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VARIABILITY IN LEARNER ERRORS AS A REFLECTION OF THE CLT PARADIGM SHIFT
Chapter 2

Learner errors

2.1 Defining key terms

The most rudimentary definition of a language error would describe the phenomenon as an “unsuccessful bit of language” (James, 1998, p. 1). Imprecise as it may be, this account certainly offers a sufficient and safe starting point for any further deliberations on language errors. Especially when we consider the fact that over the years research in the field of language errors has brought about various more and less specific terms relating to language errors, such as gaps, misapplications, flaws, hitches (Austin, 1962); mistakes, slips, errors, attempts (Edge, 1989); distortions, faults (Hammerly, 1991); goofs (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972); deviances, solecisms (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972). The labels often refer to diverse language-related setbacks, caused by faulty teaching, impaired learning, gaps in competence or performance problems. Altogether the terms paint a vague picture of what language errors truly entail. The following sections aim to shed light on the key characteristics of the phenomenon of language errors.

2.1.1 Relativity

What seems to be the one undeniable characteristic of language errors is their relational nature. Any given language deviance becomes an error only in the context of a rule of the code that has been broken, or in other words, when “the learners have not yet internalized the formation rules of the code” (Corder, 1973, p.259). As James (1998, ch. 3) points out, the choice of a “code” or a
reference point, such as a particular variety of the target language, can make all the difference. Although this decision may be of lesser importance when grammar is concerned, well-formedness in the phonological or semantic sense can vary, depending on the chosen variety.

Some researchers have expressed reservations about comparing learners’ language with the target language per se. Selinker (1972, 1992), for example, insists that learners’ version of the target language, their interlanguage, is an emerging language system that only approximates the target language and should therefore be evaluated in its own terms. Corder (1971) prefers the term “idiosyncratic dialect”, which describes learners’ language as regular, systematic and meaningful (cf. Section 2.2.3).

However, Corder (1971) also points out that individuals compare their “dialect” with the target language and strive to bring their language in line with its “standard version”. In pedagogical contexts, this line of thought is intuitively easy to entertain. Language teachers are almost constantly required to engage in comparisons of learner production with the target language and learners receive feedback on whether language they produce breaches any rules of the target language. In a similar fashion, learning standards and objectives, such as the ones set out by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for example, implicitly draw educators’ attention to the extent of divergence from the target language norms, e.g. “lexical accuracy is generally high, though some confusion and incorrect word choice does occur without hindering communication” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112), “uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 114). In this context, “incorrect word choice” or “mixing up tenses” implicitly call for comparisons with the rules or norms found in the target language. In fact, James (1998) points out that learners are typically targeted on native-speaker norms.

In addition, a substantive body of research points to the fact that comparisons of target language forms and language produced by learners are beneficial and even necessary parts of language development. R. Ellis (1992, p. 232-238) emphasizes the instrumental role of cognitive comparisons of “the linguistic features noticed in the input with the learner’s own mental grammar, registering to what extent there
is a ‘gap’ between the input and her grammar” in the “acquisition of implicit knowledge”. Cognitive comparisons are based on noticing, which has also been widely recognized in second language acquisition research (e.g. R. Ellis, 1995; R. W. Schmidt, 1990; R. Schmidt, 1994; Robinson, 1995; Swain, 1985b; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; R. Ellis, 2003). Noticing is theorized to be the first level of awareness, responsible for “registering the simple occurrence of some event” (R. Schmidt, 1993, p. 26). It is independent of the second level, “understanding,” in which a learner recognizes “a general principle, rule, or pattern” (R. Schmidt, 1993, p. 26). According to the noticing hypothesis, “what learners notice in the input is what becomes intake for learning” (R. Schmidt, 1995, p. 20). R. W. Schmidt (1990) also argues that “noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake” implying that linguistic forms can create the basis for intake for language acquisition only if learners notice them (R. Schmidt, 1993; see also Robinson 1995, 2001, 2003). R. Ellis also suggests that “one way of fostering” cognitive comparisons “is to draw learners’ attention to the kinds of errors learners typically make” (1995, p. 95), a view supported by an array of studies (Mackey, Perdue, & McDonough, 2000; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Robinson, 1995, 2001, 2003; M. Long, 1996; Philp, 2003). Gass & Varonis (1994), for instance, claim that learners’ attention can be directed through interactional feedback towards a mismatch between their production and the target language form, which fosters development. Although M. H. Long & Robinson (1998) suggest that attempting to correct errors may not necessarily lead to consciousness-raising for students, ‘flagging’ target items in the form of highlighting, underlining or providing learners with explicit rules are definitely examples of tasks that promote noticing and raise consciousness, helping learners to notice a gap between what they know and what is produced by L2 speakers, thus promoting language development. The ideal comparison of learner and target language forms should, however, take place between a non-native speaker and his/her native speaker counterpart producing utterances in the same context (Lennon, 1991). These counterparts should ideally be individuals of a similar age-group, socioeconomic status and gender, with the same level of education, etc. Such an approach, emphasizing the similarities in the make-up of the speakers involved, as well as the intended meaning of the utterance allows keeping all the extra-linguistic variables that may influence performance constant.
Naturally, the extent to which learners are willing or able to engage in cognitive comparisons of their own language with the target language has its limits. Some learners may be reluctant to follow, for example, sociolinguistic patterns characteristic of the target language in order to maintain their subjectivity (e.g. their cultural identity, sense of value, personal principles) (Beebe & Giles, 1984; LoCastro, 1986; Ishihara & Tarone, 2009). Other learners may simply plateau at a certain level, where their skills fossilize and divergences from the target language occur (e.g. J. S. Johnson & Newport, 1989). Nevertheless, it seems that the comparative aspect of language errors is a well-accepted characteristic, which is often used to learners’ advantage and should be incorporated into the definition of an error.

It is crucial to add that the concept of relativity of language errors is not only limited to breaches of the target language rules. In order to understand the true nature of a certain type of errors, or in more general terms, learners’ proficiency level, not only is it essential to analyze the absolute frequency of various errors but also to take notice of the frequency of certain error types in relation to others. Additionally, it is crucial to observe the ratio of errors to correct forms. The interpretation of absolute values may change in meaning once they are placed in various contexts.

2.1.2 The contrasts between L1 and L2 learners

It is a well-known fact about first language (L1) acquisition that all healthy children manage to attain perfect knowledge of their mother tongue. Over the course of their development, children become linguistically indistinguishable from other members of their community, provided they receive sufficient linguistic exposure. Even though the input may lack negative data and in itself be limited, children acquire full knowledge of their mother tongue and seem equipotential in doing so for any natural language (Schachter, 1996).

The situation second language (L2) learners find themselves in is more complicated than the one faced by children acquiring L1. Although the underlying task remains unchanged – to master the gradually accumulating linguistic entities and to organize this knowledge into coherent structures on the basis of “finite, degenerate and underdeterminate input” (Schachter, 1996, p. 167), L2 learners
may not necessarily approach this venture in the same way as children do. Since they already possess a set of mental representations of one language and are able to communicate in it, their needs are different.

In addition, L2 learners are cognitively mature, whereas child L1 learners are not. As Kean (1988) suggests, the brain of an adult at the onset of language acquisition is different from the brain of that same individual when the language has been learned. In other words, “the brain of a child is not a miniature adult brain either in structure or function; brain systems underlying linguistic capacity and the functions [they] subserve change through the course of development” (Kean, 1988, p. 65). Birdsong (1999) points out that a progressive lateralization of cerebral functions, which takes place as an individual matures, makes it impossible for language learning at later stages of life to follow the traits typical of L1 acquisition. Also, cognitive maturity increases the likelihood of choosing a different approach to solving problems and dealing with abstract concepts. Ironically, greater cognitive resources translate, in this sense, to lesser success at language learning. In support of this line of thought Pinker (1994, p 294-295) posits an evolutionary argument claiming that once the language circuitry is no longer needed, it is dismantled, as it incurs metabolic costs otherwise and has to be compensated for by other mechanisms.

In fact, researchers have long speculated over the potential relationship between the likelihood of attaining native-like proficiency and the age at the onset of second language acquisition, which has been known as the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967) debate. The general tendency suggests that while simultaneous exposure to two languages before the age of three (also known as bilingual L1 acquisition) leads to native-like competence, later exposure cannot guarantee similar effects. Although exposure to L2 between the ages of three and puberty increases the chance of attaining near-native competence, exposure past puberty (also known as adult language acquisition) is likely to result in compromised L2 (Hamann, 2009). In the cases where adult learners show lesser fossilization, greater cognitive resources are often believed to compensate for the unavailability of processes that guide child L1 acquisition (e.g. Tracy, 1994). Alternative accounts stemming from the connectionist approaches to learning, on the other hand, assume that since language learning relies on strengthening associations between nodes of information, the connections established for the L1 (or other languages), which
we accumulate with age, hinder the process of building and strengthening of new associations (e.g. N. C. Ellis, 2003) (cf. Section 2.2).

Irrespective of the perspective on language learning we choose, it should be noted that settings that depart from natural language environments, such as classrooms, give rise to contexts, in which acquisition of a second language gives way to learning of a foreign language. In such environments, the poverty of stimulus is even more pronounced, possibly hindering the process of language development.

In addition, regardless of the language learning model behind the process of adult L2 acquisition (or learning), its outcomes remain not nearly as impressive as that characteristic of child L1 acquisition. As a matter of fact, there are crucial differences between L1 and adult L2. While many adult L2 speakers learn to communicate effectively in foreign or second languages, the overwhelming majority are not able to gain native competence of the target language. It seems that very few adults attain L2 grammars with “the same level of mastery as that achieved by every normal child” (Schachter, 1990, p.160). Rather, the non-native representation of L2 grammar typically remains incomplete, which may not necessarily hinder communication. Yet it certainly can. Schachter (1996) speculates that grammatical competence of L2 learners is distributed normally, that is, it follows a bell-curve, while in the case of L1 learners, skills are distributed in a relatively uniform fashion. Results also indicate that adult L2 learners fail to master L2 phonology to a native-like level (e.g. Moyer, 1999). In addition, some studies suggest that sociolinguistic aspects of language, such as the choice of speech act (e.g. Cohen & Olshtain, 1993) or semantic formulae used (e.g. Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Murphy & Neu, 1996), distinguish L2 learners from native speakers.

Incidentally the occurrence of both erroneous and correct versions of certain forms also distinguishes the production of adult L2 learners from the one typical of native speakers, although, this is not to say that all native speakers are completely free of performance errors. The mere fact that an L2 learner is able to produce the correct version of a certain form does not necessarily predetermine constant perfect performance with no errors in that form. Many researchers claim that learners’ L2 is variable in that at any stage of development a learner may use different forms of the same structure. This variability may be to some extent random.
However, as it is possible to estimate the probabilities with which different forms will occur (depending on e.g. the addressee and the availability to plan), some studies claim that the variability of errors in learners’ L2 is largely systematic. For instance, learners may regularly produce forms such as double markings of verbs in interrogatives (e.g. *Does your sister likes coffee?) or regularly select a number of deviant forms that occur in some context only (e.g. *My brother lives in San Francisco but work in Portland) (R. Ellis, 1984b,a). Schachter (1996) suggests that this phenomenon is primarily associated with morphemes of little semantic load, which may have little consequence for communication. Nevertheless, it contributes to the degree of perceived non-nativeness of the L2. The patterns of learner errors may also change over time on a regular basis, which suggests that the variability is developmental. It should be noted, however, that some researchers dispute the connection between error variability and competence, suggesting that it is performance related (cf. Gregg, 1990).

Additionally, since all adult L2 learners are equipped with the knowledge of a prior language, their L1 may inhibit or facilitate the process of L2 development, depending on the underlying similarities and differences that characterize the two languages. The closer the two languages are in similarity, in terms of syntax, phonology and lexicon, the higher the likelihood of learning success (Schachter, 1996). Naturally, L1 also exerts a strong influence on production itself (for more information see Section 6.2.3).

### 2.1.3 Errors vs. Mistakes

It is a common misconception that the term *mistake* can be used as a synonym of the word *error*. In fact, two different assumptions underlie the two notions, the core of which lies in Chomsky’s distinction (1965) between competence and performance. Under competence, Chomsky understood the abstract and hidden representation of language knowledge capable of creating and understanding original utterances in a given language. In this sense, competence pertains to the computational system, or in other words, the morphosyntactic aspect of language. Performance, on the other hand, from Chomsky’s standpoint, is seen as an imperfect reflection of competence affected by the processing complications that result from language use.