic to be aware of the social expectation that a speaker should be not only fluent but accurate, and that in any case official examinations exist in classroom contexts". In other words, the students will be judged not only by their fluency but also by their accuracy in their language assessments.

Sattayatham & Honsa, (2007) did a study which focuses on error analysis of first year medical students from the four medical schools at Mahidol University. A total of 237 enrolled students were asked to translate sentences from Thai into English, translate a paragraph from Thai into English, and write an opinion paragraph in English on medical ethics. Data collected were analyzed from the sentence-level translation, paragraph level translation, and opinion paragraph writing to find the most frequent errors produced by using the distribution of frequency. Findings illustrated that the most frequent errors were on the syntactic and lexical levels with inadequate lexical and syntactic knowledge leading to the errors of overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, omission, and building of false concepts. The researchers insisted that results will be useful in the area of material development, especially in the provision of materials in the Language Learning Centre.

Bennui (2008) conducted a study on paragraph writing of 28 third-year English-minor Thai students at Thaksin University. Even though results revealed that there is L1 interference at the level of words, sentences and discourse, the causes of each type are of different nature. Bennui explained that the lexical interference takes the form of literal translation of Thai words into English whereas the interference at the sentence level involves structural borrowing from Thai language such as word order, subject-verb agreement and noun determiners. (Bennui, 2008, p.88).

Wee et al. (2010) attempted to identify and determine the type and frequency of verb-form errors in EAP writing of second year learners at a public Malaysian University Diploma Programme. For data analysis the researchers examined participant's 350-words discursive essays. Among the four category types: omission, addition, misformation and ordering, findings revealed that the subjects made the most number of errors in the omission verb-forms in the area of the third person singular verb (-s/-es/-ies), particularly occurring when students tried to make the verb agree with the singular subject or plural subject by dropping the -s inflection from the third person singular verb or making the verb plural by adding the -s inflection, respectively. Moreover, the rates of recurrence of errors for addition and misformation categories were somewhat identical while verb-form errors of ordering

were reported to be the least occurring. The copula “be” verb was a major problematic area for participants, this is reflected in their over-generalization of the verb, and thus, either omitting the “be” verb or used it incorrectly. Errors in writing affect the comprehensibility of the work; as a result findings from this research will help teachers to become aware of the problems concerning students’ verb-form errors and find ways to equip them with the basics of producing error-free writing.

Error Analysis in spoken EFL class

Only a limited number of research studies on error analysis of communicative spoken English were conducted. The nature of speech may account for the complicatedness of examining linguistic accuracy of spoken language. Beattie (1983, p.33) affirms that “spontaneous speech is unlike written text, in which it contains many mistakes, sentences are usually brief” (cited in Halliday, 1985, p.76). Brown (2003) as cited in Ting et al (2010) stresses the incongruity of requiring students to use complete sentences when they speak and points out why the notion of utterances rather than sentences are used for describing spoken discourse. He further went on to highlight that the grammar of spoken colloquial English does not impose the use of complete sentences, making utterances such as “Your family?” and “Ya wanna come along?” being appropriate. Regardless of the fact that some fine-tunings needs to be made in studies of grammatical errors of the spoken language, existing research does serve the pedagogic purpose of showing educators what learners have learned and what they have not yet mastered in spoken English. Furthermore, such studies would also contribute to literature on linguistic properties of spoken language for materials development.

Early in the seventies, co-researchers Politzer and Ramirez had carried a research concerning error analysis of the spoken English comparing bilingual and monolingual Mexican-American students. The objectives of the study were to identify the causes of spoken errors as well as to examine bilingual and monolingual students' errors. Data was collected thorough the mean of subject interviews The main findings of the study showed that the causes of deviations from Standard English include the expected interference of Spanish as well as the improper application of Standard English rules and the influence of nonstandard English dialects. The comparison between children enrolling in bilingual and monolingual school revealed that there is no significant difference between the two groups with respect to frequency of deviations from Standard English (Politzer and Ramirez 1973)

Ano (2003) had conducted a research study to investigate the relationship between fluency and accuracy in spoken English of 58 Japanese high school students. Spoken data were recorded and transcribed. The data are then classified into one of the five factors concerning fluency and into the twenty – two grammatical error categories. Results revealed that the three most occurring grammatical errors were tense, article and preposition. Many instances during the study illustrated that learners use unnecessary prepositions as a result of learning the English language as chunks or set phrases. Errors on function words were found to be more common than content words; this may have resulted from learners paying attention to content only when they speak English. Fossilization can be seen as the primary cause of this error. To avoid this phenomenon, form focus instruction is suggested for classroom activities and teachers should encourage students to pay attention to the correct grammatical form when performing communicative activities.

Another interesting study on spoken grammatical accuracy was done with Malaysian university Students in 2009 by Ting et. al. The aim of the study was to determine the types of errors and the changes in grammatical accuracy of English for Social Purpose communicative course. Spoken data were obtained and transcribed from 42 less English proficient students' simulated oral interactions involving in five role play situations during the 14 week duration of the course. A close examination in error analysis showed that the five common errors produced by the participants are preposition, question, article, plural form of nouns, subject-verb agreement and tense respectively. Based on a more broaden categorization by Dulay, Burt and Krashen's surface structure taxonomy (1982), data from the study revealed that students mainly modify the target form through misinformation and omission. On the contrary, a less frequent rate of additional of elements or misordering was being reported. When observed overtime, findings suggest an improvement in grammatical accuracy in the students' spoken English towards the end of the course.

Conclusion

Equipping students with communicative competence is the final goal in which all teachers strive to produce. To reach this goal, teachers must ensure that students can make themselves understood and are able to convey the information that they want to send correctly. During the years, many researches have proven that efforts put in error analysis had paid off. Students are able to see their errors and make corrections, teachers can use the information to design remedial materials and plan lesson, and educators and researchers benefit in curriculum planning. Hand in hand, the collaborative effort will benefit the whole education system.

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