A Gaze At English As A Second Langauge Student Writing: Error Analysis In SecondLanguage Acquisition

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Abstract: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the study of how learners learn a second language after they have acquired their own langauage. During the process of learning a second language, learning situations that stem from the influence of the mother langauge results in error production of learners.This paper will try to discuss error analysis as an evidence of SLA. Through a case study of learners of English as a second language (ESL), it will also focus on the fact that errors occur as part of interlanguage; for this reason, error correction on ESL student writing may have a small effect on their language production during their SLA. Four ESL students' writing samples will be examined as models to demonstrate their interlanguageas a part of their SLA process. The students, in common, rely on their native language which result in internalization of rules in target language. Thus, the study of error analysis is necessary to be able to characterize the SLA of the learner.*

Key words: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Error Analysis, Error Correction, Interlangauge.*

I.   Introduction

Acquisition can be defined as the internalization of rules used for communication in a target language. "Second Language Acquisition stands in contrast to first language acquisition. It is the study of how learners learn an additional language after they have acquired their mother tongue" (Ellis, 1980, p.5) [1]. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex process that involves many factors. In order to investigate this process, it is important to gaze at it by recognizing the slight difference between SLA and second language learning. While SLA refers to both a conscious and subconscious process (a spontaneous process of rule internalization), the latter refers to the conscious study of a second language. In other words, SLA is a process examining the competence of learner in natural and tutored circumstances. One of the factors of SLA is that the learners, who are exposed to second language, have different learning situations stemming from the influence of thier mother languages. From this angle, in the course of learning a second language, the influence of the mother tongue results in error production. Thus, the study of errors is one of the fundamental duties of langauge teachers who should be able to describe the errors as well as understanding the reasons for their occurances. "Error analysis aims at telling us something about psycho linguistic process of language learning" (Corder, 1981, p. 35) [2].

In the light of these assumptions, this paper will try to discuss error analysis as an evidence of SLA. Through a case study of learners of English as a second language (ESL), it will also focus on the assumption that since errors ocur as part of interlanguage, error correction on ESL student writing may have a small effect on their language production during their SLA. Four ESL students' writing samples will be examined as models to demonstrate their interlanguage—their so-called erroneous writing—as a part of their SLA process. (These students have applied to the Writers' Studio of the College they attend in order to get help for their writing assignments)

II.   Case Study of ESL Students

Even though the errors of these students from four different countries (Japan, Thailand, Spain and Korea) may vary according to the difference of their learning and acquisition levels in English, their interlanguage and attitudes towards writing are basically similar. The ESL students have high self-esteem, in general, which sometimes makes them claim to be great writers in their own language. For this reason, the students, in common, rely on their native language which result in internalization of incorrect versions of rules

in target language. Since the rhetoric the ESL students have learned in their native educational system includes quite different patterns from the rhetoric in their target language, they struggle with new forms of second language, even though they have had enough experience of writing. "People's self-perception and sense of identity are very much bound up in language and in their use of their native langauge" (Leki, 1992, p. 30) [3]. Thus, as a result of a struggle for mastery in the second language, these students experience fear of failure, pressure to succeed, and nervousness caused by competing with native students. Accordingly, these factors influence the SLA process of the students learning a second language.

When acquiring a second language, the ESL learner uses a unique language of his/her own sharing many features of the target langauge out of his/her struggle for mastery in it. Thus, error analysis is concerned with: "…discovering the degree to which the learner expresses his/her messages by means of the categories and rules which the native speaker of the target language uses" (Corder, 1981, p. 30) [4]. On the other hand, although there used to be some attitudes towards the requirement of error correction in language learners' writing in the recent years, many studies have demonstrated that errors are useful evidence of how learners are going through the task of learning and acquisition, and in what ways they are using the target language data to which they are exposed and required to respond. Therefore, this approach assumes that learners' errors are not, in some sense, randomly made, for they show some characteristics or set of rules of the learners' native language: interlanguage which is "a systematic langauge" between the learners' first language and the target language. In another sense, interlangauge becomes a manisfestation of the second language acquisition.

One example of the consequences of interlanguage is that the learner makes errors based on "interference" not because he/she lacks attention or has poor memory, but because he/she makes transfers from the mother language: "The way mother langauge plays part in the acquisition of the second language is through the data on the interference phenomena in the learner's writing" (Corder, 1981, p. 96) [5]. Ellis refers to interference as 'transfer', which he says is "the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2" (1985, p. 51) [6]. Interference is governed by learners' perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in second langauge learning. In learning a target language, learners construct their own rules.

The mother tongue of Mitsuo (Japanese student), who has been exposed to English for three years, plays an important part in his writing. As he is quite certain about the validity of his ideas and view, he does not feel the need to give specific details to support his point in his paper. An error analysis of the writing of Mitsuo is an example of the occurance of an interference in a learning condition:

> The *discrimination* for employment *unfairness* is one of the examples
> but we should not be doing this to Asian American because of the
> "model minority image."

The use of the word 'unfairness' in a context to relate to the word 'discrimination' is an example of interference of native language. Mitsuo, while trying to write in his second language, gives us the impression that he is intentionally emphasizing the meaning of discrimination. As Corder states, "the sucess of error analysis depends upon having adequate interpretations. Every sentence of the learner, whether well-produced or not, is potentially erroneous" (p. 44) [7]. So, the key concept for error analysis becomes the concept of interlanguage. It is obvious that we cannot identify errors without identifying them in their context. Mitsuo's sentence is ambiguous but interpretable. This kind of error is made by a writer who uses his/her knowledge of the target language as an ability to predict and form meaning. In this sense, the error made by Mitsuo, who is practicing his knowledge of English, becomes th most important source of information about his linguistic improvement.

The learner is an "active participant" in the process of linguistic improvement while exercising his/her already acquied knowledge of the target language. Metta, who is from Thailand, is an active participant in English for two years. She has some difficulties in writing well-developed and well-focused sentences. These difficulties are compounded by her anxieties about making errors and limitations in her vocabulary:

> This Project educated and encouraged Thai people to be
> *conservative* the sea turtles in Thailand before they will be
> *extincted.*

A type of error based on word choice (conservative) reflects Metta's effort to bring meaning to a word. She does it by substituting for the appropriate word --such aa conservation—a more familiar word that is phonetically

similar but semantically unrelated to the word her reader wants to see. Metta is involved in the acquisition of a second language during which she forms an interlanguage in her writing: the wrong usage of the word 'extincted' is an example of overgeneralization error, which shows too much reliance on the rules of target language. "The failed sentences, then, could be taken as stages of learning rather than the failure to learn, but also as evidence that these writers are using writing as an occasion to learn" (Bartholomae, 1980, p. 254) [8]. Thus, ina failed sentence, it is not right to have a conclusion that the process of taking in "the knowledge about language" is not realized; however it is the result of the learner's incomplete acquisition of linguistic knowledge.

It is apparent that the ESL student is acquiring and learning English while making some errors. What is important is the fact that error analysis is to be recognized as a process where the "actual text" of the learner varies from the "standard text" of the target language. Let us look at two types of errors in error analysis between which Corder makes a distinction: erros of performance (non-systematic errors) and errors of competence (systematic errors).

> The opposition between systematic and non-systematic errors is important…These (one sor tor the other) are due to memory lapses, physical states… and psychological conditions…it will be useful, therefore, to refer to errors of performance as *mistakes*, reserving the term *error* to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language… (Corder, 1981, p. 166) [9].

Thus, mistakes, in a way, do not demonstrate the learner's idiosyncratic, and unique langauge in his/her writing but are the manifestations of an automatic and unsystematic form of langauge. Their eradication is a matter of intensive drilling and exercise in correct forms.

A striking example to such habitual and automatic mistakes occurs in another ESL student's paper. Jonathan, from Spain, has been exposed to English for quite a long time; and the process of his English acquisition shows that he has been forming an idiosyncratic interlanguage of his own in his writing. He has both systematic and non-systematic errors as follows:

> I am very strict of what I have a time, beside I like to be punctual… You are able to know what time *the Sunrise* and what time it *goes down*.

In the first sentence above, using the article "a" to form a meaningful sentence in target language, Jonathan makes a systematic mistake which is not impossible to interpret. The second sentence above is easily interpretable as he produces a habitual and unsystematic mistake. From the second half of this sentence, we see that he has acquired knowledge on his second langauge but "correct automatic habits of the target language" are not yet acquired in this sentence, where he forgets to form a parallelism between two subordinate clauses: What time + subject + verb.

In the second example, we can only try to analyze his langauge of a situation in terms of what langauge is used for that situation rather than his knowledge of the target langauge—a knowledge of the structural codes or rules of a langauge. Since the learner also uses a unique langauge of his own, in his native language, the study of error analysis is necessary to be able to characterize the SLA of the learner. We cannot exactly control what the learner's total input—taking in the knowledge of English—has been because it is determined by the characteristics of his/her langauge acquisition mechanism. Only the learner is in control of this input: such as Jonathan's knowledge and concept of time. "There is no way to teach students about time" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 130) [10]. The student already knows it but it is too subtle and various for him to fully explain it in a context. In other words, the learner is "engaged in a task of discovering the system or code of the target language… by making, usually subconsciously, a set of hypotheses about how the language works on the basis of the langauge data, that is the example of the langauge in their context" (Corder, 1981, p.52) [11].

Yookwon, a Korean student, forms false hypotheses, either because he forms misleading knowledge about the second language (a part of his interlanguage), or because the data he receives is not complete. Making errors based on tense-disagreements, Yookwon is afraid to be intimidated by his errors while producing the target langauge:

> They *were* only two; a young couple; the husband *is* a carpenter and the wife *is* a beautician.

> When the dinner *is* ready, we *prayed* with holding hands eachother before eating dinner.

Yookwon's errors of grammar do not necessarily mean that he has not acquired the target langauge yet. According to the error analysis model, Yookwon's errors are the results of the role of his mother language; in other words they are intuitively transferred features of his native langauge.

On the other hand, the error analysis shows that Yookwon's erroneous structures are acceptable because they can be interpreted according to his intention, as he forms an interlangauge, and is not completely aware of his inappropriate usage of comparatives:

> Driving habit in Korea is very fast and dangerous because the land is small, the road is full by cars and everybody wants to *go ahead than* other people do. (First version)

> Another reason why Koreans drive fast and dangerously is everybody want to *go first*. (Second version)

These two sentences demonstrate that Yookwon is involved in a situation of language which does not match with his knowledge of the langauge. This is a kind of mismatch that the learner does not have the necessary degree of knowledge to cope adequately with a situation, but has enough basis of knowledge. In other words, in order to understand to what extent and in what situation error analysis might be helpful for foreign langauge teachers in assessing their students' knowledge of the langauge, we can gaze at error analysis as an intuitive activity.

> Error analysis, however, does not enable us to predict how a particular learner will cope with the demands of a situation of langauge use, though it will serve well to say how he will perform in a situation of langauge learning (Corder, 1981, p. 54) [12].

If we, for a moment, can see the learner as a native writer of his own langauge, we need to accept that he will have "intuitions" about the grammaticality of his langauge. "When we talk about errors made by learners we are clearly applying to their langauge intuitions about grammaticality possessed by speakers of the target langauge" (Corder, 1981, p. 57) [13].

III. Conclusion

In addition to Corder's hypothesis that learning the syntax of a second langauge is essentially a reconstructing process based on the learner's intuitions, ESL students' unawareness of their errors is another important factor in SLA process. "Second language performers can typically self-correct only a small percentage of their errors, even when deliberately focused on form… and even when we consider the easiest aspects of grammar" (Ellis, 1985, p. 112) [14]. Even though the ESL students are not consciously trying to correct their errors, it is obvious that they may and do learn so much that their teachers cannot teach them all the time. Thus, errors can be evidences of individual's idiosyncratic ways of using the target langauge to make meaning through a style based on intention. "An error can only be understood as evidence of intention" (Bartholomae, 1980, p. 255) [15].

However, we cannot disregard the fact that, for the most part, the learner acquires langauge through "comprehensible langauge input (feedback) at a level of difficulty" (Leki, 1992, p. 16) [16]. As SLA is a spontaneous and unconscious process, the input may be incomprehensible when the student errors are evaluated as indicators of their lack of knowledge of the target langauge. From this angle, the feedback may not be taken in by the ESL students as it is confusing for him/her. In other words, the student's level of langauge development may not be sufficiently advanced to receive new pieces of information which may result error correction to be upsetting on the part of the student.

When it comes to error correction, "Correctness is by no means all the work of a composition course, but it must be part of the work so long as readers continue to show but limited tolerance for errors…" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 158) [17]. Linguits insist that when error becomes a subject of instruction, "it will quickly loom in the writer's consciousness as a central problem in writing" (p. 118). However, ESL student writing requires much more than this kind of instruction. Since mastery of second language writing is a slow and demanding task, we should not ignore the assumption that foreign language teachers realize that ESL student writing improves when

they focus on students' strengths rather than weaknesses. On the one hand, the correction of errors might provide precisely a sort of negative evidence that is necessary to the discovery of correct concepts or rules in ESL student writing; on the other hand, a straightforward error correction aims at merely eliminating errors.

Accordingly, the teachers of foreign language might try to figure out what position the ESL students have constructed in the process of interlanguage, through focusing on error analysis—a reliable analysis of errors as evidence of student learning strategies. Considering these notions, giving students freedom of choice (writing what they prefer and practicing the rules and techniques they know that they have trouble with), teachers will provide their students with feedback. So, ESL students will be able to transfer assignments, be aware of the misconnection between their native language and English, realize the need to revise unsystematic errors, and most importantly, learn to see their errors—know where they are going in the process of writing. Finally, ESL students will adapt the attitudes that make it possible for them to produce well-written assignments, as a part of improvement in their SLA process. As a result of interlanguage data and evidences accumulated from error analysis of ESL students, errors are no longer seen as 'unwanted form' but as a result of the learners' active contribution to SLA.

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