

## SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING ERRORS THEIR TYPES, CAUSES, AND TREATMENT

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### *Abstract*

Recent research in applied linguistics emphasizes the significance of learners' errors in second language learning. In this article, major types of errors in second language learning are first briefly mentioned. This is followed by tracing the sources of second language learning errors to both interlingual and intralingual or developmental factors. While interlingual errors are caused mainly by mother tongue interference, intralingual or developmental errors originate in the following factors: simplification, overgeneralization, hypercorrection, faulty teaching, fossilization, avoidance, inadequate learning, and false concepts hypothesized. The article concludes with some general guidelines for teachers in correcting errors in second language learning.

Language learning, like any kind of human learning, involves committing errors. In the past, language teachers considered errors committed by their students as something undesirable which they diligently sought to prevent from occurring. During the past fifteen years, however, researchers in the field of applied linguistics came to view errors as evidence for a creative process in language learning in which learners employ hypothesis testing and various strategies in learning a second

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language.

Far from being a nuisance to be eradicated, errors are, as Selinker (1969) indicates, significant in three respects: (1) errors are important for the language teacher because they indicate the learner's progress in language learning; (2) errors are also important for the language researcher as they provide insights into how language is learnt; and (3) finally, errors are significant to the language learner himself/herself as he/she gets involved in hypothesis testing.

In this article, I am going to discuss briefly the types of errors made by second language learners, the causes of these errors, and finally how teachers should correct them.

### Types of Errors

Researchers in the field of applied linguistics usually distinguish between two types of errors: performance errors and competence errors. Performance errors are those errors made by learners when they are tired or hurried. Normally, this type of error is not serious and can be overcome with little effort by the learner. Competence errors, on the other hand, are more serious than performance errors since competence errors reflect inadequate learning. In this connection, it is important to note that researchers (cf. Gefen 1979) distinguish between *mistakes* which are lapses in performance and *errors* which reflect inadequate competence.

Other researchers (cf. Burt and Kiparsky 1974) distinguish between *local* and *global* errors. Local errors do not hinder communication and understanding the meaning of an utterance. Global errors, on the other hand, are more serious than local errors because global errors interfere with communication and disrupt the meaning of utterances. Local errors involve noun and verb inflections, and the use of articles, prepositions, and auxiliaries. Global errors, for example, involve wrong word order in a sentence.

Finally, language learning errors involve all language com-

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ponents: the phonological, the morphological, the lexical, and the syntactic. An example of a phonological error is the lack of distinction between the phoneme /p/ and the phoneme /b/ among Arab ESL learners; so we hear them saying *pird* and *brison*, for example, instead of *bird* and *prison*. An example of a morphological error is the production of such errors as *womans*, *sheeps*, and *furnitures*. A lexical error involves inappropriate direct translation from the learner's native language or the use of wrong lexical items in the second language. Examples of lexical errors are: This is the *home* that my father built, and The *clock* is now ten. Finally, examples of syntactic errors are errors in word order, subject-verb agreement, and the use of the resumptive pronoun in English relative clauses produced by Arab ESL learners as illustrated in: The boy that I saw *him* is called Ali.

### Causes of Errors

There are mainly two major sources of errors in second language learning. The first source is interference from the native language while the second source can be attributed to intralingual and developmental factors.

The native language of learners plays a significant role in learning a second language. Errors due to the influence of the native language are called interlingual errors. Interlingual errors are also called transfer or interference errors. The view that the native language plays a mostly negative role was emphasized as early as the forties and the fifties by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957). Although recently researchers tend to minimize interlingual errors and emphasize intralingual and developmental errors (cf. Dulay and Burt 1974), negative transfer or interference is still acknowledged as an important factor in second language learning (cf. Jordens 1977; Kellerman 1979; Touchie 1983).

Intralingual and developmental errors are due to the difficulty of the second/target language. Intralingual and developmental factors include the following:

1. **Simplification:** Learners often choose simple forms and constructions instead of more complex ones. An example of simplification might involve the use of simple present instead of the present perfect continuous.
2. **Overgeneralization:** This is the use of one form or construction in one context and extending its application to other contexts where it should not apply. Examples of overgeneralization include the use of *comed* and *goed* as the past tense forms of *come* and *go* and the omission of the third person singular *s* under the heavy pressure of all other endless forms as in *he go*.  
It should be noted that simplification and overgeneralization are used by learners in order to reduce their linguistic burden.
3. **Hypercorrection:** Sometimes the zealous efforts of teachers in correcting their students' errors induce the students to make errors in otherwise correct forms. Stenson (1978) calls this type of error "induced errors." For example, the teacher's insistence that Arab ESL learners produce the phoneme /p/ correctly prompts them to always produce /p/ where the phoneme /b/ is required. Thus Arab ESL learners say *pird* and *pattle* instead of *bird* and *battle*.
4. **Faulty teaching:** Sometimes it happens that learners' errors are teacher-induced ones, i.e., caused by the teacher, teaching materials, or the order of presentation. This factor is closely related to hypercorrection above. Also, it is interesting to note that some teachers are even influenced by their pupils' errors in the course of long teaching.
5. **Fossilization:** Some errors, specially errors in pronunciation, persist for long periods and become quite difficult to get rid of. Examples of fossilized errors in Arab ESL learners are the lack of distinction between /p/ and /b/ in English and the insertion of the resumptive pronoun in English relative clauses produced by these learners.
6. **Avoidance:** Some syntactic structures are difficult to produce by some learners. Consequently, these learners

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avoid these structures and use instead simpler structures. Arab ESL learners avoid the passive voice while Japanese learners avoid relativization in English.

7. **Inadequate learning:** This is mainly caused by ignorance of rule restrictions or underdifferentiation and incomplete learning. An example is omission of the third person singular *s* as in: *He want*.
8. **False concepts hypothesized:** Many learners' errors can be attributed to wrong hypotheses formed by these learners about the target language. For example, some learners think that *is* is the marker of the present tense. So, they produce: *He is talk to the teacher*. Similarly, they think that *was* is the past tense marker. Hence they say: *It was happened last night*.

### Error Treatment

Teachers cannot and should not correct all errors committed by their students. Besides, the frequent correction of oral errors disrupts the process of language learning and discourages shy students from communicating in the target language. The following are general guidelines in correcting second language learning errors:

1. Teachers should correct errors affecting intelligibility, i.e., errors that interfere with the general meaning and understandability of utterances. In this connection, teachers should concentrate on correcting global errors more than local errors.
2. High frequency and generality errors should be corrected more often than less frequent errors. For example, the omission of the third person singular *s* is an error of high frequency and generality.
3. Teachers should put more emphasis on correcting errors affecting a large percentage of their students. This factor is clearly related to the second factor above.
4. Stigmatizing or irritating errors should be paid more attention to. This factor is related to the sociolinguistic aspect of

language learning. Pupils who come from lower socioeconomic classes are conscious of and very sensitive to ridicule about their informal variety of language from students from higher socioeconomic classes who speak a more formal and prestigious variety of the language.

5. Finally, errors relevant to a pedagogical focus should receive more attention from the teacher than other errors. For example, if the focus of the lesson is the use of the present perfect tense, the correction of errors involving prepositions, articles, and demonstratives in this lesson should not be emphasized by the teacher because if he/she did, the attention of the students would be distracted from the focus of the lesson which, in this instance, is the use of the present perfect tense.

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