CHAPTER 2
ERROR ANALYSIS

2.1 The Meaning of Error

Errors indicate stages in the learner’s Target Language Development. From the errors learners commit, one can get an idea of their level of mastery of the Target Language System. Therefore, an investigation of the errors committed will benefit Educators in two ways:

i. It will tell the Investigators the learner’s ability at a given point in the learning process

ii. It will also guide Teachers as to the manner a course in language teaching should be designed so as to provide maximum benefit to the learner.

Errors arise when there is no intention to commit them. In this, Errors differ from Mistakes. Mistakes, also called Lapses, are random deviations that occur in the speech or writing of a native speaker. Taylor suggests that the way to determine whether a mistake is a slip or a genuine error is by reference to the writer’s semantic and structural intentions (1986). This definition takes into consideration two factors:
i. The Language user’s semantic intentions (i.e. what he/she wants to say)

ii. The user’s structural intentions (i.e. what he says).

The criterion of intention is very crucial in judging an error. If the learner has produced a questionable usage, one has to determine its status by knowing whether the learner intended to make it. If the learner is inclined and also able to correct the fact, then it is classified as a Mistake. If, on the other hand, the learner is unable to make the correction, it is assumed that the form the learner used was the one intended, and that it is an Error. Therefore, Error is an instance of language that is automatically deviant and is not self-corrigible by the author. A Mistake is either intentionally or unintentionally deviant and self-corrigible. The Error-Mistake distinction in English was introduced by Corder (1967). This distinction was marked earlier by linguists in German and French.

2.1.1. Types of Mistakes

Edge (1989) used the term “mistake” for all ways of being wrong. He divides them into three types:

a. Slips

b. Errors

c. Attempts
a. Slips

These are caused by processing problems or carelessness. The learner could auto-correct, if pointed out, and ‘if given the chance’.

b. Errors

They are wrong forms, which the learner cannot correct even if pointed out, but it is possible for others of the same group to understand him.

c. Attempts

Attempts are those usages that are almost incomprehensible and the learner has no idea how to use the language, but is trying to mean something.

2.1.2. Deviance

Carl James, in his book “Errors in Language Learning and Use” (1998) uses the term “deviance” to refer to difference in the language use of the learner and classifies deviances into the following four categories.

a. Slips:

These are also called ‘lapses’. They can quickly be detected and corrected by their author without any help.
b. Mistakes:

These can be corrected by the learner, if pointed out.

c. Errors:

These cannot be self-corrected until further relevant input has been provided by an outside agent (e.g. the teacher).

d. Solecism:

These are caused by the breaches of rules laid down by purists, usually taught in schools. Examples are split-infinitives, dangling participles etc. These go against the native speakers’ intuitions and it is seen that sometimes the Second Language learner makes less of these than the native speaker.

2.2 Causes of Errors

Errors are caused because many usages in English create great confusion. The student, in his/her attempt to learn English, is quite confused when he/she cannot use the plural “hairs” to refer to the quantity of hair on a person’s head. Also, the use of Articles causes confusion. He/She is unable to understand why the Article is absent with the Plural Noun in “Cows are gentle creatures”, when the Article is very much present in “The cow is a gentle creature”.
English pronunciation and spelling also create problems. It would be difficult for the Second Language learner to understand, why ‘cut’ is /kʊt/ and ‘put’ is /pʊt/.

There is no area in the English Language which does not create difficulty for the learner. The English Number System, where we find plurals in concept, but singular in form, for example, words like fleet, police, and clergy, cause utter confusion in the mind of the learner. Sentence Patterns, Tense Forms and Rules of Grammar do not satisfy the rational mind of the learner.

2.2.1. The Root and General Cause

F.G.French in his book Common Errors in English (1949) states that, every teacher of English overseas realizes that, the root and general cause of the errors is “in the particular construction, and Idiom of the regional vernacular”. The main reason is the wide difference between construction of Word Order, and of Idiom. It is also due to the strong hold the Native Language has on the learner.

2.2.2. The Three Principal Causes

H.V.George (1972) states that the three principal causes of learners’ errors are:

1. Redundancy of the Code
2. Unsuitable Presentation in Class

3. Several Sorts of Interference.

H.V. George attacks the preference for Audio-lingual Method of Teaching as against the traditional method of the Grammar Translation Approach. He states that in making such a choice, the learner was denied the choice of time for reflection which the traditional method made possible. The learner could not only reflect on the TL noticing its features and their degree of complexity and familiarity but also could notice and reflect upon the relation between unknown TL features and their known MT near equivalents.

True language learning necessarily involves errors. Errors may be caused due to:

i. False Hypothesis

ii. Overgeneralization

iii. Interference of the Mother Tongue.

Linguists have gone deep into an analysis of the various factors that cause errors in a bid to help the learner of a Second Language. Errors are systematic deviations from the Language. Errors are reflections of the students’ developing linguistic competence in the Foreign Language (FL). Linguists refer to this as the Learner's Interlanguage (IL). The term makes it clear that learners construct a
system different from their Mother Tongue (MT) and also from the Foreign Language (FL).

2.3 Contrastive Analysis

Errors which occur as a result of the difference between Native Language (NL) and the Target Language (TL) can be predicted to a fair extent using a method of Contrastive Analysis (CA). This follows the process of a comparative study of the Native Language (NL) and the Target Language (TL). The contrast between the two systems will predict the areas of difficulty for the Second Language learner. This is especially beneficial in teaching the sound system of the Target Language. Contrastive Analysis can serve as the basis for those materials and techniques employed by the Audio Lingual Method of Teaching the Second Language, as this method places great emphasis on those areas where the Second Language differs from the first.

However, Contrastive Analysis cannot fully satisfy the needs of the producers of materials for the teachers of Second language. It is seen that errors of adult language learners are not just the result of Native Language interference. Various other factors also affect the learning ability. Some errors may be due to universally valid factors. Complex sentences create more difficulty than simple sentences. Systematic errors also arise due to the language learning situation and the psychological strategies used by the
learners. An analysis of errors is, therefore, a very important requirement in the teaching and learning of a Second Language.

2.4. Error Analysis

Selinker in 1972 adopted a methodology which involved the description of learners’ speech in order to establish the concept of Interlanguage (IL). The technique adopted by Selinker was a fallback on the work by Pit Corder (Corder 1967, 1971, 1981), who suggested that L₁ and L₂ learning consisted of a strategy of forming an Internal Grammar and that the mistakes committed by the learner are a part of his Interlanguage. This view led to the complex methodology of studying Second Language Acquisition known as “Error Analysis” (EA).

Error Analysis replaced Contrastive Analysis (CA), which was the most favoured paradigm for studying Foreign Language and Second Language Learning. Error Analysis describes objectively the performance of the learner without bringing the Mother Tongue into picture. The claim made was that the error made could be fully described in terms of the Target Language. Error Analysis became the alternative to Contrastive Analysis.

2.4.1. Corder’s Views
Corder in his paper “The Significance of Learners’ Errors” (1967) has made five crucial points:

a. We should look for parallels between L\textsubscript{1} acquisition, and L\textsubscript{2} learning, since these are governed by the same underlying mechanisms, procedures and strategies.

b. Errors are evidences of the learners’ in-built syllabus, or of what have been taken in, rather than what the teachers think they have put in: intake should not be equated with input.

c. Errors show that L\textsubscript{1} and L\textsubscript{2} learners both develop an independent system of language although it is neither the Adult System nor that of the Second Language (Corder 1967) but is evidence of a transitional competence.

d. Errors should be distinguished from Mistakes.

e. Errors are significant in three respects:
   
   i. They tell the teacher what needs to be taught;
   ii. They tell the researcher how learning proceeds;
   iii. They are a means whereby learners test their hypothesis about the L\textsubscript{2}.

Selinker agrees with Corder’s view that for learners themselves the errors are “indispensable”, since the making of errors can be regarded “as a device the learner uses in order to learn”. Corder, while discussing the function of errors for the learners’ themselves, says that the making of errors is “a strategy
employed by children acquiring their Mother Tongue and by those learning a Second Language [...] is a way the learner has of listing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning” (Corder 1967). This indicates that the errors of a learner, whether child or adult, are:

a) not random, but are, in fact, systematic

b) not “negative” or “interfering” in any way with learning TL, but are, on the contrary, a necessary positive factor,-indicative of testing hypothesis.

In Corder’s opinion, a regular series of checks have to be made on the Grammar to understand the effect of exposure to certain data has had on his/her Grammar. By comparing these states, inferences can be drawn on the learning process. Using Error Analysis, better techniques for the identification and description of errors can be developed. It will help the teachers to create the most effective conditions in the classroom for the language learning process to take place. What is taught to the learner is not completely taken in. There is no one to one relationship between the input and the output. Input refers to the “external syllabus” presented to the learner. What goes in is decided by the learner himself and the teacher is not in full control of it. If the teacher knows what the learner has taken in i.e. the learner’s Interlanguage, he/she can decide on the method to adopt so that
what the learner takes in will be that aspect of Target Language which will be the most advantageous. The learner’s system is a dynamic one and he/she has what is termed by Corder as “transitional competence”. Sometimes the learner will stop at the Interlanguage level if he/she realises that the messages he/she sends get across. The function of a teaching programme should be to motivate the learner to get past his/her Interlanguage and continue along the road to mastery of the Target Language.

2.4.2. The Three Stages in Error Analysis

In his paper (1971) Corder proposes three stages in Error Analysis:

a. Recognition of Idiosyncrasy

The researcher must first look at the learner’s sentence to see if it conforms to the L₁ grammar. The analysis involves reconstructing what the learner was attempting to say by asking him / her what was intended. Corder terms this as “authoritative reconstruction”. One can also infer the learner’s intentions—“plausible interpretation”. This, Corder says, would yield a grammar of the learner’s own Interlanguage.

b. Accounting for the Learner’s Idiosyncratic Dialect

The next step in the methodology is the attempt to describe the learner’s Interlanguage in terms of bilingual comparison.
c. Explanation

The researcher should finally try to explain why the deviation from the grammar of the Second Language has risen.

2.4.5. The Four Types of Deviations

There are four categories under which the Second Language learner deviates from the Target Language. They are:

a. Grammaticality
b. Acceptability
c. Correctness
d. Strangeness and Infelicity.

2.4.5.1. Grammaticality

This refers to well-formedness. The grammar of the TL decides whether the learner is right or wrong. The method is objective. However, the method can only be applied to clear-cut cases. In such instances there is a deviation from rules.

2.4.5.2. Acceptability

This governs the usability of a particular form. Grammaticality is a pre-requisite for acceptability. The context also decides the acceptability of a piece of language. In this sense acceptability differs from grammaticality. Where grammaticality can be judged even if the sentence is taken in isolation, acceptability is decided by the context of utterance. Radford (1988) calls acceptability “a
performance notion”. Invariably it is the native speaker who decides on the acceptability of an utterance.

### 2.4.5.3. Correctness

Correctness refers to that notion which takes recourse to prescriptive normative standards. Here the language user rejects a particular language use upon reflection about explicitly learnt canons. An example is found in the use of “whom” instead of “who”, where the latter, though used by native speakers and therefore acceptable, is rejected and “whom” accepted, because it conforms to certain rules of usage.

### 2.4.5.4. Strangeness and Infelicity

These refer to strange combinations of lexical items. This is usually found in the language of poets and in the language of the native speaker especially when they switch parts of speech. Examples are found in the verbing of nouns.

### 2.5. Advantages of Error Analysis

The recognition of error and its reconstruction can be established by a process of analysis and deduction. The advantages of Error Analysis are given below:

i. Error Analysis deals with data.

ii. It is a scientific method that tries to find regularities in a collection of facts.
iii. The corpus of language facts collected will provide the rules of language acquisition. If sufficiently analysed, they will also provide the techniques to be employed in the development of linguistic competence.

iv. Error analysis gives a systematic description of the errors committed by the learner of a Second Language.

v. It also gives a detailed study of the causes of errors and makes possible the correction of such errors.

Use of Error Analysis in L₂ teaching/learning process will make the language used by the learner grammatical and acceptable. It will also help bring about in the learner a near perfect production of the Target Language.

Error Analysis is the paradigm most suitable in the Language Learning context found in this country. An understanding of the status of the English Language in India - a Multilingual country - will be relevant in this context.