

Recycling errors in the language classroom

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Abstract

This paper relates to the findings of a study on the constraints encountered by teachers in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in rural combined schools in the Oshana region. Errors and mistakes are as some the major constraints that teachers encounter in language teaching. While mistakes are usually at the surface of the speaker's language awareness, errors are usually more internal. Many factors such as L1 interference can account for the occurrence of errors in a learner's language use. It is argued that a consistent reinforcement of errors results in error fossilization. Even though Proponents of the Communicative Language Teaching approach have emphasised the significance of errors and mistakes in the language teaching and learning process, the role of teachers in the cycle of errors in the language classroom has been over-looked.

1. Background

In Namibia, English was only introduced as a national language at independence in 1990. Prior to the introduction of English, Afrikaans as the language of the colonial oppressor was used not only as the main lingua franca but it was also used as medium of instruction in most state schools. According to Schmied (1991), English was only used as a medium of instruction in private and some elite schools. After independence in 1990, the new Namibian government introduced English as the sole official language, doing away with the Afrikaans medium.

As people from different regions of Namibia speak different languages, a local language could not be used as *lingua franca* because one ethnic group would be empowered at the expense of others. Afrikaans could not be used either because it was generally regarded as the language of the oppressor, leaving English as the most suitable alternative (Benjamin, 2004).

In line with the implementation of English as an official language, the Ministry of Education introduced English as the medium of instruction in all state schools and schools subsidized by government (Jansen, 1995). This move received mixed reactions from the Namibian population since English was a complete foreign language, and only few people could speak it (Benjamin, 2004). Teachers were expected to teach in English despite not being fully proficient. According to a nationwide survey conducted in 2011, more than 90% of teachers in Namibia were found to be lacking 'sufficient' English language proficiency

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(Kisting, 2011). It is thus questionable how teachers' low language proficiency which can be referred to as 'errors' contributes to learners' language learning process.

2. Literature review

Errors and mistakes are synonyms that have varying degrees of meaning in varying contexts. In the general sense, errors and mistakes refer to a wrong action, attributable to bad judgment, or ignorance, or inattention. However, in linguistics, a 'mistake' is considered as a normal human act which is less in gravity compared to an error while an 'error' is considered as more severe and a sign of lack of competence. Considering the significance of errors as indicators of lack of competence, the focus of this section is therefore on the different variables pertaining to the handling of errors in the classroom.

2.1. Error fossilization

According to Han (2004), second language acquisition research over the past three decades has generated a wide spectrum of different interpretations of 'fossilization' – a construct introduced by Selinker (1972) for characterizing lack of grammatical development in second language learning. Han considers these conceptual differences to have become increasingly clear, creating confusion rather than offering clarification, thereby obstructing a coherent understanding of the theoretical notion as well as empirical research findings. Selinker (1972) defines fossilization as "the point at which no further learning appears possible, with the student's performance apparently impervious to both exposure to English and explicit error correction (i.e.: 'set in stone')."

Hasbun (2007) conducted a cross-sectional study on the most frequent grammar errors made by 159 English Foreign Language college students. The data consisted of eight sets of writing samples produced either in class or out of class as part of the regular course activities. The students were evaluated, and the errors were classified according to an error taxonomy. The study found that although the frequency of certain errors increased and decreased unpredictably across levels, errors pertaining to subject omission, subject verb agreement and negative forms were found to be more common in beginners. Hasbun concluded that errors related to the use of articles and prepositions and incorrect verb forms were the most frequent categories across levels. Another conclusion of Han's study was that most errors were a result of using uncorrected, incorrect grammatical forms.

2.2. Language learning, acquisition and proficiency

Krashen (1975) distinguishes language acquisition from language learning. He defines language acquisition as 'a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication'. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. Krashen argues that in language acquisition, people are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages they have acquired. Instead, they have a 'feel' for correctness. Grammatical sentences 'sound' right, or 'feel' right, and errors 'feel' wrong, even if they do not consciously know what rule was violated. Krashen states that some of the prerequisites for language acquisition under the input hypothesis are interaction and exposure to the target language.

Language learning, on the other hand, is defined by Krashen (1973) as a way to develop competence in a second language is by language learning, emphasising the use of the term 'learning' to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In non-technical terms, learning is 'knowing about' a language, known to most people as 'grammar', or 'rules'. Some synonyms include 'formal knowledge' of a language or 'explicit learning'.

According to Krashen (1985), adults have two different ways of developing competence in second languages: acquisition and learning. “There are two independent ways of developing ability in second languages. ‘Acquisition’ is a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language, a conscious process that results in knowing about the rules of language” (p. 87). The acquisition-learning distinction is considered as one of the most essential of all the hypotheses in Krashen’s theory and the most widely known among linguists and language practitioners.

Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn. The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims, however, that adults also acquire, that the ability to “pick-up” languages does not disappear at puberty (Krashen, 2003). This does not mean that adults will always be able to achieve native-like levels in a second language. It does mean that adults can access the same natural ‘language acquisition device’ that children use.

In Namibia, even though English is the official language, it is spoken and learned by many as a second language: one of the reasons for the varying language proficiency among Namibians. Kisting (2011) reports a 2011 nationwide survey conducted by the Ministry of Education to test the English language proficiency of teachers in Namibia. The survey was conducted by means of an English language test administered to 23000 teachers in all schools in Namibia. According to the preliminary findings leaked to the local media, more than 70 per cent of teachers in the senior secondary phase were unable to read and write basic English, 63 per cent in the junior secondary phase were not sufficiently proficient in English, while at primary school level, about 52 per cent of lower primary teachers struggled with the English language, and about 61 per cent faced English language difficulties. According to Kisting (2011)’s coverage of the preliminary report, a total of 7 850 teachers scored between 0 and 52 per cent (‘pre-intermediate’) in the test, while 10 094 scored between 53 and 74 per cent (‘intermediate’), and 4 145 scored between 75 and 92 per cent (‘advanced’). Only 561 managed to get between 93 and 100 per cent.

The test consisted of a comprehension section, a language usage part and a writing category – in which teachers had to construct four complete sentences. Listening, speaking and pronunciation skills were not tested in the test.

The report, Kisting (2011) says, claimed that the teachers in the ‘advanced’ category battled with capital letters, subject-verb agreement, singular and plural forms, articles and the use of full stops. Teachers were also reported as lacking skills in critical thinking and discourse analysis.

The report further states that “it was also apparent that those [teachers] who scored poorly in the reading and language use sections also performed poorly in the writing section” (p. 2). Kisting argued that, “there was strong evidence that this low performance of teachers and other educators overall has a negative impact on learners’ performance in English and all other subjects.” Some teachers, the report states, struggled “to fill in personal data required on the front of the answer sheet”. The report emphasised that there was “much work to be done to upgrade teachers’ English abilities, specifically reading, comprehension, specific fossilised grammar features and punctuation errors” (p. 1-2).

According to the report, younger teachers were more proficient in English than older teachers, while those who were better qualified also read, wrote and spoke better English.

3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the constraints encountered by Grade 10 teachers in teaching ESL in combined schools in rural areas. For an in-depth understanding of the research problem, the qualitative approach was used. Grix (2004) maintains that qualitative research methods allow for in-depth investigation in search of a better, more meaningful understanding of complex issues through the collection and examination of data from several perspectives and the focus on natural settings which are flexible and sensitive to social context. In addition, qualitative research takes into account historically or culturally significant phenomena, values participants' perspectives on their worlds, and often relies on the words of individuals as its primary data (Grix, 2004).

The population of the study was combined schools in rural areas of the Oshana region in northern Namibia. Ten schools were selected by means of the convenience sampling technique since most schools were inaccessible due to the 2011 floods. Data was collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analysed using the content analysis technique.

Discussion of Findings

Although it was not a major objective of the study to test the language proficiency of participants, a high number of grammatical errors coupled with an inability to comprehend some of the interview questions was observed. This indicated that the English language continues to be a barrier to many people, including ESL teachers. This finding is consistent with the 2011 survey on teachers in Namibia which found that the English language proficiency level of at least 90% of teachers in Namibian schools was a cause for concern (Kisting, 2011).

The study found, however, that the younger teachers appeared to have better English language proficiency. This finding relates particularly to the findings of the 2011 survey on the English language proficiency of Namibian teachers which suggested that younger teachers' English language proficiency was at a higher level than that of the older teachers (Kisting, 2011). Although all participants made grammatical errors in their written responses, syntactical and spelling errors were more frequent among the older participants. Furthermore, the interviewer had to occasionally simplify interview questions for older participants to be able to elicit proper answers to questions.

The low English language proficiency of the older participants could be attributed to the education that they had received during the colonial and early post-colonial eras. Before Independence in 1990, the medium of instruction was Afrikaans. English was only introduced as medium of instruction at Independence in 1990 (Schmied, 1991). It is thus possible that the older teachers enrolled at the College of Education with six years or less experience in ESL learning, while the younger participants had more experience in ESL learning with an approximate minimum of between ten and twelve years of schooling in an English medium. This finding has not been addressed in previous studies; although it posits itself under the language acquisition theories of Krashen (1973). Krashen's language acquisition theory states that for language acquisition to take place there must be exposure and interaction: the more exposure and interaction, the better the chances of effective language acquisition. Relating to Krashen's theory, one can thus state that in Namibia, the older the teacher, the fewer opportunities he or she might have had for interaction and exposure to the English language, and therefore the fewer opportunities for acquiring English. Once again, low language proficiency of teachers could constraint ESL teaching in the Oshana region.

The study, furthermore, found that due to the linguistical make-up of the Oshana region, English in most rural communities in the Oshana region could be considered to be almost a 'foreign language' and not necessarily 'second language' as prescribed by the JSC curriculum. It was found that many learners (and teachers) only accessed English in ESL classrooms at their schools, as the day-to-day business was conducted in the indigenous language, Oshiwambo, which was the language spoken by almost everyone in the communities around the schools. It can, therefore, be concluded that exposure and interaction in English were limited to schools. This limited exposure, according to Krashen (1973), means that learners in the Oshana region can be expected to have a low chance of acquiring the English language effectively.

Although English is the official medium of instruction in all state schools in Namibia, the study found that some teachers of other subjects did not teach through the medium of instruction. ESL teachers lamented the English language proficiency of their colleagues, and argued that it was proving to be a constraint to the teaching of English. Teachers with low English language proficiency could induce errors in learners. This finding is supported by the claim of some teacher participants in this study that learners reach Grade 10 with a below average level of English.

As Han (2004) found, uncorrected teacher induced errors could lead to error fossilization. When learners are exposed to incorrect English language forms by teachers too often, they might begin to accept these incorrect forms as correct forms. It can thus be concluded that the low English language proficiency of teachers in the Oshana region could induce errors in learners, and when these errors are reinforced, instead of being corrected by other teachers, the errors could become fossilized. This finding is consistent with Han's (2004) claim that reinforced errors lead to error fossilization. As discussed earlier in this chapter, almost everybody in the Oshana region shares Oshiwambo as a first language. First language interference and negative transfer from Oshiwambo to English are thus likely to be similar, which in turn makes error reinforcement more likely to occur as more and more people are likely to make the same error. Error fossilization might pose a serious constraint to Grade 10 ESL teachers.

Furthermore, as learners move from Grade to Grade, meeting different teachers and other learners, they might pick up some errors: a process that may be referred to as 'error inheritance'. A learner might inherit incorrect English language forms that are used commonly by peers in the classroom, in the same Grade or across different Grades. Similarly, it is assumed that teachers of different Grades might inherit learner errors that might have been induced by their colleagues that taught the learners previously. It is also possible that a learner might inherit an error from the teacher and vice versa. When the errors are not corrected they might be reinforced, lead to fossilization and can be passed on from Grade to Grade throughout the system. Like error fossilization, error inheritance can be a constraint to ESL teachers who would have the task of dealing with errors that were either induced or should have been corrected by their colleagues.

The Namibian lower primary curriculum prescribes that learners be taught through a mother-tongue medium from Grade One to Four. While this is possible in monolingual societies, such as those in the Oshana region, it is not possible in multilingual societies such as those in urban areas, i.e. Windhoek. A delay in transition from Oshiwambo as medium of instruction to English as medium of instruction in the Oshana region can be a constraint to ESL teaching in Grade 10. According to Krashen (1973), language acquisition occurs best at the early ages of a person's life. A delay in transition to English might delay a learner's acquisition of English. Learners in urban areas have thus, according to this theory, a better chance of acquiring the English language compared to their rural counterparts.

ESL teachers in the Oshana region are, therefore, more likely to be required to put in more effort in helping their learners to be on par with their urban counterparts.

When one looks into the language proficiency of teachers, it is worth taking into account that some teachers might have had high levels of English language proficiency when they started teaching in rural schools. The possibility of language decay can thus not be ignored. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the study found that, like learners, teachers have minimized opportunities to interact in the English language in rural areas in the Oshana region. Exposure is minimal as most of the day-to-day affairs were conducted in the Oshiwambo language. The few English speaking domains limit the exposure of both learners and teachers to English. The study found that some learners (and teachers) in the Oshana region were only exposed to English at school. Teachers had thus a limited chance of improving their English language proficiency under the ‘practice makes perfect theory’. It can, therefore, be argued that the English language of many teachers decays and gets rusty as it is used minimally.

The different factors surrounding the English language, ranging from status to decay, error fossilization and error inheritance, are worth warranting English as a constraint to JSC ESL teaching. The study found that JSC ESL teachers in rural areas have a problem with the language they are expected to teach. Nevertheless, the English Language Proficiency Programme (ELPP) designed to improve the proficiency of all teachers in Namibia raises some hope.

Errors in the language classroom

A combination of the errors discussed above, constitutes a potential breakdown of communication and can impede the acquisition of full competence. Therefore, a salient question emerging from the discussion is: how are errors handled in language classroom where both the teacher and learners commit errors? It is thus justified to refer to errors in a language classroom as a cycle. Figure 1 illustrates the error cycle in the language classroom.

Figure 1: the error cycle

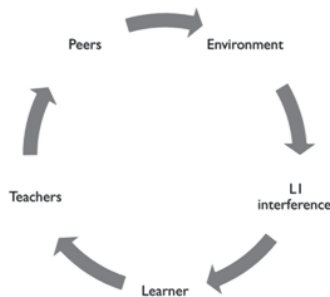


Figure 1 shows that errors can start with the learner through negative transfer, mother-tongue interference and other factors inherent to the learner. These learner errors can either be corrected or reinforced by the learner’s teachers, peers and the learner’s language environment. The 2011 nationwide survey on Namibian teachers revealed that more than 90% of teachers lacked proficiency (Kisting, 2011). In view of the survey findings, it is safe to argue that when teachers of English and of other subjects utter errors to the learners, they reinforce errors in the learners. Even in a case in which an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher corrects a learner’s errors, teachers of other subjects reinforce the errors in the learner through a process that Richmond (1984) refers to as ‘teacher-induced errors’, a process in which teachers cause a learner to make an error.

Likewise, the influence of peers on a learner's errors can be considered as 'learner-induced errors' (Richmond, 1984). A learner's peers who have language deficiencies can either induce errors in a learner or reinforce a learner's error. In a classroom that is characterised by vast learner differences, induced and/or fossilized errors may be passed on from learner to learner, a process that may be referred to as 'error inheritance'. The finding on error inheritance, a process of error transfer, is a new contribution to the literature on language teaching constraints in Namibia and in other parts of the world. Figure 2 illustrates the concept of error inheritance.

Error inheritance occurs because of reasons ranging from induction, imitation and negative input. As Figure 2 shows, the process of error inheritance can begin from an expansion of teacher and learner induced errors. In a classroom, a learner that initially used correct forms of a language may start using incorrect language forms used by classmates, a combination of error induction and imitation. Among learners, error inheritance can occur in a classroom, in a Grade, and across different Grades. As learners interact with each other, learners pass on errors to each other through error inheritance. However, error inheritance is not only influenced by a learner's peers, but it may also be influenced by a learner's teachers.

Similar to error inheritance among peers, learners may inherit errors from their ESL teachers and teachers of other subjects (see figure 2). It was found in the study on constraints (Lumbu, 2013) that teachers teaching in the lower primary phase (Grade 1-4) were considered by their Grade 10 ESL colleagues to be lacking ESL proficiency, a finding supported by the teacher survey of 2011 (Kisting, 2011). Considering the perceived lack of proficiency of teachers, it can thus be argued that learners in the lower primary phase can inherit errors from their teachers.

In the same way, teachers may inherit in their classrooms incorrect grammatical forms that may have been induced by their colleagues who taught the learners in preceding Grades or in other subject classrooms. Each time an error is not corrected, it is reinforced, and each time an error is echoed a person other than the learner, it is reinforced. Error reinforcement in turn, leads to error fossilization. In the absence of intervention, fossilized errors can be inherited from Grade to Grade, throughout a learner's schooling. The perceived lack of ESL proficiency of 98% of teachers in Namibia as revealed by Kisting (2011) should thus be a cause for concern.

Conclusion

This paper was based on the findings of a study on constraints in ESL teaching in the Oshana region, Namibia. The introduction of English in Namibia as an official language and medium of instruction in 1990 came at a time when English was a near complete foreign language. After 23 years of the use of English in Namibia, many people still lack proficiency, teachers included. The 2011 national survey found 98% of teachers in Namibia lacking proficiency. The focus of this paper was thus on the cycle of errors in the classroom. It is thus concluded that errors are often cycled in classrooms, in Grades, in a school, and throughout the education system. It is further concluded that uncorrected errors get reinforced and become fossilized until they are passed on from learner to learner, teacher to learner and Grade to Grade. It is, therefore, recommendable that the phenomenon of errors be investigated at university level in the teacher training programmes, to find out whether the cycle of errors continues at university level.

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