

Native and Non-Native Speaker Teachers' Perceptions of Errors

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Abstract

This study investigates the perception of error gravity by native and non-native teachers of English in a Tunisian context. Based on the data collected from a questionnaire, the native vs. non-native dichotomy was found to be relevant to the Tunisian context since NSTs were more flexible when dealing with EFL students' deviant utterances as long as they do not impede understanding, in contrast to the NNSTs who were harsher and insisted on the correctness of the messages. However, it is very simplistic to disfavour a particular teaching approach. Instead, it is advisable to adopt an eclectic approach ensuring a balance between accuracy and fluency by integrating grammar and correctional feedback within communicative tasks.

Keywords: *Native speakers - Non-native speakers - Errors – Error Correction- Contrastive Analysis - Error Analysis*

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Introduction

The late 1970's witnessed the swing of the pendulum in English language teaching from the Audio Lingual Method to the Communicative Approach. This shift in language teaching methodology engendered a switch in instructional emphasis from grammar translation, memorization of dialogues, and drills and practice of structural patterns to the use of language in real life contexts for meaningful purposes.

The basic tenet of the communicative language teaching resides in the concept of 'communicative competence' which was formulated by Hymes (1972) as a direct response to Chomsky's linguistic competence. This communicative competence implies the speaker's ability to use and interpret language appropriately taking into account the context in which it is being used and the socio-cultural constraints governing the successful production of verbal messages, the way native speakers do (Savignon, 1997). It follows that the focal point in the classroom is to incite learners to communicate in the target language by focusing on the message rather than on the form of the utterance. Therefore, teachers are expected to prioritize fluency over accuracy, and to tolerate students' errors since they represent a transitional stage towards the native-like proficiency.

However, researches worldwide have reported on the failure of applying the communicative approach by EFL teachers attributed to the disparity between their theoretical backgrounds and their actual teaching, and their misunderstanding of the very nature of communicative language teaching (Kumaradivelu, 1993; Karavas-Doukas, 1996). This observation has led to the resurgence of the native speaker as the optimal model to follow by both teachers. In this respect, Ferguson (1983) contends that "linguists... have long given a special place to the native speaker as the only true and reliable source of data" (p. vii). This study builds upon this interest and attempts to investigate the ways both native and non-native teachers deal with the language learners produce with a particular locus of interest on their respective ranking of the seriousness of errors.

The aim of this study is to examine a widely spread assumption in the fields of second language acquisition which stipulates that native speaker teachers tend to be more lenient than non-native speaker teachers when dealing with students' deviant utterances (Santos, 1988). To investigate this claim, both native and non-native speaker teachers were given a sample of EFL students' errors and were asked to rank those errors on a gravity scale. It was hypothesized that the native speaker teachers will tend to tolerate ungrammatical utterances as long as they do not jeopardize intelligibility; whereas, non-native speaker teachers will accord greater importance to the notion of correctness. Hyland and Anan (2006) observed that Japanese EFL teachers prioritized grammatical accuracy, focusing on rule violations when evaluating errors. In contrast, English native speaker teachers were more concerned with how errors affected intelligibility, demonstrating a more lenient

approach to mistakes that didn't hinder understanding

The reason for undertaking this topic stems from the observation of the great discrepancy between the theoretical background of non-native teachers and their actual teaching practice. It is worth noting here that, even though these teachers use textbooks that are designed for communicative purposes, they showed a strong tendency to revert to the traditional teacher-centred approach which is characterized by according much importance to accuracy over fluency and by stigmatizing learners' deviant utterances as being signals of imperfect learning.

The other incentive for undertaking this study stems from the recognition that learners' errors are a natural outcome of the learning process in that they provide valuable insights on the cognitive processes operating in the learner's mind while approximating native-like competence. Therefore, non native speaker teachers' negative attitudes towards errors are due to overhaul. It is hoped that the results of a comparative study between natives' and non-natives' perceptions would allow Tunisian teachers to locate sites of convergence and divergence between both groups, and consequently renovate their teaching methodology in the light of those results.

Research Questions

The primary research questions addressed in this study are:

- How do native and non-native speaker teachers perceive EFL learners' deviant utterances?
- What are the types of errors that are considered most serious by both groups of teachers?
- What are the criteria employed by both native and non-native teachers in their assessment of error gravity?
- What type of correction do they consider to be the most effective technique?

Literature Review

The identification and analysis of ESL/EFL learners' errors has always been a central part of the study of language acquisition/learning. The basic premise behind evaluating learners' deviant utterances lies in the fact that it shed light on the process and sequence of acquisition of English as a second/foreign language and subsequently, plan for the most appropriate teaching techniques and materials. Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) claim that the study of SLA can be said to have passed through two phases defined by the modes of inquiry researches have utilized in their work: Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis.

1.1. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis:

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (hereafter CAH) came to the forefront in the 1940's as the by-product of the behaviourist psychology which posits that humans are born with a tabula rasa and that learning takes place by responding to external stimuli and receiving proper reinforcement (Skinner, 1957). As such, errors were considered to be a wrong response to the stimulus, and therefore should be corrected immediately in order to prevent it from becoming a bad habit i.e. a wrong behavioural pattern. It appears clearly, thus, that errors were highly stigmatized and considered as pathologies that have to be eradicated since they signal non-learning. This stance is epitomized in Brook's (1960) claim that "like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcomes but its presence to be expected" (p.58).

This perception of learning influenced greatly the classroom setting, where teachers adopted the Audio Lingual Method which concentrated on the mimicry and memorization of target forms and tried to instil the correct patterns of the form into learners' mind. If learners made any erroneous utterance, the teacher corrected it on the spot by over practice until their performance is error-free. In fact, Brooks (1960) contends that "the principal way of avoiding [an error] is to shorten the line lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model" (p.58).

The CAH is founded on the assumption that the major obstacle for learning another language is interference from the mother tongue. The psychological underpinning of this claim resides in transfer theory

which stipulates that “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture” (Lado, 1957: 2). Odlin (1989) defines transfer as “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired”.

It is worth noting in this respect that transfer is further divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991: 53) stipulate that “where [the] two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur; where they were different, negative transfer, or interference would result”. In this line of thinking, the object of inquiry of the contrastive analysis is the systematic juxtaposition of structures of the mother tongue against those of the target language in order to identify sites of similarity and difference between them. Proponents of the CAH argue that listing differences and similarities according to the structural taxonomies would yield predictions about where to expect ease of learning and where to expect interference and hence difficulty.

The results of the systematic comparison between the native language and the target language provided the ground for curriculum designers in developing teaching materials. In this respect, Fries (1945) advocates that “the most efficient materials are those based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner” (p.259). The emphasis was on maximizing positive transfer by including similar structures and minimizing negative transfer by avoiding different ones.

1.2. The failure of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis:

The strong claims of the CAH, which stipulate a predictive power in anticipating errors and therefore the possibility to avoid them, were called into question and were subsequently discarded for being unrealistic and practically inadequate. The major pitfall of CAH lies in the fact that unpredicted errors actually did occur while predicted errors did not occur. The simplistic equation $\text{difference} = \text{difficulty} = \text{error}$ did not seem to be able to withstand the criticism resulting from the observation that some learners found no problems in learning structures that are different from their native language.

Furthermore, these claims did not account for the avoidance strategy (Schachter, 1974; Kleinmann, 1977). The absence of erroneous utterance in the speech production of the learner does not necessarily imply a perfect assimilation of the target language rules since learners generally tend to avoid structures they do not master very well in order to avoid committing errors.

In the same line of analysis, Catford (1964: 147) points out that “similarities can even be treacherous” in the sense that similar structures were found to be more problematic. Danesi (1995: 219) goes on to add that dissimilarity and not similarity that seemed to facilitate learning especially in the case of typologically distinct languages where the two systems are so different that no false associations were made. These findings led linguists to reconsider the effect of transfer since not all errors are ascribed to L1 interference.

1.3. Error Analysis:

In the late 1960's, the CAH has been discarded and superseded by Error Analysis (hereafter EA), which became the main pillar of second language acquisition. The behaviourism gave the theoretical legitimacy to the CAH and ultimately led to its downfall mainly when the basic assumptions of behaviourism have been called into question and challenged by the mentalist/cognitive psychology mainly after the publication of Chomsky's (1959) review of Skinner's verbal behaviour.

This shift of paradigm was brought about by the observation that second language learners follow the same sequence of acquisition as L1 learners (Dulay & Burt, 1974). The implication of this is that human beings must have some kind of innate capacity to acquire a language. In this respect, errors are no longer bad habits that should be eradicated. Instead, they provide clues about the mental processes underlying the formation and testing of hypotheses toward a mastery of the target language rules. In this context, Selinker (1992: 151) advocates that “the errors of a learner (...) are (a) not random, but are in fact systematic, and are (b) not ‘negative’ or ‘interfering’ in any way with learning a TL but are, on the contrary, a necessary positive factor, indicative of testing hypotheses”.

It is generally acknowledged that Corder (1967) was the first to advocate the significance of learners' errors in that "they provide the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (p.167). It is worth noting here that Corder (1967) draws a distinction between 'errors' and 'mistakes'. Mistakes do not represent a lack of competence; the learner knows the rules but fails to apply them due to random guesses, slips, fatigue or spoonerism. However, errors are deviations from the target language rules due to lack of competence or incomplete mastery of the rules. Generally speaking, mistakes can be self-corrected, whereas errors cannot.

EA sought its object of enquiry the identification and description of errors as a first step in order to determine their causes and the strategies of learning employed, and then find out the panacea i.e. therapy to diminish its effect. Error making became more tolerated for being natural and inevitable. Corder (1967) perceived errors as some kind of "transitional system", a notion which was undertaken later by Selinker (1972) to formulate the Interlanguage Theory which is conceptualized as "a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and the target languages" (Brown, 1994: 203). In the same line of thinking, the idea that L2 learners follow a specific pattern in acquiring the target language that is similar to L1 acquisition led Corder (1967) to conclude that they have an in-built syllabus, which implies that input is not necessarily equated to intake; and therefore the teacher has a little influence on the sequence of acquisition.

Research Methodology

2.1. Subjects:

This study employed random sampling technique in the selection of the informants in order to ensure that they are representative of their populations. In sum, the subjects involved in this study are 10 teachers who are teaching English as a foreign language in Tunisia. Five of them are Tunisian secondary school teachers chosen from different institutions in Siliana, whereas the other five are native speakers of English (both Americans and British) teaching respectively in Amideast and the British Council. The informants were selected at random in order to be representative of their populations.

2.2. Instruments:

To investigate the research questions, a two-section questionnaire was designed according to Hendrickson's (1978) framework of questions that should be asked in error analysis. In the first part, the informants were asked to rank 20 errors on a 5-point Likert Scale according to their gravity (1 being the least serious and 5 being the most serious); the second part is meant to explore the theoretical background of the informants and the roles they assume in the classroom with a special focus on error treatment by including open and close-ended questions about their preferences for particular methods of correction.

For the selection of the language corpus, a sample of written work was collected from 15 first-year university students at Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis. To establish validity and reliability of the data, the sample of errors was approved by 3 EFL teachers in the same institution as being typical and representative of the first-year students' population.

2.3. Data collection procedures:

The questionnaire previously described was administered to both native and non-native speaker teachers in order to investigate the two groups' attitudes towards learners' deviant utterances. The respondents' scores were calculated into mean averages by dividing the sum of the scores per each category by 25 (the number of opportunities multiplied by the number of subjects) in order to obtain a score on a scale of five representing the gravity of the error; and subsequently, those scores were compared in order to extrapolate conclusions on the teaching methodologies employed.

The errors were classified into 4 categories which are: lexical, grammatical, spelling and mechanics. Even though researches on error analysis classify include errors of spelling within the category of mechanics, I opted for a distinction between the two types on the basis that spelling errors distort the shape of the lexical item and render it incorrect; whereas, mechanics errors are only typographical in the sense that they affect the presentation of the word while at the same time remaining correct.

In order to undermine the Hawthorne effect, the subjects were not informed about the purpose of the study. Being aware that the questionnaire was designed to elicit and compare native and non-native teachers of English might have altered the results and therefore jeopardize the extrapolation of accurate and reliable findings.

Data Analysis

The examination of the average scores assigned by both native speaker teachers (hereafter NSTs) and non-native speaker teachers (hereafter NNSTs) to the errors reveals a tremendous disparity between the two groups' perceptions of error gravity. In fact, NNSTs ranking of errors according to their gravity was: 1) grammar 2) vocabulary 3) spelling 4) mechanics; whereas, NSTs ranking was: 1) vocabulary 2) grammar 3) mechanics 4) spelling. This discrepancy in the two groups' judgements of error gravity reveals that NNSTs are more interested in the accuracy of the students' utterances, in contrast to the NSTs who seem to accord more importance to fluency over accuracy. In this line of analysis, NSTs concern with lexical errors is quite licit since "lexical items carry the basic information loads of the meanings [speakers] want to comprehend and express" (Read, 2004: 146).

The general picture that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires is that spelling and mechanics errors represented the least concern of both NSTs and NNSTs. This could be explained by the fact that "spelling, punctuation, mastery of paragraphing and letter-writing conventions, and so on do not necessarily correlate with low ability or achievement" (Swan, 1995). This finding is further consolidated by the informants' responses to the question concerning their criteria for judging the seriousness of an error. It appears clearly that the two groups employ different criteria in their assessment of error gravity. While NNSTs considered infringements grammatical rules as a determiner of seriousness especially when those violations tend to be frequent, NSTs view the degree of intelligibility as a criterion for assessing the learners' deviant utterances. Errors were accepted by NSTs as long as they do not hinder understanding and therefore result in breakdown of communication.

What is striking however is the immense discrepancy between NNSTs responses on part 1 and question 1 of part 2 of the questionnaire. The two questions aforementioned are two different manners for asking exactly the same question: the first question employed an elicitation technique which means asking the question indirectly without drawing the subjects' attention to its aim in order to avoid the alteration of the answers; whereas, the second one is direct question whose aim is fairly predictable and therefore could be manipulated by the respondents. This measure is employed to detect and verify any inconsistency in the informants' responses for being assessed.

The results of question 1 part 2 were absolutely contradictory to the results of part 1 previously reported since the NNSTs ranking of error gravity shifted to the opposite direction. The order of priority became 1) mechanics 2) vocabulary 3) spelling 4) grammar. This mismatch between the NNSTs responses in the two questions conveys the discrepancy between their theoretical background and their actual teaching practice. This observation goes in line with Pajares' (1992) conclusion that teachers' acknowledgements about CLT are not what inform their classroom behaviour, and that classroom conduct rests rather on their underlying beliefs.

It worth noting here that, in addition to inter-group differences, it is essential to investigate intra-group variation. In the NSTs group, 40% of the teachers considered grammatical errors as the most serious errors, whereas the other 60% accorded the highest score of gravity to vocabulary. In contrast, 80% of the NNSTs attached the greatest importance to grammar, and only 20% were more preoccupied by lexical errors. Moreover, the highest score attributed to a category was 4.8 out of 5 from a NNST to deviant grammatical forms. These results confirm the hypothesis that NNSTs are more concerned with the accuracy of their students' utterances, while NSTs prioritize fluency over accuracy and use the criterion of comprehensibility in judging the speech production of the learners.

Yet, despite the disagreement concerning error gravity, both groups agree on the importance of correcting errors. Almost all the informants held the argument that correcting errors is essential in order to avoid fossilization of deviant forms. However, the majority of the teachers insisted that correction must occur on the appropriate time depending on the focus of the lesson or the activity. The two groups of teachers agreed upon the fact that student self correction as the most effective type of correction, followed by correction by another student, then correction by the teacher. The rationale behind integrating this question is to examine the roles teachers assume in the classroom. The fact that the teacher is left as the last resort in correcting errors implies a

more learner-centred classroom, where the focus is on developing the learner autonomy. Peer feedback is also highly valuable since it enhances collaboration and negotiation of meaning without inhibiting the learner.

However, with regard to the NNSTs judgements of error gravity which were found to accord grammar the great bulk of the teacher's interest, it seems to be very simplistic to take their answers that the teacher is the least preferable correction strategy for granted. It is quite doubtful that this emphasis on accuracy would provide any opportunity for the learner self correction or peer correction, since the teacher is the holder of the knowledge particularly the knowledge of grammatical rules. The best test for these answers would be classroom observation in order to examine the interaction and the real classroom behaviour; which unfortunately was not possible in this study due to time constraints.

In view of the above, the ultimate conclusion that could be drawn is that NSTs are more lenient than NNSTs in the sense that they showed a greater tolerance towards grammatical errors, which confirms the hypothesis posited at the beginning of the study. While NNSTs attached greater importance to accuracy, NSTs were more concerned with errors that hindered communication. Pedagogically speaking, NSTs attitude seems to be more productive since it encourages the learner to communicate. However, NNSTs over attention to correctness may be inhibiting and may lead to the abortion of future attempts to communicate. It appears clearly therefore that the NSTs are more successful in applying the communicative approach than the NNSTs who are still operating within the traditional audiolingual approach to language teaching since they were harsher in discriminating errors.

However, NNSTs focus on form is not necessarily a sign of failure in teaching since there is growing evidence pointing at the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction on in attaining native-like proficiency (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). The teachability hypothesis conferred by Pienemann (1984) stipulates that, even though the learning process is fixed, some developmental sequences can be boosted through instruction of grammar. Within the same trend, Skehan (1998) and Tomasello (1998) have presented empirical evidence indicating that the language input cannot be processed for form and meaning simultaneously. It is hence fundamental that the learners notice the target forms and not rely only on meaning for the learning process to be successful.

Conclusion

To summarize the findings of this study, the native vs. non-native dichotomy was found to be relevant to the Tunisian context since NSTs were more flexible when dealing with EFL students' deviant utterances as long as they do not impede understanding, in contrast to the NNSTs who were more harsher and insisted on the correctness of the messages. However, it is very simplistic to disfavour a particular teaching approach. Instead, it is advisable to adopt an eclectic approach ensuring a balance between accuracy and fluency by integrating grammar and correctional feedback within communicative tasks. It seems also that more subjects and consequently more data are required before that any generalization of the findings could be made. Another limitation of this study is that it employed de-contextualized examples; therefore, it seems to be of great value to investigate teachers' attitudes to errors in real contexts where the actual teaching strategies could be observed.

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