Error Linguistics and the Teaching and Learning of Written English in Nigerian Universities as a Second Language Environment

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Abstract: *Alarming decline of the written English language proficiency of graduates of Nigerian universities has been observed for a long period of time. This has engendered a startling and besetting situation in which most graduates of Nigerian universities cannot meet the English language demands of their employers since they cannot write simple letters, memoranda and reports in their places of work. Pedagogy has sought different methods or strategies to remedy the trend. Applied linguistics models have been developed towards the improvement of second or foreign language learning through the use of diagnostic tools such as error analysis. This paper focuses on the usefulness and strategies of error analysis as diagnostic tool and strategy for second language teaching exposes the current state of affairs in English as a Second Language learning in Nigerian sociolinguistic environment highlights the language-learning theories associated with error analysis, and, highlights the factors that hinder effective error analysis of written ESL production in Nigerian universities. The paper also discusses the role of positive corrective feedback as a beneficial error treatment that facilitates second language learning. Practical measures for achieving more efficient and more productive English as a Second Language teaching and learning in Nigerian universities have also been proffered in the paper.*
Key Words: *Learning, Teaching, Proficiency, Decline, Errors, Feedback*

I. INTRODUCTION

Error analysis is an applied linguistics construct or diagnostic tool which serves as a basis for understanding the nature and types of errors which people make in the course of second or foreign language learning. Error analysis was first used in the 1960's by Pit Corder and some of his contemporaries as a method of studying second language acquisition. Error analysis is one of the major themes in applied linguistics that emerged in the 1960's to demonstrate that learner errors were not only due to the interference of the learner's native language but also because of some faults in the learning strategies. It was developed when a renowned British applied linguist, Stephen Pit Corder refocused attention on error from the perspective of language processing and language acquisition [1].

Applied linguistics is a branch of linguistics, an academic discipline which uses linguistic principles and methods to articulate and address language problems. It is an interdisciplinary field of linguistics that identifies, investigates and offers solutions to language related real-life problems in society (wikep). It is a discipline which has given rise to the development of designs and strategies for the improvement of language teaching and learning among which is Error Analysis.

The primary aims of Error Analysis focused on the identification of types and patterns of error and the establishment of a classification scheme for errors as psycholinguistic phenomena. (http://en.wikip). Consequently, today, the aims of error analysis are: (i) to describe, by the evidence contained in the errors the nature of the user's interlanguage and (ii) to deduce from these descriptions the extent of second language learning. Otagburuagu (1999) Error analysis equally played a crucial role in the development of the interlanguage theory. Corder and his colleagues had held that the only 'true' errors are those that are connected to the state of the interlanguage or the learners competence.

Error analysis is, therefore, based on the premise that the second language learner is not a passive recipient of language but engages in what linguists call "creative creation process" to create new structures [2].

Deterioration of Proficiency in English Language in Nigeria Universities

English is a compulsory subject as well as the medium of instruction and study in Nigerian educational system. However, most of the undergraduates and graduates of our universities have not gained adequate proficiency in the English language. Consequently, they make erroneous English expressions in their academic writing as well as their spoken performances in spite of the number of years of their study of the language.

Though the students take their lectures in English, errors in grammar show their incomplete knowledge or absolute ignorance of the grammatical rules.

Today, there is a constant outcry by stakeholders of the education sector about the decline in the performance of Nigerian students in English language at all levels of the educational system in the English language. The two common indicators that were used as the bases of judgment were the poor performance of students in written public examinations and the preponderance of errors in the students' daily use of the language.

Furthermore, there is the startling situation in which most Nigerian university graduates cannot write simple official letters, reports and memoranda in their places of work. According to the World Bank Report published in the Guardian Newspaper of 19 February 2001, contemporary Nigerian university graduates have failed to meet the English language demands of employers satisfactorily. One of the two major areas where this extremely low level of production performance is glaring is the graduates' writing skill in the language. Comments on the decline of proficiency in the language are often value judgments about the written form of the language. Erroneous or unacceptable expressions are the evidence of incompetence and poor performance in the language.

Contemplating the sources of errors in English language teaching and learning, [3] categorically notes that, "errors are errors, on whose lips or from whose pen they occur notwithstanding.… "[4] echoes Oji's statement in the following paraphrase of it: "An erroneous expression remains an erroneous expression; it does not matter who says it or who writes it".

Common observations and empirical studies have shown that the secondary school English language background of students who pursue university education is grossly inadequate. The error spiral in the English language performances of Nigerian undergraduates in Nigerian universities shows that pedagogy has not yet found a solution to the crippling effects of errors in English language. Therefore, error linguistics and the research it entails remain relevant if our undergraduates and graduates' learning and use of English must improve.

However, the authorities of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria have not been unmindful of the poor and porous English language background of most of the students they admit and the disastrous effect of such a background on their academic and professional pursuit. It was this perception that gave rise to the mounting of the Use of English courses as parts of the General Studies in tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria to enable the students to cope with their studies. [5] reiterates that the purpose of the General Studies Use of English courses are to expose the students to the basic elements of English language usage and make them see the language as a tool for communicating ideas, not a collection of unrelated facts memorized for examination purposes. He further argues that it is the last opportunity for them to improve their English language competence. Therefore there is the dire need for remedial English at all levels of education. However, I strongly believe that remedial programmes cannot achieve any meaningful improvement without effective corrective feedback which is a product of sound error analysis.

Teaching and Learning of Written English as a Second Language in Nigeria

The use of English in Nigeria for more than four and a half centuries arose as both a sociolinguistic and a political necessity. It was a compromise language used by the erstwhile colonial masters to administer and socialize the area for colonial benefits. The teaching and learning of the language was a priority in the colonial education system. The early colonial education ordinances prohibited the use of vernacular languages in schools until the Phelps-Stokes commission report was published in the 1920's. The multilingual nature of Nigerian society with` more than 400 distinctive and mutually unintelligible languages with dialectal variations engendered a national language dilemma – a problem which was solved by the adoption of English as a bridge and unifying language [6], [7], [8].

The writing skill is a language production skill which yields concrete language corpus for error analysis. In the functional hierarchy of language skills, writing occupies a conspicuous position as evidence of literacy in contemporary societies. [9]. Writing performs a key role in tertiary education and in the world of scholarship.

The best way to learn how to write is by writing. This is supported by the behaviourist law of practice and effect. Teaching writing in a second or foreign language is by far a more difficult thing than teaching it in a first language. It involves helping the learner to develop suitable language that will carry the meaning which such a learner intends to convey in the text [10].

Standard English as the Target Model

In error linguistics, errors are identified and explained with reference to the rules of accepted forms and usage structures. [11] laconically captures the status and functions of Standard English in the following words: It is the variety of English adopted in educational institutional as the medium of instruction and scholarly

presentations. "It is that variety of the language used for serious business in government, by the judiciary, the press, and in international affairs" (p.56). This is the standard British English taught and used in Nigerian institutions of learning. Both the undergraduates and graduates take their lectures, studies, tests, seminars, workshops and examinations via Standard English.

It therefore follows that any ESL error analysis employed as a pedagogic tool in Nigeria must be based on the standard of English taught in Nigerian formal educational system and used in formal communication. Errors analysed and corrected are violations of the grammatical and semantic rules of the widely accepted standard usage described above. Such errors are deviations from the systematic rules which are symptoms of ignorance or inadequate knowledge of the system.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For lucid discussion of the thesis of this paper, it is necessary to review some related literature and theories since the principles of error analysis were drawn from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. Because error analysis focuses on manifestations of deviation and causes of the deviations, we have to first look at error types before we loot at related theories**.**

Theoretical Framework

Over the years, linguists have formulated some hypothesis and established theories for adult language learning from behaviourist, cognitive, sociolinguistic and affective perspectives. [12] as cited in [13] define Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory as "a set of principles about how languages are learned, how knowledge of language is represented and organised or how language is structured" (p.15). This definition suffices for this paper. Second language learning theories therefore have a role to play in the evaluation or assessment of language learning. Each accounts for language learning and performance from a different perspective.

Since error linguistics focuses on the learner's language performance as products of his mental activities, it imperative to briefly review literature on some second language learning theories associated with it such as the interlanguage theory, the fossilization theory, the noticing hypothesis and the learner's personality hypothesis as the theoretical framework of this paper.

Interlanguage Theory

The need to identify the psychological processes or events in second language learning with the aid of a theoretical construct has led psycholinguists to assume "the major features of the psychological structure of an adult when he attempts to understand second language sentences or produce them". This psychological structure is said to be latent in the brain of an adult learner. Based on the observable output of an adult learner's attempted production of a target language (TL), the assumption above implies the existence of a separate linguistic system which linguists have accepted to call *interlanguage* (IL) [14], [15], [16], [17]. [18] as cited in [19] has proposed the name interlangue for "idiosyncratic dialects whose rules share characteristics of two social dialects of languages, whether these languages share rules or not" (p.17).The Interlanguage theory was developed for the purpose of explaining systematic linguistic errors. According to Wikipedia,

> An interlangue is an emerging language system in the mind of a second language learner. A learner's interlangue is not a deficient version of the language being learned filled with random errors, nor is it a language purely based on errors introduced from the learner's first language. Rather, it is a language in its own right, with its own systematic rules.

Interlangue (IL) as a theoretical construct validates learners' errors as positive evidence of learning, not as reprehensible lapses inhibiting learning.

Through interlangue theory, applied linguists seek to understand learner language as a natural language which has its own rules. Interlanguage therefore refers to the system of knowledge about the target language which learners construct in their minds in the process of learning the new language. [20] notes that interlangue is similar to and different from the concept of competence; "similar because it is the learner's internalized and systematic ability to use the target language to communicate and, different in the sense that the internalized language system is still unfinished" (p.56). Interlangue shows that the learner is trying to construct a system of a second language competence. Interlangue is thus used to describe the learner's incomplete knowledge of a second language. (file://F:/Notesoninterlangue.htm). For instance, a learner who has learnt but has not yet mastered the use of 's' as a finite marker may use it with verbs for all subjects and tenses, irrespective of number, time and exceptions as in the following sentences:
*She knows him.
* They knows her.
* I knows him your hard.
* We likes it.

Similarly, a learner who has learnt but has not yet mastered the use of the plural marker, '*s*' may use it of the end of all English nouns, including irregular nouns like mouse and cattle to produce * *mouses* and * *cattles*. These errors of overgeneralization are seen as evidence of learning as they show what the learner has learnt and what need to be clarified in order to achieve mastery. The theory of interlangue reveals that the major processes of second language learning are language transfer, transfer of training strategies of second languages learning, strategies of second language communication, overgeneralization of target language material [21].

The Interlanguage theory is relevant and illuminating to the subject matter of this paper because it x-rays crucial stages in the process of language learning.

The Noticing Hypothesis

The Noticing hypothesis posits that learners must notice the ways in which their interlanguage structures differ from the target norms. This noticing of the discrepancy makes the learner's internal language processing device restructure the learner's internal representation of the rules of the second language in order to bring his production closer to the target expression accuracy (wikep). This Noticing hypothesis was propounded by R..W. Schmidt to account for the role of attention of second language learners in determining the amount of new information they notice from corrective feedback or other sources of learning the target language - even through the learner's own reflections and intensive study. Noticing also determines the success or failure of language learning processing.

The Noticing hypothesis is related to and backs corrective feedback which is an aspect of error analysis to be discussed under section 4 of this paper.

The Learner's Personality Hypothesis

An individual's natural ability can either enhance or hinder his second language learning. An individual's peculiar ability constitutes his personality. Personality therefore refers to an aggregate of traits of a particular individual. The following personality traits have been identified as factors affecting the rate of second language learning: aptitude, affective, self confidence level, attitude toward classroom and teacher, and age. [22], [23], [24], [25] cited in [26].

In this context, aptitude refers to a person's ability or intelligence rate in learning a second language. The two components of aptitude identified in the literature are grammar sensitivity and inductive ability. "Grammar sensitivity" refers to the individual's ability to demonstrate his awareness of the syntactic patterning of sentences in the language being learnt". Inductive ability, on the other hand, is the ability to examine language material to notice and to identify patterns, correspondences, and relationships involving either meaning or grammatical form" [27] and quoted in [28].

Attitude here refers to those attitudinal or emotional factors that either encourage or discourage second language learning intake.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND METHODS OF ERROR ANALYSIS

The early seventies marked the beginning of serious empirical research into second language acquisition. Error analysis brought learners errors under a new light - errors ceased to be "signs of inhibition" that needed to be eradicated. Instead, they came to be regarded as useful evidence of faulty strategies of learning and as natural aspects of language learning process [29].

Up until today, applied linguists affirm the usefulness of analysis of learners' errors in providing insights into the nature of language and the personality of the learner and in the processes of language teaching and learning and leading to reliable conclusions with regard to "how a second language can be effectively taught or learned or how existing methods of teaching an learning can be improved " [30].

[4] points out the two very significant contributions that Corder made clear through error analysis are that "errors of a learner, whether adult or child are not random, but are in fact systematic, and are not negative or interfering in any way with learning a target language but are on the contrary, a necessary positive factor (http://www.studycode.com), 2003).

Furthermore, error analysis widened the perspective on possible causes of errors. It led researchers to recognised that the first language is neither the only nor the more important factor that can lead to error [12]. Besides, error analysis helped to establish a taxonomy of error types and to draw a distinction between errors and mistakes as earlier noted. The significance of error analysis in the language teaching field arises from the significance of the language learners' errors to the teacher. It enables the teachers to find act the sources of errors and to take pedagogical precautions towards them. [20] note that "research works and published material on error analysis expose the teacher to areas where learners are more vulnerable to committing language blunders, thus requiring both the teacher and the learner to be more careful. It therefore enables the language teacher to develop diagnostic and treatment skills, appropriate teaching aids, effective teaching techniques,

suitable tests and appropriate syllabus for different levels and needs of learners [6]. [9] summarises the importance of error linguistics in the following words.

> The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of the language learning. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning strategies. In this respect, error analysis may prove to be one of the central activities in the psycholinguistic study of language (p. 24).

Error analysis has therefore provided a good analytical and diagnostic tool for English language teaching and learning across the globe over the years, especially for monitoring learner performance, yet, its lessons and coasts have remained elastic and evergreen. This is because different generations of learners have their own language learning challenges to contend with and language teachers, especially in ESL learning environments, attempt new remediation strategies to develop and use in the light of emerging challenges in the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Error analysis and evaluation provide the background and framework for error treatment in the teaching of English as a second language.

[11] elucidates the usefulness of analysis of learners' errors in providing insights into the nature of language, the personality of the learner and in the processes of language teaching and learning leading to reliable conclusions with regard to "how a second or foreign language can be more effectively taught or learned or how existing methods of teaching and learning can be improved [17]. According to [5] as cited in [28], Error Analysis serves three purposes as follows: "(i) to find out the level of proficiency the leaner has reached; (ii) to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning; (iii) to find out how people learn a language" (p.1).

Methods of Error Analysis

[12] as cited by Lennon in [23] elaborates the procedure for Error Analysis as comprising five stages, viz: (i) selection of a corpus of language, (ii) identification of errors in the corpus, (iii) classification and description of error identified, (iv) explanation of the psycho-linguistic causes of the errors".(pp. 51-60). In (1978) Corder modified these steps to include exemplification of correctiion for each aberrant from or structure. This error treatment generates connective feedback for the learner or trainee.

Corrective Feedback

To [7] cited in [9] error treatment simply means "any teacher behaviour following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error. Finally, there is "the true" correction which succeeds in modifying the learner's interlanguage rule so that the error is eliminated from further production" (p.1), According to [5] as cited in [6], corrective feedback means "any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learners received (p.1). [16] suggests that corrective feedback can be categorized as positive and negative feedback. Long defines positive feedback as one providing the learner with "models of what is grammatically acceptable in the target language and negative feedback as one providing learners with what is not acceptable. Corrective feedback allows the learners "to confirm, disconfirm, and possibly modify the hypothetical, transitional rules of their developing grammars". The shared belief among applied linguists is that "the provision of corrective feedback following the identification of an error is important for the learner to notice a contrast between their faulty utterance and the target form - the first step in the eventual abandonment of the wrong form and the acquisition of the correct one. This means that intake is what the learners consciously notice in the corrective feedback. The amount of intake will therefore depend on the amount of attention a learner gives to corrective feedback because learners are limited in the amount of information they are able to notice [5], [6]. [7].

HINDRANCES TO EFFECTIVE ERROR ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

Some factors are responsible for ineffective error analysis of ESL written production in Nigerian universities. Discussed below are some of them.

Lack of Practice in Writing

The best way to learn writing is to write. Ironically, university students are not given the opportunity to practise writing. Although the compulsory Use of English has been developed to remedy the deficiencies and improve the use of English language competence of undergraduates, not much has been achieved by the scheme. As [11] cited in [12] observes that "the current practice where most students attempt essay writing for the first time in the examination hall – a repeat of their secondary school experience – makes nonsense of the objectives of the course".

This situation limits the opportunities available to the ESL writing teacher to utilise error analysis systematically and consistently to determine the nature and the frequency of errors so that appropriate remedies could be designed for effective English language teaching and learning.

Large Classes and Insufficient Qualified Lecturers

After the Nigerian civil war, that is, from 1970, there was explosion in school enrolment. School classes became unmanageably large with crippling effect on teacher performance and standards of learner performance in English language. [30] succinctly note that the teaching and learning problems of a large language classes are that such a class size, among other things:

i.   makes learner feedback difficult to obtain and robs the teacher the opportunity of following up the performance of the learners;
ii.   limits the ability of the teacher to initiate and sustain individuals attention to the learners;
iii.   makes the teacher adopt the plenary method which makes him an all knowing narrator and reduces the language learner to the position of a receptacle. This teacher frontedness makes it hard for the teacher to make language teaching and learning communication-oriented (p.63).

Again, there is a dearth of well trained teachers to satisfactorily teach English language to the number of students found in classes in schools.

Lack of Positive Corrective Feedback

According to [17], the process of second language learning is not very much different from that of learning a first language and the feedback a L2 learner gets upon making errors benefits him in developing the L2 knowledge. This happens where the language teacher gives the learners timely corrective feedback. It is quite unfortunate that today, most Nigerian teachers of English at all levels of education do not give appropriate feedback to their students. [6] aptly points out that "corrective feedback that does not provide the correct form may force the learners to utilize their own resources in constructing a reformulation" (p.4). In most Nigerian ESL learning environments, teachers and examination authorities give examination results (assessment scores and grades) as the only performance feedback. Examination results do not show the students what they have not learnt, what they have partially learnt and instances of negative transfer. Therefore examination results in the form of scores and grades may be objective or subjective assessment of performance. They do not provide learners with corrective feedback that can modify or adjust their interlanguage. Students' tests and examination results are only assessment feedback, not corrective feedback. Even in the so-called continuous assessment, students are not given positive corrective feedback. This absence of corrective feedback is observed even in the departments of language studies of our universities. The General Studies Use of English teaching teams do not provide the students with corrective feedback, they only produce examination results after assessment. Teachers' incompetence and large ESL classes are likely responsible for this pedagogic inefficiency..

Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice at any level of education discourages language teaching and learning. It weakens the commitment of the teacher and removes the interest and zeal of the learner. Worse still, where students performances are products of undetected examination malpractice, the assessment feedback (the results) only lead to the deceit of certificate-based qualification

English as a Second Language Teachers in Nigeria

The language teacher or lecturer is expected to be an erudite model in the language he teaches. Unfortunately, due to scarcity of English teachers as well as political influence, some incompetent teachers have been recruited to English language at different levels of education in Nigeria based on certificate qualifications. However, it is a fact in applied linguistics that incompetent language teachers or lecturers are possible sources of errors. All prominent applied linguists believe that learners' errors also become fossilized or entrenched if the teacher shares the same errors with his students. In other words, the teacher who has not mastered the language he teaches may unwittingly encourage errors that were almost corrected in the learners [14], [15], [16]. This is the case in many Nigerian ESL classrooms.

III. CONCLUSION

Error linguistics has influenced teaching and learning of second or foreign languages for the past five decades. Error Analysis (EA) is a diagnostic and pedagogic tool established in the 60's which has remained useful in Applied Linguistics till the present day. It is used to monitor the second language learning difficulties and the learner's learning rate with the aim of improving language teaching and learning. Because it is rooted in cognitive psychology, it is also a means of understanding the interlanguage of a second language learner. English is the second language and the language of instruction in all institutions of formal education in Nigeria.

Sadly, proficiency in English as second language in Nigeria has been degenerating over some years. The indicators of this decline are errors in the learners' and users' spoken and written production in the language. This worrisome trend is prevalent at all levels of formal education in Nigeria to the extent that most Nigerian university graduates can no longer express themselves intelligibly in the language. It is the opinion of this paper that this decline of learning and proficiency is a result of ineffective error analysis and lack of positive corrective feedback on the part of the language teachers. On this challenge of English teachers in Nigeria, [24] laments the predicament and challenge of the English teacher in Nigeria in the following words:

> ...the English teacher can be seen as a victim, a culprit, an accomplice, an adjudicator or a self-appointed grammar policeman that has failed in his duty. Head or tail, he is culpable. If he is a product of the dwindling standard of English, then he is half-baked and cannot impart what he does not have. If he is well trained in the English language, he is still blameworthy for producing graduates the majority of whom the society considers to be illiterate. This is the dilemma of the English language teacher at every level of educational system in Nigeria.

To get out of this dilemma which Azubuike has identified, the English language teacher must fall back on error analysis to be able to identify the persistent errors that mar the performance of learners. This way, the teacher will be able to impart the right linguistic skill to the learner and absolve himself of the blame of producing people who cannot use the language well.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve error analysis and efficient teaching and learning of English language in Nigerian universities, I recommend the following measures:

1. Effective English language teaching in the university must draw insightful inspiration from error analysis. English language curricular must be informed by the results of error analysis carried out consistently over a long period of time so that effective remedies can be built into the teaching and learning process of the language for better performance.
2. Only well trained and knowledgeable teachers should be employed to teach English language. Every prospective teacher should be thoroughly tested and interviewed before employment that he would not share and perpetuate errors.
3. Faculty and Departmental authorities should compel teachers of English to give positive corrective feedback.

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