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Common Errors & Mistakes of the Language Learners in Bangladesh: A Case study

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims at exploring some of the problem areas specially in writing of the language in Bangladesh and at relating them to various pedagogical, contextual and cultural issues that serve in the learner's learning English. The article also recommends some remedies to be implemented with a view to expediting the overall teaching-learning process in the language classrooms in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Errors, Mistakes, Language, Learners, Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Common errors and mistakes of the English language learners in Bangladesh have long been analyzed by many experts. There is no denying the fact that error analysis can play a significant part in assessing and evaluating a particular group of learners who frequently commit mistakes in different areas. The analyses of the common errors and mistakes of a group of learners in the language classrooms also provide a language instructor with some practice knowledge as to how he/she should approach their teaching, what would be their strategy in the class and also what methodology should be followed in the classroom in course of their teaching.

So, the article shows some most common errors and mistakes of the English language learners in Bangladesh. There is certainly much truth in the remark that it is very difficult to come to a conclusion regarding the issue comparing the huge number of English language learners in Bangladesh with the collection of my limited samples. But it is hoped that the process of analysis would be very useful in predicting the general trend of errors/mistakes. The article also aims at minimizing these common errors and facilitating the teaching-learning process as it recommends some remedial measures that might come out through the investigation process.

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2. THE MEANING OF 'ERROR' AND 'MISTAKES'

According to S. Pit Corder(1967), “an error is a systematic deviation made by learners who have not yet mastered the rules of language”. Rod Ellis says, “an error can be defined as a deviation from the norms of the target language. But, the definitions are not wholly satisfactory”. Richards(1971) mentions the term ‘error’ to refer to a form of structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable. By and large, an error is viewed as a form or combination of forms produced by the language learner which would be unacceptable to the average native speaker because it reflects the lack of competence in the language learners. ‘Mistakes’ occur when learners fail to perform their competence(S. Pit Corder 1967).

Now, if I can analyze systematically, the errors committed by the language learners will reveal which items of the language have been learnt incorrectly by them. As a result, a systematic error analysis might be useful in making teaching and learning easier and less complex by adopting methods and approaches most suitable to the given context. Teh Geok Choan (1993) contends that error analysis is useful to the teachers because it provides information on common trouble spots in language learning. It thus helps in the preparation of effective teaching materials. Also by being able to predict errors to a certain extent, teachers can help students minimize as well as overcome their learning problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

It is true that error analysis through applying a proper methodology is not a very easy task. Over the years, Linguists differ greatly as to how one should treat learners, errors. It is because attitudes towards errors vary among teachers as well as learners.

It would be useful to cite some policies and references of some linguists before approaching the issue of error analysis. Steve Schackne (2002) believes that there is no hard evidence that aggressive correction leads to positive results any more than a hands-off approach does. However, he makes a couple of observations in this regard. Speakers who do not understand each other use rhetorical devices, such as, paraphrasing and asking for clarification etc to avoid directly confronting errors. These devices are useful when a speaker makes global errors, i.e., those which affect comprehension. On the other hand, local errors are simply ignored. Some of the instructors, however, believe that direct intervention is often ineffective and serves only to hamper communication.

Stephen Pit Corder (1974, cited in Ellis 1994), the pioneer of Error Analysis, has proposed the following steps in EA research:

- Collection of a sample of learner’s language
- Identification of errors
- Description of errors
- Explanation of errors
- Evaluation of errors

Abbot et al (1980), however, do not use the step ‘description’ at all. They suggest instead the following two steps:

- Reconstruction
- Classification

Steve Schackne (2002) however, proposes, a common sense approach to treating errors in L2 learners, which he believes will be ‘minimally disruptive to both the flow of the lesson and student motivation’. Schackne’s common sense approach comprises the following stages:

- Investigation
- Isolation
- Demonstration
- Experimentation
- Learning-Acquisition

The author of this article, however, tries to follow a method here which is somewhat different. A combination of data collection and interview has been used in this small-scale research with the standard data analysis instrument being used but it obviously conforms to the traditional error analysis procedure. Keeping the main objective of the study in mind, the authors at the same time attempt something different. As error analysis in this article is based on students’ writing, writing samples were collected from around 100 students who were undergraduate students at Manarat International University, Dhaka in 2009. As the author is the course teacher of one of their English language courses, the students are well-acquainted. They were asked to write compositions on “Your present, Your past vacation & Your Future Plan” as an assignment. Since it was a part of the class activity, the learners took it casually as part of their regular class work. So, the writing reflected their natural writing ability. And thus the most common errors made by the students could be diagnosed. The author worked independently with his own students but followed the same methodology and analyze the findings later on.

After collecting, checking and re-checking the writing samples of 100 students, the author made an arrangement for interview. The interview continued for over a week. The students expressed their opinions in a very comfortable & congenial atmosphere as the interviewer himself is their course Instructor. While interviewing the students, the authors took out the checklist of errors and notes prepared for each student concerned. And accordingly the interview questions were directed to the errors/mistakes s/he had made. The questions in the interview evolved around the nature of the errors, possible reasons for making such errors (as were initially assumed by the authors), background information of the learners, their English learning background, and their observation on their own errors, etc.

4. THE STUDY

In two steps the study was conducted: In step one, 100 students were asked to write a composition as an assignment on “Your present, Your past vacation and Your future plan”. In step two, the students were interviewed with a view to finding out the possible reasons for and explanations of the errors they had earlier committed.

4.1. Step: 01:-

In step one the students were given an assignment on three writing topics- i) Your present ii) Describing past vacation iii) Your future plan. The word limitation of the composition was 400 to 450 words. The sample assignments thus collected were closely read and reviewed at a time convenient to the author. The errors/mistakes committed by the students were underlined, and then corrected. Notes were written beside each error/mistake with their category/type (i.e. error in tense, spelling, article, agreement etc) and with the possible reasons for committing such errors as were assumed by the author.

Below is a brief list of the most frequently occurring errors found in the scripts of the students followed by the analysis:

4.1. (a) **Spelling:** Errors in spelling were found as one of the most widely spread problems in the scripts of the learners. 40% of the total number of errors in 100 scripts was in spelling. Words like alys, or allwyes were written for always. One of the reasons behind committing this kind of error could be the confusion of students with the words of nearly the same sounds (homophony). A lot of such errors were detected. Examples were: Studing for studying; stoped for stopped, belive for believe; usually for usually, bron for born, hiard for hired, socity for society, successful for successful and many more. If one tries to analyze the nature of these errors, it would be evident that most of the errors, it would be evident that most of the errors have something to do with ‘sounds’. So, in most cases, the sounds of different words are same but the spellings of these words are different. The learners are not careful about the spellings of English words.

The following are 5.1.(b)->5.1(i) the analysis of errors in various grammar items. It was found that 51% of the total number of errors in the sample writings was in grammar.

4.1. (b) **Tense:-** The learners were given an assignment on i) Your present ii) Describing past vacation & iii) Your Future plan. The topics were chosen on specific purpose in mind. It was expected that the learners while writing the topics would use all the three tenses in English: present, past and future. However, it is evident from the students’ writings that most of them were quite confused with the tenses. For example: one of the assignments read as follows:

“I was a very nice vacation. Last month, I go to Cox’s Bazar. There I see many things. I was stay there 5 days. It is very interesting vacation.” The examples above were

just a few of many such errors that the students committed in tense. From the sentences quoted it is clear that there are other errors in it as well. He started the paragraph willing to describe his past, and he proceeded to write the second sentence about his past vacation in present tense!

4.1. (c) Agreement: Agreement in writing was another major matter of concern as was evident from the writings of the students. Many of them failed to maintain even the elementary agreements in their writings. Below are some of the errors in agreement found in their writings-

- * Now this time I am a student and always wants to complete my course. (Subject-verb agreement).
- * All my teacher is very good. They loves me very much. (Subject-verb agreement)
- * At first we goes the sea-beach(subject-verb agreement).
- * My past vacation is very enjoyable for me. (problem in tense & subject verb agreement)
- * Many people says that future plan is very good. (subject-verb agreement).

4.1. (d) Article: Students committed some ridiculous errors on articles as well. In Bangladesh these grammar items are taught at elementary levels. Therefore it is sometimes hard to believe that students are still making mistakes at this level. Some of the article errors found in their scripts are as follows:

- * It was a interesting vacation.
- * Everyone must have a ambition.
- * I could not pronounce an word.

4.1. (e) Verbs: Many learners, it seemed, did not know the right forms of verbs. Some students used the past or past participle forms after an infinitive “to” as the examples below would testify:

- * He told me that I will built up my career.
- * I always wants to completed my course. (both subject-verb agreement & verb).
- * I am wanted that I will be famous.

4.1. (f) Auxiliaries: It was evident in the writing of the students, the use of auxiliaries was a major problem area for learners at this level. Many of them did not even know the use of different auxiliaries and they could not differentiate between the primary and modal auxiliaries. Also, they faced a lot of problems when they had to change sentences into negative, interrogative or negative-interrogative. Their difficulties multiplied when they were asked to make these changes with sentences given in different tenses. A few examples of such errors are given below:

- * I am stay there 5 days
- * I will must work hard for my ambition (two modals).
- * After I completed my Hon's, I am admit in M.A. (problem in tense & grammar & auxiliaries).

4.1. **(g) Active/Passive:** Students often confused the active voice with the passive.

We (*) born as child. (*no use of auxiliary)

The author experienced many such errors related to voice on other occasions.

4.1. **(h) Preposition:** Students were very tentative with preposition. It was clear that they were not taught the use of prepositions properly at the secondary or higher secondary levels. Some of the errors on preposition are listed below:

- * I always want to listen (*) my parent's advice. (* no preposition is used)
- * Once my mother was annoyed for me and told that she would not take me to school. (faulty preposition, for in place of with)
- * I want to earn in a better means for my father.

4.1. **(i) Lexical and others:** 17% of the errors detected in the 100 samples fall into this mixed type category.

- * Life is a flowing process.
- * Past is those day * which we overcome with memories.
- * My past life was great. I can't never get it. (double negativities)
- * My father gave some money for the journey and buy something.
- * My father always wants to good result (??) and also make (sub-vb agreement???) an honest and braveful(??) person.
- * We kept busy our classroom when our teacher absented.
- * I feel very boring. In university life I have acute inhabitant problem.
- * I was the only one son of my parents.
- * When my group lost any match, then I showed them very bad behave (???)
- * I admitted (*) a renowned university in Bangladesh. (*no preposition is used, apparently following Bangla structure)

5.2. Step: 02:- As has been mentioned above, the research was conducted in two steps the second step being the interview of the students. After the writing of the learners were checked and notes written against the errors committed by them, the students were interviewed with prior set questions. This was done to get an idea as to why, they thought, they had committed such and such errors. In the end, it turned out that the interview had been quite useful in learning more about the writing problems of the students as they had responded spontaneously sharing their thoughts and views.

The questionnaire for the interview was prepared with a lot of care keeping in mind some specific issues regarding the trend of errors. All the (48) students were asked more or less the same questions with slight variations depending on the context so as to make the questions more relevant and accommodating to the errors they had made. While interviewing them the authors kept notes of students' response so that a general conclusion could be drawn later on. As the students participated spontaneously, authentic outcome regarding their thoughts and beliefs on their errors was expected.

Since we cannot accommodate the entire account of the interviews that took place, we would rather give a gist, first, of the questions which were set for the interviews and then, the responses that students made to these questions in a generalized manner.

5.2. (a) Questions for the interview

- (1) What is your evaluation of your own writing? Do you think you make mistakes/errors often?
- (2) Do you think make more mistakes than errors? How do you know? Did you ever make an analysis of your own errors/mistakes in writing?
- (3) Why do think you make these errors/mistakes? Is it because of your lack of concentration while writing? Have you ever thought about it?
- (4) Do you have any checklist of the kind of errors you commit more often? Are you aware of the errors you commit most often?
- (5) How do/did your English teachers address your errors? Do/did they invite you for conference?
- (6) Do you like it if your teachers identify your errors and analyse them for you? Or, do you feel more comfortable doing it yourself?
- (7) Have you ever tried to identify errors in your friends' writings? Could you find them? How do you feel about peer correction? Do you think it helps your learning and make you more aware of your problems in writing?
- (8) You have made some errors/mistakes which I believe, you could have avoided if you had been a bit more serious. (The students were, at this point, shown some of the mistakes/errors they had made). How will you explain this?
- (9) Do/did you think in Bangla while writing in English? Did you translate your thoughts from Bangla to English?
- (10) How do you think your teachers/instructors can help you overcome your problems? Do you have any suggestion regarding the teaching method we follow here so that you could perform/learn better?

Now we can look at the responses of the learners to these questions. Again, we would discuss them in a brief and generalized way. The responses recorded for each of the questions mentioned above follow the same numerical order as the questions:

5.2. (b): Responses:-

- 1) Most of the students replied that they never evaluated or thought of evaluating their own writing. They are not easier to write more. They wrote either to impress the instructor or simply to pass the course.
- 2) Majority of the students replied in the negative as for the last part of the Question. They could not reply the first part exactly as they did not understand the difference between errors and mistakes.
- 3) In response to this question, most of the students admitted their lacking in basic Grammar, sentence structure, spelling etc.
- 4) Most of the students did not have any checklist of their errors. Even they were not aware of their errors which they committed most often.
- 5) Students in general opined that the English teachers address their errors truly but hardly invite them for conference.
- 6) Students seemed to favour idea of teachers identifying and analyzing their errors. However, they felt that self correction would make them more aware of their own weaknesses.
- 7) Most of the students informed that they tried to overcome one another's problem by analyzing and correcting each others' errors in writing.
- 8) In this condition, most of the students explained that they made some silly mistakes due to the concentration or the negligence for the subject or to the lack of practice.
- 9) In replying this question more than fifty percent students agreed that they translate their thoughts from Bangla to English.

10) Most of the students reply some vague notions to this question. But few of them refer to some remedial measures the instructors should take to overcome their problems. A proper methodology, the technological support & the individual care were some of the suggestions of the learners regarding the teaching methods of the language Instructors of our country.

6. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After having done the literature review, analyzed the errors of the learners and interviewed them, it becomes clear that getting to the root of the errors is not an easy task at all. Actually the reasons for committing so varied types of errors were many as they were interwoven with different factors. Still, shading light on some of the important issues should be quite useful.

To start with, it is observed that many of the errors in spelling (36% of total errors) derived from the inability of our EFL learners in recognizing the sound patterns of English, more specifically, the homophony words. At times they got confused with the similar or near-similar sound patterns in English. Teachers/language instructors, especially those who taught at primary and secondary levels could be held responsible.

The errors committed by students in grammar (51% of total errors) revealed a general lack of strong structural knowledge of the language. In most cases, they tried to over-generalise the rules from their mother tongue. Thus on many occasions they simply tried to translate their thoughts into English with the structure of their mother tongue (Bangla) in mind resulting in incongruent sentence structures.

Tense was the most basic grammar item that they learned at school (primary) stage and yet they struggled to get their tenses right. The reason was that they did not learn tense in context with sufficient readings but rather tried to learn it by heart and in bits and pieces.

One other observation the authors made was that most of the times they were not ready to give enough time to English study, assuming English as of secondary importance. This was true especially with undergrads majoring in business or science subjects.

Students committed a staggering number of errors on verbs. Many of them did not have a clear idea about the use of auxiliaries. Also they seemed to be confused about the use of different forms of verbs and when to use which form.

Sentences constructed without parallelism and agreement (i.e. subject-verb, noun-determiner etc.) were two widely occurring problems detected in the writings of the students.

Errors on articles, preposition, active/passive voice etc were also prevalent. However, it was hard to explain how/why they made such errors. However, mistakes also have occurred for so simple reasons as inattentiveness, time constraints, impatience, lack of interest and so on.

Thus the findings discussed above are many and quite substantial. We feel that systematic analysis of errors in students' writing is necessary to identify their weaknesses. And if feedback is provided accordingly they could be made more aware of the outcome of their learning.

On the basis of the discussions and findings described above we would like to make the following recommendations:

At the beginning we must acknowledge that it is indeed very difficult to single out an error, to relate that to one reason or the other as its possible cause and to find a possible remedy for that. However, the following are some of the recommendations we would like to make as an outcome of the analysis of the samples collected, the subsequent interviews that followed the data collection coupled with our classroom teaching experience at this level.

1. Many incorrect forms occur simply because of carelessness of the learners themselves. It is not that they do not know the rules but that they do not always make sincere efforts to write correctly. One of the reasons behind this is that the learners' motivation level is very low. So measures should be taken in this regard.

2. It transpired that students are/were not properly instructed in grammar: certain important topics of English grammar are not included in the syllabus. So a thorough review of the current communicative syllabus must be conducted soon.
3. Teachers need to be more pro-active, especially at secondary and higher-secondary levels. They have to make efforts to help students on a once to one basis instead of as a whole class. When learners get personal attention regarding their problems, it certainly provided them with more incentives for learning.
4. Conscious efforts should be made to familiarize students with the sound patterns of English, at least upto an elementary level. This would certainly help them become aware of the similar or near-similar sounds of English and avoid a lot of errors in spelling. This would also help them make the right use of the homophony words and avoid confusion over meanings of different words with identical sounds.
5. However improbable it may sound in our context, measures should be taken to maintain an ideal class size at all levels. Too many students in the class are at the root of frustration on the part of the learners as well as teachers. Students' errors cannot be properly addressed in a big class, even when there is an honest intention to do so.
6. In order to avoid L1 interference provisions can be made to make contrastive analysis of the structures of English and Bangla. This is important because students often try to translate ideas in a way they usually do in Bangla. Students will thus know that English and Bangla have both similar as well as dissimilar structures patterns.
7. As was revealed in the interviews, students are quite willing to involve themselves in peer review activities. So they should be encouraged more to do so. This may generate interests in the learners about finding problems in writing and thus may help them identify and become more conscious about their own errors.
8. Encouraging learners to keep a checklist of the most frequently occurring mistakes and asking them to make it a habit could help curb down their mistakes in writing. This would also teach them to become more analytical and critical about their writing performance.
9. The instructors must make it a point to invite learners frequently for conferencing during which they could help them identify the errors/mistakes and the remedies for them in a sympathetic and patient manner.
10. We strongly believe that creating a culture of "English Only (EO)" on campus is essential. This would make students use English all the time. In this set-up, ideally all the students, regardless of their subject, seniority, competence, background should compulsorily use English for every kind of correspondence so long as they stay on campus.

7. Conclusion:

We do not claim that the current work is representative of errors in writing of the language learners in Bangladesh in general; still, we can safely say that the trend and nature of errors/mistakes of our language learners are reflected to a large extent in the study. So, the description of errors/mistakes above might be useful in planning and administering lessons, delivering lectures, and designing syllabus in our country.

We cannot forget the fact that making mistakes/errors is an integral part of foreign language learning. But if the errors/mistakes made by the learners are not attended to judiciously at the budding stage, they might lead to huge frustrations among teachers and the student population. Hence a pragmatic approach to error correction should be an essential part of language pedagogy.

The errors of our learners being so diverse and widespread and the ideal classroom situation lacking, the recommendations made above should not work unless and until the students are put to work more and more in reality. One of the biggest hurdles that our learners face is the lack of exposure and environment to practice whatever little knowledge they have already acquired. That is, they fail to make the most of their knowledge as they have to use very little English in everyday life with very few exceptions. So a change of the prevailing setup is essential if any long-term improvement of any sort is expected in this regard. But how? The questing remains for the planners, policy makers and the administrators!

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