

6. "I didn't learn my lesson, Sir" - The Case for Learner-Centred Error Analysis

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Abstract

Evaluation and assessment as applied respectively to the language learning process and to the target language produced by learners are usually conducted separately. Assessment as implemented in standard testing procedures is seldom conducive to enhanced learning awareness, mainly because there is often little time available for a meta-cognitive evaluation of why mistakes were made. It will be argued in this paper that learner-centred error analysis, on the other hand, can make a worthwhile contribution to learning awareness among learners in that it concerns both the process and the product of language learning. Samples of defective discourse will be discussed and categorised. Procedures for classroom implementation of learner-centred error analysis will be suggested.

I would like to suggest a couple of relatively simple procedures whereby teachers might be able to help learners acquire some awareness of what might be going on when they grapple with English and try to produce sentences. But first of all I would like to set the scene, so to speak, and comment briefly on the conceptual backdrop of the issues I am planning to raise.

Firstly I would like to make a basic semantic distinction between *Assessment and Evaluation*, especially as there is only one word in French. *Assessment* is usually applied to *the product*, i.e. the Target Language (TL) produced or understood by learners. Assessing is normally conducted by the teacher or the educational institution at large, by means of various testing techniques, whose reliability, feasibility and validity can in turn be assessed by appropriate procedures. *Evaluation* on the other hand usually applies to some features of the overall teaching *process*, i.e. curricula, coursebooks, techniques, methods and materials used, logistics of the teaching set-up, results achieved by learners.

There has been a trend since the 80s to develop self-assessment procedures: How well do I know the TL? How do I manage in given situations? (Oskarson 1978). There have also been attempts to develop tools for the self-evaluation of language learning ability (Ellis and Sinclair 1989, Narcy 1991, Willing 1989).

This has generally been linked to investigations into learning styles (Duda and Riley 1990).

C.R.A.P.E.L. has contributed to these issues, but one of our main concerns now is to help learners develop enhanced awareness of what psychologists and sociologists call "representations", that is, personal mental models or images of or beliefs and attitudes about the world at large. The representations that we language teachers need to be interested in are those that learners harbour regarding language, learning and language learning in general. At C.R.A.P.E.L. we conduct our research into this area with the help of our own learners, i.e. university students and adult education students who take part in our self-directed language learning scheme (bibliography in *Mélanges* n°22, C.R.A.P.E.L., Université Nancy 2, 1995). Our view is that representations can contribute to or interfere with learning strategies. Learners therefore need to acquire some awareness of their representations, or in some cases "robots" or "automatic learning skills" as Laurie Thomas and Harri Augstein (1990:209) have termed them.

In this paper I will concentrate on a sub-section of learner representations which is of perennial concern to teachers and learners alike, i.e. errors. Experts have identified three kinds of errors: interlingual or interlanguage errors, developmental errors and intralingual errors.

Interlingual or Interlanguage Errors

Interlingual or interlanguage errors are caused by *interference* of the learner's mother tongue or another language that s/he might be learning or might know. Teachers in France can spot interference of French when it occurs. Other languages though may contribute to interference, especially because many pupils learn two, and sometimes three languages at school in France. For instance interference of German might produce sentences like the examples below (Lévêque, 1996). These sentences were produced by pupils in a "seconde" (the first year at a "lycée") learning German as a "première langue" (the first foreign language) and English as a "seconde langue".

Word order

1. In the left hand corner *is there* a house.
2. Then *rang the phone*.

3. I saw the White House where *lives the President of the U.S.A.*
4. I *knew him not.*
5. *I had all New York visited.*
6. A man *came me to see.*
7. I went to Nancy for a *cross-country race doing.*

German Lexis

8. The children *spielen.*
9. I like *auch* tennis and playing football.
10. *Auf* the table, he had a paper.
11. He's bigger *als* me.
12. She parked the car *um* go to the match.

Anglicised German words

13. The man had *nimmed* the hand of a stranger.
14. I *verstood* she was not awake.
15. Five *minuten* later, I was in a traffic jam.

To my knowledge there is no available data for interference of Spanish in the English produced by learners in French secondary schools.

Developmental Errors

The two sentences below were produced by a very young native speaker of English, the first when the child was 3 years, 2 months old and the second when the child was 3 years, 11 months old. These are samples of so-called "*developmental errors*", i.e. errors that young native speakers of English are liable to make while in the process of mastering their mother tongue (Dunlea 1985:23).

1. "I brought the book." (3 years, 2 months)
2. "I brang it to school." (3 years, 11 months)

Errors such as these are of course usually due to over-generalisation: "bring/*brang" as in "sing/sang" or "ring/rang". This often comes as a relief to learners as they discover that native speakers, be they young or old, make mistakes in their own language, and even mistakes that the learners themselves might make at some point in time. Susan Ervin-Tripp (1969) brought this issue up 30 years ago: "possibly the morphological and syntactic simplifications of second language

learners correspond to some simplification common among children (i.e. mother tongue speakers) learning the same language" (quoted in Richards 1974:175).

Incidentally, the same child also produced the following sentences:

3. "I brought the paper" (3 years, 5 months)
4. "We brought sweets" (4 years, 2 months)

Sentence 3 would seem to indicate that the child had mastered the appropriate form for the past tense of "bring", but s/he lapsed 6 months later (*brang). This was no doubt due to a temporary partial breakdown of the child's competence regarding verb forms, probably under pressure from what s/he was learning at the time. The child's expanding lexicon and grammatical expertise had temporarily disrupted part of his/her apparent competence in the language. This is something that is liable to happen to any foreign language learner and is worth pointing out in view of reassuring learners who may get concerned about apparent instances of linguistic regression.

Intralingual Errors

A third type of error may be termed *intralingual*, in that it belongs to a temporary, possibly idiosyncratic, grammar of the target language that the learner will have developed in the course of trying to acquire it. Some of these errors will of course be due to over-generalisation. Selinker, Richards and Lévêque have suggested other processes or strategies at work which may help to account for TL errors:

Analogy

"he said to me" → "he asked to me"

"we talked about it" → "we discussed about it"

"ask him to do it" → "make him to do it"

Influence of teacher's discourse

Teacher's Question	Student's Response
"What was she saying?"	"She saying she would ask him."
"Will they soon be ready?"	"Yes, they soon be ready."
"How much does it cost?"	"It cost one dollar."

False concepts hypothesized

“one day it was happened”

“he is speaks French”

“Was” and “is” have been interpreted as markers of the past and present tenses respectively. (Richards, 1974: 176-181)

Communication strategies

Simplification: “I was in Frankfurt when I fill application.” (Selinker, 1974: 40)

Code-switching/borrowing:

“In the picture *man* can see a tree.”

“I like Tom Cruise, *weil* he is nice.”

“Go straight and turn *recht*. “

(Lévêque, 1997: 30-33)

In order to sensitize learners to these phenomena, the following simple classroom procedures may be worth considering:

- While correcting written work, collect faulty passages. Record speaking activities and transcribe errors. Prepare OHTs with samples of faulty passages and errors to show students. Get them to figure out what went wrong and why. Students will tend to explain the mistakes they make in terms of how much, or how little, work they have put into the exercise or task that the teacher may have set them. Gradually, however, with the help of the teacher they should manage to identify why things went wrong.
- An additional activity might consist in asking the students to try and remember or spot mistakes that they and their friends or relatives might make in French. This might help them accept that errors are inevitable and should be accepted as a fact of life or communication. As Dulay and Burt once said: “You can’t learn without goofing” (Dulay and Burt 1974). In other terms the representation whereby errors are to be frowned upon if not actually considered some form of mortal sin needs to be tackled by teacher and student alike.

Learner-centred error analysis as an activity is in fact part of the much larger issue of language and learning awareness. In the areas of language and learning awareness the following representations need challenging:

language awareness

- knowing a language is being able to *speak* it (as against *understand* it),
- oral language is a debased form of written language,
- texts are made up of sentences which are strung together,
- words in our mother tongue have or should have an equivalent in the TL,
- understanding a text depends on how well you understand all the words in the text.

learning awareness

- learning on your own is next to impossible,
- errors should be avoided at all costs,
- assessment and evaluation are the teacher's job,
- there's always a right way to learn,
- learning is about imitating, repeating, memorising,
- thinking in the TL is crucial for effective learning,
- the best way to understand a text is to translate it,
- you can't master a language if you don't master its grammar.

Arguably then, one of our jobs as language teachers is to help learners become more aware of what they know or think they know about language and language learning. When I say, "what do learners know about language" I am not referring to what they know about English. I would like to suggest that learning English is every bit as much about language and learning awareness as it is about learning grammatical, lexical or even pragmatic niceties of the English language, such as phrasal verbs, continuous tense forms or how to order a pint in a crowded pub.

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