Error analysis and the EFL classroom teaching

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Abstract: This paper makes a study of error analysis and its implementation in the EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom teaching. It starts by giving a systematic review of the concepts and theories concerning EA (Error Analysis), the various reasons causing errors are comprehensively explored. The author proposes that teachers should employ different and flexible error treatment strategies in accordance with the teaching objectives, students' linguistic competence, their affective factors and the effectiveness of the error correction.

Key words: error analysis; contrastive analysis; interlanguage; EFL classroom teaching

1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, error correction has become one of the important teaching processes. But actually, few teachers know a lot about error analysis and some related theories. They often take so negative attitudes toward errors that they could not tolerate any errors and tend to correct them as soon as they could find any. As a result, although they think they have been working hard enough and spend much time and energy working on error correction, their effort is not effective and the students do not believe they have benefited a lot. On the contrary, the students often feel upset, for they have found that there is a great gap between themselves and their teachers in dealing with errors and understanding of error correction. So we find it necessary to have a theoretical foundation about error analysis. In the next section, the development of the theory—error analysis would be briefly reviewed.

2. Theoretical development of error analysis

2.1 Contrastive analysis

In the 1950s, American linguist Robert Lado began to study errors systematically and developed theories about errors—contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system and that a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which are problems and which are not. Deeply rooted in behaviorism and structuralism, they held that human language learning was to change old habits and to build new habits. Errors occur when learners could not respond correctly to a particular stimulus in the second language. Since an error may serve as a negative stimulus which reinforces "bad habits", it should not be allowed to occur. So, in the classroom teaching, they placed more emphasis on mechanical pattern drills and attempted to correct any errors or mistakes wherever there were.

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2.2 Interlanguage and its features

The weaknesses of contrastive analysis are that it overemphasized the interference of the outer environment of language study, but the language learners themselves are totally neglected. While interlanguage intended to explore learning strategies based on the learners' errors, and it has become the basis of error analysis.

What is interlanguage? It is a term that Selinker (1972) adopted from "interlingual". It refers to the separateness of a second language learners' system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language learners. A number of terms have been coined to describe the perspective which stressed the legitimacy of learners' second language system. Corder (1971) used the term "idiosyncratic dialect" or "language learners' language" (1978), Nemser (1971) called it "approximate system". While each of these designations emphasizes a particular notion, they share the concept that second language learners are forming their own self-contained independent linguistic systems. This is neither the system of the native language nor the system of the target language, but falls between the two. The most important feature of interlanguage is that it has its own legitimate system where learners are no longer looked on as producers of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes, but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition creatively acting upon their linguistic environment. The second feature is that this system is dynamic and it is based on the best attempt of learners to produce order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. Finally, it is a linguistic system which reflects the psychological process of learning and the psychological process of foreign language learning.

3. Error analysis and the procedures

In order to analyze learners' errors in a proper perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between "mistake" and "error". According to Brown (2000), a "mistake" refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. While an "error" is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. This recognition process is followed by the error description process. We compare learners' sentences with the correct sentences in target language, and find the errors. Then we come to the next step—explanation stage, finding the sources of errors.

The beginning stages of learning a second language are characterized by a good deal of interlingual transfer from the native language. In the early stages, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which the learner can draw. These kinds of errors can be found in all aspects of language learning.

Intralingual transfer (within the target language itself) is also a major factor. At an intermediate level, learners' previous experience and existing subsumes begin to influence structures within the target language itself. Most of time, negative intralingual transfer or overgeneralization has occurred, and these kinds of errors are called developmental errors. We have found that overgeneralization makes it significant for us to study the psychological process of language learners.

Cultural interference can cause either linguistic errors or inappropriateness in the context. In addition, it sometimes hinders communication, so it should be taken seriously. For example, an American lady said to a Chinese lady "what a beautiful dress!" Instead of saying: "Thank you, I'm glad to hear that", her reply "No, no." In accordance with Chinese way of receiving compliment will make the American lady feel at loss. Thus language learning is also the culture learning. Otherwise, we cannot get a good understanding of the language.

In some occasions, due to their insufficient linguistic knowledge, learners have to express themselves with

the help of communicative strategies. The most frequently used communicative strategies are avoidance, language switch and prefabricated patterns. Factually communicative strategies do help learners a lot in expressing their ideas and the communicative teaching approach need these strategies as well. On the other hand, teachers need to pay more attention to the errors occurred, otherwise they will backfire.

4. Error treatment

Error treatment is a very complicated and thorny problem. As language teachers, we need to be armed with some theoretical foundations and be aware of what we are doing in the classroom. Here principles of optimal affective and cognitive feedback, of reinforcement theory, and of communicative language teaching all combine to form these theoretical foundations. With these theories in mind, we can judge in the classroom whether we will treat or ignore the errors, when and how to correct them.

4.1 What kinds of errors should be corrected?

Learners' errors are usually classified in different categories. Burt (1975) made a distinction between "global" and "local" errors. Global errors hinder communication and they prevent the learner from comprehending some aspects of the message. Local errors only affect a single element of a sentence, but do not prevent a message from being heard. According to Hendrickson (1980), global errors need not be corrected and they are generally held true. But the expressions such as "a news", or "an advice" are systematic errors, and they need to be corrected. As for pre-systematic errors, teachers can simply provide the correct one. For systematic errors, since learners have already had the linguistic competence, they can explain this kind of errors and correct them themselves. So teachers just remind them when they commit such errors. As to what kind of errors should be corrected, it needs teachers' intuition and understanding of errors. At the same time, the teacher should consider the purpose of the analysis and analyze them in a systematic way.

4.2 When to correct the errors?

Concerning this problem, the most controversial issue is to treat them immediately or to delay. First, we are confronted with a dilemma─fluency versus accuracy. For communicative purpose, delayed correction is usually preferred. Some advanced students believe that when to correct errors is determined by the type of errors committed. For instance, if they are pronunciation or grammatical errors, immediate correction is preferable, for post-correction cannot make learners remember anything. Furthermore, the overall situation in the classroom is also important. When the whole class is familiar with a word, but only one of them is singled out for being corrected, he or she would feel awkward. So, we can see that when to correct is very complicated. Both the teachers' intuition and the feedback from the students are equally important.

4.3 How to correct the errors?

According to James (1998), it is sensible to follow the three principles in error correction. Firstly, the techniques involved in error correction would be able to enhance the students' accuracy in expression. Secondly, the students' affective factors should be taken into consideration and the correction should not be face-threatening to the students.

Some scholars believed that teachers' indirect correction is highly appreciated. They either encourage students to do self-correction in heuristic method or present the correct form, so students couldn't feel embarrassed. Compare the two situations:

(1) Student: "What means this word?"

Teacher: "No, listen, what does this word mean?"

(2) Student: "What means this word?"

Teacher: "What does it mean? Well, it is difficult to explain, but it means…"

It is obvious that teacher's remodeling in (2) is more natural and sensible than the direct interruption in (1).

Up till now, both the theory and the application have been illustrated, in the next section we are going to deal with both the significance and limitations of error analysis in language teaching and learning.

5. Significance and limitations of error analysis in language teaching and learning

Firstly, by error analysis, teachers will get an overall knowledge about the students' errors. Foreign language learning is a process of hypothesis and trial and error occurrence is inevitable. So the teacher should learn to tolerate some errors, especially some local errors. Secondly, errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So students' errors are valuable feedbacks. We can do some remedial teaching based on their errors. Thirdly, errors are indispensable to the learners themselves, for we can regard the making of mistakes as a device the learner employs in order to learn. Finally, some errors need to be handled, otherwise, they will become fossilized. In a sense, error analysis theory together with other theories have enriched the second language learning theory in that learning involves in a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes and by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment. With the feedback they make new attempts to achieve the more closely approximate desired goals.

Certainly, error analysis is significant, but it also has its limitations. First, there is a danger in too much attention to learners' errors and in the classroom teacher tends to become so preoccupied with noticing errors that the correct utterance in the second language will go unnoticed. While the diminishing of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency, the ultimate goal of second language learning is the attainment of communicative fluency in a language. Another shortcoming in error analysis is the overstressing of production data. Factually language comprehension is as important as production. It also happens that production lends itself to analysis and thus becomes the prey of researchers, but comprehension data is equally important in developing an understanding of the process of language acquisition. Thirdly, it fails to account for the strategy of avoidance. A learner who for one reason or another avoids a particular sound, word, structure or discourse category may be assumed incorrectly to have no difficulty therewith. The absence of error therefore does not necessarily reflect native like competence since learners may be avoiding the very structure that poses difficulty for them. Finally, error analysis can keep us too closely focused on specific languages rather than viewing universal aspects of language.

6. Conclusion

Error analysis is associated with a rich and complex psycholinguistic view of the learner, but the sophisticated use is in its infancy. As EFL teachers, we should be aware of what is going on in the field of EA and keep a keen eye on the related theories. In order to improve teaching, we need to explore the learners' psychological process in language learning so that we can enhance our understanding of learners' errors. Based on the analysis of the causes of their errors, we provide our timely guide and help. In addition, while placing an emphasis on error correction in the classroom, as language teachers, we should take the teaching objectives, students' linguistic competence, their affective factors and the effectiveness of the error correction into

consideration. Consequently, we can employ more flexible strategies in error correction and make more contributions to the EFL classroom teaching and learning.

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