A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF ERRORS IN THE LITERATURE ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA) RESEARCH AND HOW APPLIED LINGUISTS AND TEACHERS NEED TO RESPOND TO ERRORS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Second language learners, in acquiring English as a second language, make errors based on their cognition of concepts. The perception of linguists and teachers about errors inform their approach to language research and pedagogies. Linguists and teachers who have negative attitudes towards errors consider them as deviations that need to be prevented at all costs, while others perceive the errors as innovation. Indeed, while deviations could be innovative and contribute immensely to the development of new varieties of languages, some deviations are clearly deficits that could influence the acquisition process leading, and language teachers need to respond to these deviations appropriately. Through a systematic review of literature, the article presents an evaluation of errors (deviations or innovation) and their pedagogical purposes for applied linguists and teachers.

Keywords: Second Language, Errors, Deviations, Innovations, Pedagogical Purposes

INTRODUCTION

Errors refer "…to the systematic (mistakes) of the learner from which we can reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his transitional competence" (Corder, 1967, p. 167).

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors of learners in the stages of language acquisition "…with the practical intention to develop objective standards of judgment or didactic measures to reduce or eliminate such errors" (Rein, 1983, p. 99). For some scholars (such as Quirk, 1988), errors are wrong habits and deviations that can and should be eradicated while for some others (such as Corder, 1967 & Kachru, 1991), errors are the manifestation of transitional competence and innovation. This paper is an evaluation of the perceptions of errors in second language acquisition and how applied linguists and teachers need to respond to errors of second language learners. The article is structured, first, present a brief review on errors in the literature. Secondly, I evaluate three negative perceptions of errors. Third, the paper will present an examination of positive perceptions of errors for four reasons through a review of other works. Finally, I discuss four recommendations that will help applied linguists and teachers respond to errors of second language learners. The study is undertaken through a systematic review of relevant works done on errors in language teaching and learning.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ERROR

As error has been conceptualized in the introductory part of the paper, there is the need to systemically review other scholarly works on errors. The multiplicity of different approaches to second language learning results in the creation of many and very often contrastive ways of understanding errors. Thanks to behaviorists, such as B.F Skinner, or cognitivism, like Noam Chomsky, it is possible to notice that linguists have some negative, but also positive views on errors. Just as there have significant changes in the methodologies and materials used in the teaching and learning of a second language (Keshavarz, 2012), there have been changes in attitudes towards students' errors. Lennon (1991) defined an error as a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by native speaker's counterparts. Quirk (1988, 1990) has presented the negative connotations of errors which others have sought to take delight as innovations. Errors constituted and still do a very substantial object of linguistic studies. They occur in both the first and second language learning processes and thus so many well-known and respected specialists devoted their publications, books to the particular topic. This paved way for the analysis of errors by educationists.

Error analysis has been the focus of much research which has led to changes in the attitudes towards errors, evidence in a less obsessive avoidance of errors as in the case with the communicative approach. Decades past, when contrastive analysis and audio-lingual approach to teaching and learning of second languages were at the peak of their popularity, a rather negative attitude towards errors was prevalent. For example, Brooks (1960), in his famous book, *Language and Language Learning*, asserts, "Like sin, an error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected" (p. 167). This indicates that error was frowned upon during the period under discussion. The principal method of avoiding language error is to observe and practice the right model a sufficient number of times: the principal way of overcoming it is to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model (Keshavarz, 2012). According to Ellis (1994), the presence of linguistic deviation meant that the process of teaching and other signs of progress have not been fruitful. These reviews have been situated in the behaviorist perspective.

Contrastively, cognitivist and mentalist linguists have understood errors as positive signs of self-development and depiction of current second language learners' understanding of the rules

of the target language. In opposition to Rivers' (1964) claim that errors are not "cute" but "dangerous" because they represent decremental not incremental learning, cognitivists have sought to conceptualize errors in a positive frame to scaffold the learning process. From the literature, it is significantly understood that as learners progress in the acquisition of a second language through rule formation and other processes, they make their modifications to guide the acquisition. Errors are evidence of the learner's success and not their failure. They are integral to language learning and manifest the learner's transitional competence by providing evidence of the system of the language that he is using at a particular point in the course (Coder, 1967). Keshavarz (2012) states that a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide an understanding of the underlying processes of second language acquisition. Many language practitioners (Russel & Spada, 2006; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) have acknowledged the need to respond to errors duly. As Nassaji (2007) opines, dealing with learner's errors is an important aspect of L2 teaching ... (and)... most of the evidence points to the usefulness of error correction versus no error correction. However, Keshavarz (2012) believes too much correction should certainly be avoided. In this regard, I evaluate the errors in the literature.

EVALUATION OF ERRORS

First and foremost, errors are deviations that lead to the abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners. Quirk (1988) argues that viewing learners' errors as evidence for the emergence of new varieties of the English language is dangerously mistaken particularly where it leads to the abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners. This can be related to what Cooper (1989) terms 'language maintenance'. He explains that activities are directed not toward increasing the number of users but toward maintaining the language. For example, the inclusion of English as a core subject in the Ghanaian school system requires the learners to study the standard language. Hence, the acquisition of English is not to contribute to the spread of English with varieties, but to maintain Standard English. Quirk (1990), in his discussion of Englishes in various contexts especially in the English as Second Language countries, suggested that teachers of English were to focus on native norms and native-like performance; and stressed the need to uphold one common standard in the use of English. As such, errors by second language learners undermine the standard form and use of the English language. However, in so far as intelligibility is concerned, I believe that if the second language learners understand their utterances in a situational context, the errors may not be deviations to imply the abandonment of Standard English. This evaluation is supported by the claim that "only the situational context could show whether his utterance was an error or not" (Corder, 1967, p. 168).

Again, the increasing failure of the education system renders errors as deviations. Following the discussion on maintaining Standard English, a great responsibility lies in the educational system. The professionalism of teachers who are implementers of the curriculum, sometimes, is least plausible. Quirk (1988) exemplifies countries such as Nigeria, where the English of teachers themselves inevitably bears the stamp of locally acquired deviation from the standard language. For example;

     i.   You are knowing my mother, isn't it?

     ii.   You have taken my book, isn't it?

From illustrations (i) and (ii), it is evident that in the view of Quirk, the education system is failing. This results in the abandonment of Standard English usage, even by teachers. The correct tags are 'aren't you?' and 'haven't you?' respectively. I support the view of Quirk because some errors made in the process of second language acquisition are deviations and efforts must be made by the teacher to correct them. The comprehension of errors in the educational system reflects on its failure to maintain Standard English.

Finally, there is a lack of linguistic resources to describe 'innovative' errors. Errors are deviations because, when they are developed into varieties of the English language, there will not be a grammar, lexical or phonological description for the errors produced. These descriptions of the language are provided by the native speakers (norm-providers). Errors are "…false extrapolation of English" (Quirk, 1988, p. 233). Errors are misleading, following the varieties of English such as Nigerian English, Indian English, and Ghanaian English. Quirk regards only that native speaker and judges based on such dimensions with the linguistic resources. On the contrary, I assert that errors should be evaluated based on the reality of language usage. For instance; if a second language learner uses the target language in a multi-cultural context, evaluating the errors to be produced as deviations using native speaker criteria and linguistic resources is not suitable. Also, if errors are deviations, the learning of the standard language does not have an integrative function. By this, the standard use of the language does not identify the second language learner as a native speaker.

This paragraph presents the positive perceptions of errors as innovation in second language acquisition. To begin, errors are motivated by an urge for linguistic emancipation. Language is a symbol of independence. To scholars such as Kachru (1991), errors are innovatively variation models for linguistic emancipation. Errors as innovations provide grounds for the institutionalization of English as a Second Language. Second language learners become emotionally attached to the language. Here, I believe the aggregate function of institutionalized language as a variety is greater than using English internationally. Formal and functional characteristics "…have given the English language distinct cultural identities…" (Kachru, 1991, p. 7) and as such, the errors produced in performance can be seen as innovations by relating it to the culture of the specific second language learner.

In addition, acquisition creativity is a positive perception of errors. The creative aspects of uses of English in second language acquisition are misinterpreted as errors. Kachru (1991) states emphatically that this misinterpretation is essentially the result of undue emphasis on concepts such as "interlanguage" and "fossilization". The effects of language contact should not only be perceived negatively but positively as well. Linguistic creativity shows the distinction between speakers. Many of the second language learners' early utterances are unique, therefore generated not imitated (Ellis, 1985). This reveals the productive and creative nature of the second language acquisition process.

Moreover, errors provide learners with proof that they are learning. They serve as means for the learners to test their assumptions about language. Error plays an important role in the process of hypothesis testing. Corder (1967) points out that second language learners make errors to test out certain hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. So, the making of errors is a strategy, evidence of learners' internal processing. The learners undergo levels error which Corder (1971a) identifies as pre-systematic (the learner does not know the rule of the second language), systematic (the learner discovers the rules of the second language but does

not apply it), and post-systematic (the learner knows the rules, but for lack of attention does not use it). Summarily, the testing of assumptions elicits the feedback that confirms or modifies the learners' hypotheses at each level.

Lastly, some errors confide in the notion of interference. In any sense, "the interference is not related to function: The result is that external discoursal and interactional norms are imposed on a variety" (Kachru, 1990, p. 185). This means that error production is not always a result of a lack of linguistic knowledge. In a context and performance, a second language learner will be encouraged to make errors that are sometimes seen as creative, relating to his identity. For example, grammatically, Ghanaians use the verb 'have' which is a stative verb as a dynamic verb.

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A.   I have a book. (BrE)

B.   I am having a book. (GhE)

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According to Kachru (1990), the term 'interference' has acquired a negative connotation, attitudinally very loaded. He explains such connotation that multilingualism is an aberration, and monolingualism is the norm. Inferring from the claim of Kachru, errors are innovations through positive perceptions of the errors. As such, these errors lead to the variation model of languages.

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PEDAGOGICAL RELEVANCE OF ERRORS

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This section presents a discussion on how applied linguists and teachers need to respond to the errors of the second language learner. First and foremost, teachers need to "…explore the variety of language that students bring to their classrooms from very different social and regional backgrounds" (Quirk, 1988, p. 235). Coder (1967) claims that "…if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques." The classroom is a heterogeneous environment; as such, the teacher must have a constructive view of errors. The total input from the teacher in helping the learners acquire a second language determines the positive or negative perception towards the error. The teacher needs to analyze the root causes of the errors. I agree with Quirk's assertion because some errors are produced through interference and the teacher should systematically examine the varieties of a language of the second language learner. It is believed that it is from these varieties that deviations are produced. By exploration of errors, the teacher utilizes theoretical error analysis and attempts to explain why and how errors occur (Keshavarz, 2012). The teacher should make pragmatic and constructive efforts to understand the errors. In line with this, Corder (1967) highlights that the learners' errors prompt the teacher of the systematic analysis to determine the progress of the learner towards a set goal and what remains for him to learn. In all, the teacher becomes supportive by helping to plan remedial lessons to respond to the errors of the learner.

Second, applied linguists can recommend appropriate linguistics material for learners. In second language acquisition, learners' errors "…provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language" (Corder, 1967, p. 167) and as such, applied linguists can recommend reference grammars for the second language learners to facilitate their discovery. Concerning language maintenance, the learners can turn to reference grammars and dictionaries for information on the standard language and its usage. For example, a second language learner is likely to use an objective pronoun at the initial stage of a sentence.

a) [Me] and Grace are students.

This is a deviation because the standard language requires a subjective pronoun. Also, applied linguists can help sequence items in linguistic resources to be in correlation to the strategies and procedures the learners use in the second language acquisition.

In addition, the teacher can provide feedback to respond to the errors of the second language learners. The teacher can utilize the errors as guidance for the learners. Feedback is given to reduce or do away with the errors in learning. Hyland (2003) purports that writing extensive feedback comments on learners' productions helps to provide a response to learners' efforts and at the same time helps them to improve. The feedback must focus on error correction which Ferris (2007) claims to be effective. The feedback from the teacher confirms or modifies the learners' hypotheses in learning the second language.

Lastly, applied linguists can liaise with authorities in education such as curriculum developers to create a language-rich environment and conditions to respond to the errors of learners. There should be many opportunities for the standard use of the English language. To respond to the errors, the learning of English as a second language should be conducted at a high rate of intensity. In such cases, the implementers of the curriculum or syllabus "…may learn to adapt to the learner's needs" (Corder, 1967, p. 169) in acquiring the language.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the essay evaluated three negative perceptions of errors: abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners, the increasing failure of the education system and lack of linguistic resources to describe 'innovative' errors; and proceeded to present an examination of four positive perceptions of errors: errors are motivated by an urge for linguistic emancipation, acquisition creativity, errors provide learners proof that they are learning and the notion of interference. In addition, the essay discussed four ways how applied linguists and teachers need to respond to errors of second language learners – first, teachers need to explore the variety of language learners bring to the classroom; second, applied linguists can recommend appropriate linguistic materials for learners, teachers can provide feedback, and the need to create a language-rich environment and conditions to respond to the errors of learners. Errors play an integral role in second language acquisition – they do not only prove that acquisition is taking place, but they are indispensable in the process. These errors may be deviations or innovations.

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