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LEARNING THEORIES

T AND TEACHING PRACTICES

IN SECOND LANGUAGE

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In The Name Of God

**LEARNING THEORIES AND TEACHING
PRACTICES IN SECOND LANGUAGE**

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A covert error occurs in utterances that are superficially well-formed but which do not mean what the learner intended them to mean. For example, the utterance:

**It was stopped.*

This sentence is apparently grammatical until it becomes clear that 'it' refers to 'the wind'. Furthermore, a superficially correct utterance may only be correct by chance. For example, the learner may manifest target-like control of negative constructions in ready-made chunks such as 'I don't know' but fail to do so in 'created' utterances (i.e. utterances that are constructed on the basis of rules the learner has internalized). The existence of covert errors led Corder to argue that 'every sentence is to be regarded as idiosyncratic until shown to be otherwise.'

A fourth question concerns whether the analysis should examine only deviations in correctness or also deviations in appropriateness. The former involves rules of usage and is illustrated in the two examples above. The latter involves rules of language use. For example, a learner who invites a relative stranger by saying 'I want you to come to the cinema with me' has succeeded in using the code correctly but has failed to use it appropriately. In general, EA has attended to 'breaches of the code' and ignored 'misuse of the code'.

These various distinctions are indicative of the kinds of problems which analysts face in recognizing errors. To overcome them, Corder proposes an elaborate procedure (see Figure 2.1) for identifying errors. This procedure acknowledges the importance of 'interpretation' and distinguishes three types: *normal*, *authoritative*, and *plausible*. A *normal interpretation* occurs when the analyst is able to assign a meaning to an utterance on the basis of the rules of the target language. In such cases, the utterance is not apparently erroneous, although it may still only be right by chance. An *authoritative interpretation* involves asking the learner (if available) to say what the utterance means and, by so doing, to make an authoritative reconstruction. A *plausible interpretation* can be obtained by referring to the context in which the utterance was produced or by translating the sentence literally into the learner's L1.

part



II

**The Description Of
Learner Language**

Introduction

An obvious starting point in the study of second language (L2) acquisition is the study of the language that learners produce at different stages of their development. Learner language can provide the researcher with insights into the process of acquisition. A number of different approaches to the description of learner language can be identified:

- the study of learners' errors
- the study of developmental patterns
- the study of variability
- the study of pragmatic features

Chapter Two

Learner Errors and Error Analysis

Learners make errors in both comprehension and production. An example of a comprehension error is when a learner misunderstands the sentence “Pass me the paper” as “Pass me the pepper”, because of an inability to discriminate the sounds /ei/ and /e/. However, comprehension errors have received scant attention, for, although we can test comprehension in general terms, it is very difficult to assign the cause of failures of comprehension to an inadequate knowledge of a particular syntactic feature of a misunderstood utterance. In this chapter, in accordance with the main focus in second language acquisition research, we will concentrate on production errors.

L2 learners are not alone in making errors. Children learning their first language (L1) also make errors. Also, even adult native speakers sometimes make errors.

But it is probably true to say that these 'errors' are not generally thought of as errors in the same sense as those produced by L2 learners. Whereas L2 learners' errors are generally viewed as '*unwanted forms*', children's 'errors' are seen as '*transitional forms*' and adult native speakers' errors as '*slips of the tongue*'. The study of errors is carried out by means of *Error Analysis* (EA). In the 1970s, EA supplanted *Contrastive Analysis* (CA), which sought to predict the errors that learners make by identifying the linguistic differences between their L1 and the target language. The underlying assumption of CA was that errors occurred primarily as a result of *interference* when the learner transferred native language 'habits' into the L2. Interference was believed to take place whenever the 'habits' of the native languages differed from those of the target language. CA gave way to EA as this assumption came to be challenged. Whereas CA looked at only the learner's native language and the target language (i.e. *fully-formed languages*), EA provided a methodology for investigating *learner language*. For this reason EA constitutes an appropriate starting point for the study of learner language and L2 acquisition. It was not until the 1970s that EA became a recognized part of applied linguistics, a development that owed much to the work of Corder.

Corder (1967) noted that errors could be significant in three ways:

- (1) they provided the teacher with information about how much the learner had learnt,
- (2) they provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, and

(3) they served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language.

Steps in error analysis research

Corder (1974) suggests the following steps in EA research:

1. *Collection of a sample of learner language*
2. *Identification of errors*
3. *Description of errors*
4. *Explanation of errors*
5. *Evaluation of errors*

This chapter will consider the procedures involved in each of these steps. In so doing, it will examine some of the research carried out in the 1970s and, where appropriate, the methodological problems. A general critique of EA follows. Finally, it will look at some more recent research which has made use of the techniques of error analysis.

Collection of a sample of learner language

The starting point in EA is deciding what samples of learner language to use for the analysis and how to collect these samples.

We can identify three broad types of EA according to the size of the sample. A massive sample involves collecting several samples of language use from a large number of learners in order to compile a comprehensive list of errors, representative of the entire population. A specific sample consists of one sample of language use collected from a limited number of learners, while an incidental sample involves only one sample of language use produced by a single learner. Clearly an EA based on a massive sample is a major undertaking and it is not surprising that most published EAs have employed specific or incidental samples.

The errors that learners make can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, they may make errors in speaking, but not in writing, as a result of the different processing conditions involved. Learners with one L1 may make a particular error which learners with a different L1 do not. This points to the importance of collecting well-defined samples of learner language so that clear statements can be made regarding what kinds of errors the learners produce

Chapter Eight

Language Transfer

Behaviorist views of language learning and of language teaching were predominant in the two decades following the Second World War. These views drew on general theories of learning propounded by psychologists such as Watson (1924), Thorndike (1932), and Skinner (1957). Dakin (1973) identifies three general principles of language learning derived from these theories. According to *the law of exercise*, language learning is promoted when (he learner makes active and repeated responses to stimuli. *The law of effect* emphasizes the importance of reinforcing the learners' responses by rewarding target-like responses and correcting non-target-like ones. *The principle of shaping* claims that learning will proceed most smoothly and rapidly if complex behaviors are broken down into their component parts and learnt bit by bit. Underlying these principles was the assumption that language learning, like any other kind of learning, took the form of habit formation, a 'habit' consisting of an automatic response elicited by a given stimulus. The single paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem solving, but the formation and performance of habits. Learning was seen to take place *inductively* through '*analogy*' rather than '*analysis*'.

According to behaviorist theories, the main impediment to learning was *interference* from prior knowledge. Proactive inhibition occurred when old habits got in the way of attempts to learn new ones. In such cases, the old habits had to be '*unlearnt*' so that they could be replaced by new ones. In the case of L2 learning, however, the notion of '*unlearning*' made little sense, as learners clearly did not need to forget their L1 in order to acquire an L2, although in some cases loss of the native language might take place eventually. For this reason, behaviorist theories of L2 learning emphasized the idea of '*difficulty*', defined as the amount of effort required to learn an L2 pattern. The degree of difficulty was believed to depend primarily in the extent to which the target language pattern was similar to or different from a native- language pattern. Where the two were identical, learning could take place easily through positive transfer of the native-language pattern, but where they were different, learning difficulty arose and errors resulting from negative transfer were likely to occur. Such *errors* or '*bad habits*' were considered damaging to successful language learning because they prevented the formation of the correct target-language habits. The commonly held view was that like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence to be expected.

These behaviorist views have now been discredited. Chomsky's (1959) review of *Skinner's Verbal Behavior* set in motion a re-evaluation of many of the central claims. The dangers of extrapolating from laboratory studies of animal behavior to the language behavior of humans were pointed out. The terms '*stimulus*' and '*response*' were exposed as vacuous where language behavior was concerned. 'Analogy' could not account for the language user's ability to generate totally novel utterances. Furthermore, studies of children acquiring their L1 showed that parents rarely corrected their children's linguistic errors, thus casting doubt on the importance of '*reinforcement*' in language learning. These studies suggested that language acquisition was *developmental* in nature, driven as much, if not more, from the inside as from the outside. As we shall see, the demise of behaviorist accounts of language learning led to a reconsideration of the role of the L1 in L2 learning.

Terminological issues

The terms '*interference*' and '*transfer*' are closely associated with behaviorist theories of L2 learning. However, it is now widely accepted that the influence of the learner's native language cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of habit formation. Nor is transfer simply a matter of interference or of falling back on the native language. Nor is it just a question of the influence of the learner's native language, as other previously acquired 'second' languages can also have an effect. This suggests that the term 'L1 transfer' itself is inadequate. Sharwood Smith and Kellerman (1986) have argued that a superordinate term that is theory-neutral is needed and suggest *crosslinguistic influence* that is *theory-neutral*, allowing one to subsume under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss and thus permitting discussion of the similarities and differences between these phenomena.

Transfer can be viewed those processes that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another. Manifestations of transfer are:

1. **Errors:** They occurred as a result of the negative transfer of mother tongue patterns into the learner's L2,
2. **Facilitation** (positive transfer): The learner's L1 can also facilitate L2 learning. The facilitative effect of the L1 can also be adduced by certain types of *U-shaped behavior*. Learners may sometimes pass through an early stage of

development where they manifest correct use of a target-language feature if this feature corresponds to an L1 feature and then, subsequently, replace it with a developmental L2 feature before finally returning to the correct target-language feature. In such a case, the facilitative effect is evident in the early stages of acquisition, before the learner is 'ready' to construct a developmental rule. The 're-learning' of the correct target-language rule occurs when learners abandon the developmental rule as they come to notice that it is incompatible with the input. The facilitative effect of the L1 is evident in other aspects of L2 acquisition. In many cases, this is obvious, as when two languages share a large number of cognates (for example, English and French), thus giving the learners a head start in vocabulary.

3. *Avoidance* (or underproduction): Learners also avoid using linguistic structures which they find difficult because of differences between their native language and the target language. In such cases, the effects of the L1 are evident not in what learners do (errors) but in what they do not do (omissions). The identification of avoidance is not an easy task. Seliger (1989) points out that it is only possible to claim that avoidance has taken place if the learner has demonstrated knowledge of the form in question, and if there is evidence available that native speakers of the L2 would use the form in the context under consideration. In other words, it only makes sense to talk of avoidance if the learners know what they are avoiding.

4. *Over-use*: The over-use or 'over-indulgence' (Levenson, 1971) of certain grammatical forms in L2 acquisition can occur as a result of intralingual processes such as overgeneralization. Over-use can also result from transfer—often as a consequence of the avoidance or underproduction of some 'difficult' structure.

Difference and difficulty: the role of contrastive analysis

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as formulated by Lado (1957) was based on this assumption that the student who comes into contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult (difference=difficulty). The 1960s saw a spate of contrastive analyses involving the major European languages. They were designed to provide course developers with information regarding where the differences and hence the

Chapter Fifteen

Constituents Of Language Teaching

Method vs. methodology

A variety of labels such as approach, design, methods, practices, principles, procedures, strategies, tactics, techniques, and so on are used to describe various elements constituting language teaching. A plethora of terms and labels can hardly facilitate a meaningful and informed discussion in any area of professional activity.

Method is central to any language teaching enterprise. Teachers use the same term, *method*, to refer to two different elements of language teaching: *method* as proposed by theorists, and *method* as practiced by teachers. What the teachers actually do in the classroom is different from what is advocated by the theorists.

One way of clearing the confusion created by the indiscriminate use of the term, *method*, is to make a distinction between *method* and *methodology*.

Method refers to established methods conceptualized and constructed by experts in the field (see text to come). *Methodology* refers to what practicing teachers actually do in the classroom in order to achieve their stated or unstated teaching objectives. This distinction is nothing new; it is implicit in some of the literature on language teaching. Such a distinction is, in fact, the basis by which Mackey (1965) differentiated what he called *method analysis* from *teaching analysis*. He rightly asserted that any meaning of *method* must first distinguish between what a teacher teaches and what a book teaches. It must not confuse the text used with the teacher using it, or the *method* with the teaching of it. *Method analysis* is one thing, therefore, *teaching analysis*, quite another. *Method analysis* determines how teaching is done by the book; *teaching analysis* shows how much is done by the teacher.

Approach, method, and technique

Antony (1963) was perhaps the first in modern times to articulate a framework for understanding the constituents of *method*. He proposed a three-way distinction: *Approach*: a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught. Thus, an *approach* embodies the theoretical principles governing language learning and language teaching.

Method: an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected

approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural. As such, within one approach there can be many methods. Methods are implemented in the classroom through what are called *techniques*, particular tricks, strategems, or contrivances used to accomplish an immediate objective.

The tripartite framework is hierarchical in the sense that approach informs method, and method informs techniques. However, a lack of precise formulation of the framework resulted in a widespread dissatisfaction with it. Antony himself felt that modifications and refinements of his framework are “possible” and even “desirable” primarily because the distinction between approach and method on one hand, and method and technique on the other hand, was not clearly delineated. The way approach and method are used interchangeably in some of the literature on L2 teaching testifies to the blurred boundaries between the two. Secondly, the inclusion of specific items within a constituent is sometimes based on subjective judgments. For instance, Antony considered pattern practice a method, and imitation a technique when, in fact, both of them can be classified as classroom *techniques* because they both refer to a sequence of classroom activities performed in the classroom environment, prompted by the teacher and practiced by the learner.

The Antony framework is flawed in yet another way. It attempted to portray the entire language teaching operations as a simple, hierarchical relationship between approach, method, and technique, without in any way considering the complex connections between intervening factors such as societal demands, institutional resources and constraints, instructional effectiveness, and learner needs. In short, the Antony framework did not effectively serve the purpose for which it was designed.

Approach, design, and procedure

To rectify some of the limitations of the Antony framework, Richards and Rodgers (1982) attempted to revise and refine it. They proposed a system that is broader in its scope and wider in its implications. Like Antony, they too made a three-part distinction—approach, design, and procedure—but introduced new terms to capture the refinements

The first level, *approach*, defines those assumptions, beliefs, and theories about the nature of language and the nature of language learning which operate as axiomatic constructs or reference points and provide a theoretical foundation for what language teachers ultimately do with learners in

classrooms. The second level in the system, *design*, specifies the relationship of theories of language and learning to both the form and function of instructional materials and activities in instructional settings. The third level, *procedure*, comprises the classroom techniques and practices which are consequences of particular approaches and designs.

Notice that the term, *method*, does not figure in this hierarchy. That is because Richards and Rodgers preferred to use it as an *umbrella term* to refer to the broader relationship between theory and practice in language teaching.

Design, however, is broader than Antony's *method* as it includes specifications of (a) the content of instruction, that is, the syllabus, (b) learner roles, (c) teacher roles, and (d) instructional materials and their types and functions. *Procedure*, like *technique* in the Antony framework, refers to the actual moment-to-moment classroom activity. It includes a specification of context of use and a description of precisely what is expected in terms of execution and outcome for each exercise type. *Procedure*, then, is concerned with issues such as the following: the types of teaching and learning techniques, the types of exercises and practice activities, and the resources—time, space, equipment—required to implement recommended activities.

Categories of language teaching methods

The exact number of methods currently in use is unclear. It is easy to count nearly a dozen, ranging from Audiolingualism to Jazz chants. It is not as if the existing methods provide distinct or discrete paths to language teaching. In fact, there is considerable overlap in their theoretical as well as practical orientation to L2 learning and teaching. It is therefore beneficial, for the purpose of analysis and understanding, to categorize established methods into:

1. *language-centered methods*
2. *learner-centered methods*, and
3. *learning-centered methods*

Language-centered methods

Language-centered methods are those that are principally concerned with *linguistic forms*. These methods (such as Audiolingual Method) seek to provide opportunities for learners to practice preselected, *presequenced linguistic*

structures through *form-focused exercises* in class, assuming that a preoccupation with form will ultimately lead to the mastery of the target language and that the learners can draw from this formal repertoire whenever they wish to communicate in the target language outside the class. According to this view, language development is more intentional than incidental. That is, learners are expected to pay continual and conscious attention to linguistic features through systematic planning and sustained practice in order to learn and to use them.

Language-centered pedagogists treat *language learning as a linear, additive process*. In other words, they believe that language develops primarily in terms of what Rutherford (1987) called "*accumulated entities*". That is, a set of grammatical structures and vocabulary items are carefully selected for their usability, and graded for their difficulty. The teacher's task is to introduce one discrete linguistic item at a time and help the learners practice it until they internalize it. Secondly, supporters of language-centered methods advocate *explicit introduction, analysis, and explanation of linguistic systems*. That is, they believe that the linguistic system is simple enough and our explanatory power clear enough to provide explicit rules of thumb, and explain them to the learners in such a way that they can understand and internalize them.

Theoretical principles

The fundamental principles of language-centered pedagogy are drawn from structural linguistics and behavioral psychology.

Theory of language

Language-centered pedagogists believed in the theory of language proposed and propagated by *American structural linguists* during the 1950s. Structural linguists treated language as a system of systems consisting of several *hierarchically linked building blocks*: phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses, and sentences, each with its own internal structure. These subsystems of language were thought to be linearly connected in a structured, systematic, and rule-governed way; that is, certain phonemes systematically cluster together to form a morpheme, certain morphemes systematically cluster together to form a phrase, and so forth. Secondly, structural linguists viewed language as *aural-oral*, thus emphasizing listening and speaking. *Speech was considered primary*, forming the very basis of language. *Structure* was viewed as