

Error Analysis of the Spoken English of Adult Indian Learners: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Errors are crucial in the process of analysing a language learner's knowledge of the target language, as well as the efficiency of the teaching methods adopted. The present paper attempts to highlight the most common mistakes made by adult Indian students who are learning English as their second language. The present paper will not only discuss the errors of the students, but will also deal with some tested ways to rectify the errors and to make the students understand the correct usage of various words and sentence structures. This study aims to be relevant to teachers and language learners alike.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Interlingual Errors, Intralingual Errors, Feedback.

Introduction

According to Crystal's estimate, India has surpassed the United States and the United Kingdom in terms of the total English-speaking population. He goes on to say, "...given the steady increase in English learning since 1997 in schools and among the upwardly mobile, we must today be talking about at least 350 million. This is more than the combined English-speaking populations of Britain and the US" ("Subcontinent raises its voice"). In a country where the ability to speak fluent English is mistakenly associated with intelligence, and grammatical errors are not considered mere errors, but a blow to a person's self-esteem and a blemish on the character, the participants of this study had been preferring to stay silent, even in meetings and presentations, rather than speaking grammatically incorrect yet functional English due to the immense pressure to speak

'correct English'. Some participants were hesitant to speak English anywhere except on a one-on-one basis with the researcher, which goes to show how important being 'grammatically correct' was for them.

Speaking English has become much more than just speaking another language. It is about forming a good impression, getting better opportunities, jobs, higher pay, along with respect in society. This is especially true in the case of India, a country where English has turned into a "language of empowerment and upward mobility. Its base has increased considerably from being an elite language to being a business language all over urban India" (Paranjape and Prasad, 2010, p.9). This puts individuals under constant pressure to master the language they have been intermittently learning since their childhood.

Error Analysis

The question is: why do language learners

make errors? Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis considers the native language of the students to be the main source of errors, and such errors are called interlingual errors. Lado (1957, p.2) claims that errors in the target language can be explained by negative transfers from the student's L1. Scott and Tucker regarded the mother tongue as the chief cause of frequent errors made by language learners (1974, p.94). The present study also found the native language to be the source of numerous errors, especially at the intermediate level.

Although some of the errors analysed in this study can be attributed to the interference of the learner's native language, errors are also "a sign that the learner is investigating the systems of a new language" (Corder, 1967, p.168). However, the current paper goes beyond interlingual errors. As Falhasiri et al. stated, "Errors can be attributed to a variety of factors, not solely to interference from the native language" (2011, p.252). Some sources of such intralingual errors can be "overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and the building of false systems or concepts" (Richard, 1971, p.21). The present study found inadequate exposure to the target language to be the main reason behind grammatical errors.

Methodology and Participants

This study focused extensively on ten working professionals who were attempting to upgrade their English-speaking skills, in an attempt to perform better at work. Out of the ten, eight were intermediate-level participants and the remaining two were upper-intermediate-level participants. They

had limited contact with the English language, and second language input was mostly limited to classroom interactions. Furthermore, the participants had little to no opportunity to speak English with anyone outside the classroom, except at work. When forced to interact at work, they barely participated, mainly because they felt inferior and to quote one of the participants, "my co-workers are English-medium educated and speak English fluently. I was a Hindi-medium student, my English is very bad". This feeling of inferiority and unwillingness to use English in a formal setting was present more or less in all the participants.

One of the participants confessed, "I don't send emails, because my colleagues send long emails in complex English. If I write emails, I make mistakes. I just schedule a meeting and communicate in my native language".

For error correction and data collection, the researcher made a note of all the errors the students committed while speaking and showed those notes to the participants at the end of the speaking task. The students were asked to correct their own mistakes. In most cases, the subjects were able to correct those mistakes and reported that they knew the grammatical rules, as they had been taught grammar extensively in their school life. The participants complained that they were not able to apply those rules and use the correct forms while speaking. Hence, unlike Sumanilog's (2018, p.70) research participants, who made errors due to a lack of awareness of grammatical rules, in the case of the participants of this study, the main cause of errors was the utter lack of practice

and exposure to the English language. The findings were synonymous with Khansir's (2008, p.1) analysis of syntactic errors made by Indian undergraduate students.

Findings: Major Errors and Suggestions for Correction and Feedback

Translating from L1

The subjects often translated directly from their native language, which occasionally resulted in hilarious mistakes, such as "I do running", "I do cleaning", and "I was seeing a movie". Since 'करता है / करती है' is used after the verb in some sentences in Hindi, the subjects would also translate that. This was one of the most common errors, and even one of the upper-intermediate students made such errors.

This error was the hardest to eliminate, as the students felt more comfortable directly translating from Hindi, especially in the initial stages of the classes. An effective way to reduce this frequent error, apart from explaining the fact that their L1 and target language are quite different, is to provide more input in English, so that the students can form sentences directly in English, instead of having to translate sentences from their native language.

Helping Verbs

All the intermediate-level participants struggled with auxiliaries and their proper usage. Some of the frequent mistakes made by the participants have been listed below:

'I was worked hard.'

'It is raining from two days.'

They often added auxiliaries unnecessarily, as in:

'My boss was gave me projects and I worked hard.'

The researcher found that explaining grammatical rules helped, but only to a certain extent. Due to their experience with grammar at school, the subjects often believed that studying grammar was a waste of time and lost interest. Making the students talk about their personal lives and pointing out the correct usage of auxiliaries is the best method to teach auxiliaries. For instance, a majority of the Indian English learners struggle with the usage of "has been, have been, had been". This was the case with the subjects in question as well. However, when asked to talk about their lives, they were quite interactive, although they made some errors, such as 'I am working as an engineer since 10 years'.

Here, the researcher explained the proper usage of 'have been', 'has been', and 'had been' in relation to the participants' personal lives by making them form sentences such as:

"I have been working as an engineer for the past ten years."

"I had been married for three years when I had a baby."

"I have been studying English for 20 years."

"My boss has been working hard lately."

Instructors can go on to explain other auxiliaries by asking students about them and their loved ones, then correcting them and explaining the proper usage, as in, "My wife

is a teacher, my daughter is studying”. In a nutshell, students understand concepts much better if they are given relatable examples from their own lives, instead of giving examples from a 30-year-old textbook.

Tenses

The participants could effortlessly talk about the present tense, but when it came to talking about the past, they made numerous errors. Even the upper-intermediate students sometimes mistakenly used incorrect verb forms to talk about the past.

Again, relate it to the student’s personal life. The researcher encouraged the subjects to tell their life stories using prompts such as:

- Describe a time when you met an old friend.
- Describe a time when you ran out of money.
- Describe a time when you met a wise person.
- Describe a bad travel experience.
- Describe a time you had a fight with a loved one.
- Describe one of your childhood memories.
- Describe a time you were proud of yourself.

Using such prompts in the class not only reduced the tense-related mistakes of the participants, but also enhanced their ability to interact, engage in informal discussions, and share anecdotes. At the end of the session, the researcher shared the notes of the errors with the students and asked them to correct

the errors they made.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Not adding *e/es* to the verb in the third-person singular in the present tense was the most common error made by intermediate and upper-intermediate students alike. In this situation, the researcher explained the grammar behind this error and asked the student to talk about someone they know, such as their best friend, or boss, which forced them to use the third person without even knowing it.

Using Comparative and Superlative Degrees

When it came to using comparative and superlative degrees, even the intermediate level students made mistakes and used phrases such as ‘more better’ and ‘more rarer’. Instructors can try explaining to the students that polysyllabic words or longer words (in case the students do not know about syllables, it is better to use the term ‘longer words’ for their understanding) require periphrastic terms such as ‘more’ and ‘most’. While using words that already have their comparative form, we do not need to add ‘more’ or ‘most’. One of the participants raised the concern that he was using ‘most’ for emphasis, as in, “That is the most cheapest car.” In this case, the researcher clarified that the subject can use ‘even’ instead of adding ‘more’ or ‘most’, as in, “A good friend is even harder to find than a Bengal tiger.”

Using Reflexives for Self-introduction

Three of the intermediate level participants introduced themselves as, “Myself XYZ”. What they do not understand is that ‘myself’

is a reflexive pronoun and requires an antecedent. This mistake is fairly common among lower-intermediate-level Indian English learners. Translating the phrase “Myself XYZ” in their native language, and asking them if it sounds correct usually makes them aware of what they are actually saying. The instructors can use this opportunity to talk about the appropriate pronouns for self-introduction.

Using 'read' instead of 'study', to talk about what grade they/their children are in

This mistake is fairly common; here is a sentence used by one of the participants: “My daughter reads in class seventh”. The researcher noticed that her intermediate-level school-going language students, who were not a part of this study, also used ‘read’ to refer to the grade they were in. Again, this happens because they are translating from their L1 Hindi, where the verb “पढ़ना” is used to refer to both the act of studying and reading. Instructors can explain that English has different words for reading and studying.

Pluralizing Irregular Nouns

The intermediate level students often generalised and used sentences like:

“There were a lot of peoples on the bus.”

“Childrens were playing.”

“I have to collect the datas again.”

In this case, a lesson on irregular plural forms and follow-up grammar exercises came in handy.

Missing out the Plural Marker

Some intermediate-level participants often

made errors such as “I have two friend.”, “I stayed there for three month.”, and “I have thirty colleague.”

However, the one sentence structure in which students of both levels made errors was in using ‘One of the...’. For example,

“One of my friend called me.”

“One of my relative is coming.”

“One of my neighbour is rude.”

The researcher elaborated this by asking the subjects to imagine something that they have in abundance (for instance, shirts), and then asked them to talk about one of those many things, as in “one of my shirts”.

Using *for*, *from*, and *since*

The intermediate level students were also confused about the correct usage of *for*, *from*, and *since* and made errors such as:

‘I am living in Delhi from two years.’

‘She has been working hard for this morning.’

Again, explaining the related grammatical rule and giving examples from their life helped them understand how to use ‘for, from, and since’ correctly.

Using the Wrong Preposition

Prepositions are often overlooked when it comes to traditional grammar classes in India, as the tenses and auxiliaries enjoy the spotlight. Over the years, the participants also started to underestimate the importance of using the correct prepositions, consequently making errors such as:

“I started surfing in the social media.”

“One of his son met an accident.”

“His father was in deathbed.”

“This show is available in Netflix.”

A viable solution is to explain the proper usage of various prepositions and to encourage the students to look around and describe their surroundings using the correct prepositions.

Incorrect Use of Articles

The majority of the students, including the upper intermediate ones, struggled with the correct usage of articles. Generally, they either did not use articles at all or used them unnecessarily. Here are some of the sentences uttered by the participants:

“I used to go there in past.”

“My father gave me a limited cash.”

“We went to coffee shop.”

To teach the correct usage of articles, instructors can discuss the related grammatical rules. For error correction, the researcher showed the participants the incorrect sentence they used and the correct one and asked them which one sounded correct. This usually made them notice the errors they were making.

Implementation of the Suggestions

The suggestions given in this paper have been successfully implemented by the researcher herself. The outcomes were the following:

1. Instead of merely memorising grammatical rules, students were able to understand them in relation to their own lives.

2. Compared to the initial stages, the participants’ grammatical errors reduced considerably.

3. The participants were able to correct themselves whenever they made an error.

4. The subjects were more interactive in the classes and reported that they felt more confident.

5. Along with their spoken English, the writing skills of the participants also improved. Once they stopped making most of the grammatical errors they were making, they were more comfortable writing e-mails and expressing themselves in a professional setting.

Conclusion

Analysing errors is equally beneficial for teachers, students, and researchers because it gives them a crystal-clear idea of the learning process (Corder, 1967, p.167). The aforementioned observations and suggestions are an outcome of the researcher’s interaction with the participants throughout their second language learning journey. Considering the demographics of the participants, and the suggestions provided, this research intends to help teachers deal with the spoken English errors of the English language learners in general, and Indian students in particular.

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ELTAI READING CLUBS

ELTAI has launched Reading Clubs in educational institutions with the primary objective of creating a 'culture of reading' among school and college students. This initiative is based on a research-based framework that takes into account differences in age, gender, interests, and location.

Objectives of the Reading Club:

- ❑ To create a love for reading in students and enable them to become better, lifelong readers;
- ❑ To enable them to reflect on what they read in order to lead them to become effective writers and speakers;
- ❑ To familiarize them with different text types (genres) and enable them to engage in appropriate reading strategies; and
- ❑ To employ synchronous (both virtual and physical meetings) as well as asynchronous modes – Web tools, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Reading Logs, MOOCs (audios, videos, quotes, blurbs, reviews, etc.) to sustain their interest.

ELTAI would like to have MoUs with institutions that are willing to implement this initiative and help to achieve these objectives collaboratively. Institutions interested in this project may please write, expressing their interest, to: indiaeltai@gmail.com with a copy (Cc) to Dr. Zuleiha Shakeel, the Coordinator of the project at:

zoowasif@gmail.com.

For a brief description of this initiative, visit our website at: <http://eltai.in/reading-clubs/>.

For an outline of the respective roles and responsibilities of the host institution and ELTAI, visit the website at: <http://eltai.in/roles-and-responsibilities-of-the-host-institution-and-eltai/>.