

Functional approach to language learning

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Abstract

The field of error analysis (EA) has expanded to include not only the nature and development of L2 linguistic systems (phonology, morphology, syntax), but also the dynamics of interactional and communicative performance of L2. Focus was put on the functional, social and pragmatic fields of the second language use and on the effect of the communicative behaviors of native speakers on the statement of non-native speakers to determine its acceptability and convenience.

The aim of this paper is to explore the effective use of communicative and functional approach to English language teaching and learning. It is a discussion of theoretical perspectives of exploring issues and concerns to use communicative and functional approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) by presenting different points of view of different researchers on Arab learners of EFL.

Key words: communication, English, foreign, Language, learning, teaching

Introduction

The debate on the validity of Chomsky's dichotomy (1965), between competence and performance, applied to the field of linguistics in general and applied sociolinguistics in particular, has changed in the target language teaching. Researchers are no longer interested in the structure, but in communication. Such developments have won the support of schools such as the school of Prague and the "British school" or "Firthian school of linguistics". These schools have rejected the idea that language is a set of personal content and can be separated from the paralinguistic reality. And although neither grammar nor situation are excluded or neglected, they are no longer the major focus of linguists and teachers. Now, the emphasis is mainly placed on the learner and his functions of language, that is to say, a communicative purpose.

According to Firth (1957) and Halliday (1978), the rejection of Chomsky's dichotomy between competence and performance leads to a refutation of appropriate grammatical differentiation. In Halliday's theory on language, in a neo-firthian approach, language is considered as the "potential meaning" (what the speaker says), which is an interface between "the potential of behavior" (what the speaker can do) and the lexico-grammatical system (what the speaker may say). The notion of "potential meaning" is close to what Hymes (1964) calls "communicative competence" (what interests us here). The difference between the two is that Hymes' communicative competence involves the study of language as knowledge, while the potential of meaning of Halliday involves the study of language as behavior. Halliday's approach requires a theory that links knowledge to behavior (what the speaker knows versus what he actually does). Halliday does not totally reject this approach of language, but regards it as an unnecessary complication. So, Halliday's structure refrains from psychological considerations (what the speaker knows) and considers the language in its behavioral terms.

According to Halliday, this high degree of idealization neglects many points of interest of researchers in applied sociolinguistics. While Chomsky's approach involves three kinds of idealization, regulation, standardization and "contextualization" (Lyon, 1977), sociolinguists reject the two last simply because they represent data from non-standardized language, that is to say prefabricated data to be incorporated in its analysis.

Widdowson (1978) puts forward that we can easily recognize, in the teaching of a language, that the ability to produce sentences is paramount in the learning process. However, it is also important to recognize that this is not a single skill to be acquired by learners. Someone who knows a language has internalized the ability to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how phrases are used in a communicative purpose. Widdowson said in this sense: "We do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language; we at the same time realize it as a meaningful communicative behavior."

1- Communicative error analysis

Since the communicative function of language is essential to the functional approach to language teaching, the theory of communicative competence plays a central role in current research in applied linguistics. The field of error analysis (EA) has expanded to include not only the nature and development of L2 linguistic systems (phonology, morphology, syntax), but also the dynamics of interactional and communicative performance of L2. Focus was put on the functional, social and pragmatic fields of the second language use and on the effect of the communicative behaviors of native speakers on the statement of non-native speakers to determine its acceptability and convenience.

Research on the effect of errors in communication, as stated by Burt and Kisparsky (1972), focuses on whether errors interfere on communication or not; in other words, what kind of error makes a sentence incomprehensible to the listener or reader?

Burt and Kiparksy analyzed thousands of English sentences that contain errors committed by adults learning English as a foreign language in many parts of the world. The errors were seized by recording spontaneous conversations, written compositions and letters. To determine the relative effect of these errors on the communication, they asked native speakers of English to judge their intelligibility. They then concluded that there are two types of errors:

- 1) Global errors: those that affect the organization of the sentence in general and significantly hinder communication, for example ungrammatical word order, missing or misplaced connectors, etc.
- 2) Local errors: those that affect the constituents in a single sentence but does not interfere with communication in general such as prepositions, articles, etc.

Hendrickson (1976) used Dulay and Burt's global/local distinction in his research on the effectiveness of error correction to provide a useful extension that would help distinguish between levels of language proficiency and communicative of a student. Other studies, inspired by the development of the communicative approach, examined the errors in terms of intelligibility by asking the opinion of native speakers.

According to Kachru (1992), English has two distinct varieties, a native variety and non-native variety. He said that English is unique because of its global distribution in diverse linguistic and cultural societies. It plays different roles in each country where it is used. Therefore, it is rather difficult to define a standard for each English speaking-group. English is considered native in countries where it is associated with nationalism and political emancipation. The American English and English in New Zealand are examples of this phenomenon.

As for non-native varieties of English, there are two major categories:

- 1) varieties of performance that include the varieties used as foreign languages like Iranian English, Arabic English and Japanese English,

2) institutionalized varieties as Indian English and African variety of English that have some ontological status as in Nigeria.

We can qualify the different categories of non-native varieties of English mentioned above in terms of: 1) its duration of use, 2) extending its use, 3) the user's emotional attachment to the variety of English, 4) its functional importance within a community, and 5) its sociolinguistic status.

The main contribution in the field of error analysis (EA) is the distinction between deviations and errors. According to many linguists, a mistake is unacceptable to the native speaker as it does not belong to the standard of English language. This does not concern the sociocultural context of non-native variety. However, a deviation is the result of a non-English linguistic and cultural situation in which English is used. It is systematic in a variety and explained in the context of situation. Hence, a variety of non-native English is not only deviant in terms of grammar, phonology and semantics, but also as a communicative unit.

We will try to review some studies that contribute to our research on Arab learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Only few studies have specifically addressed the analysis of the types of errors found in the spoken and written English of Arab students in EFL.

Willcot (1972) studied the mistakes of sixteen Arabic native speakers, using written responses from the final exam of a history course at the University of Texas at Austin. His goal was to highlight some issues that native speakers of Arabic found in written English syntax to develop effective instructional materials. The study showed that the most serious problems relate to the concept of "definiteness". Other types of errors have been identified such as those involving the morphology of verbs, nouns and adjectives.

Scott and Tucker (1974) conducted a carefully controlled study on Arabic-speaking students enrolled in the Intensive English Program at the American University of Beirut. The aim of the study was to describe "transitional grammar" of students. Students were asked to write an essay from images. Syntax errors have been identified and classified. Verbs, prepositions, articles and relative pronouns represented the most problematic areas for Arab EFL learners. The most common errors on verbs occurred in the use of auxiliary and copula; errors on auxiliary verbs included redundancy, omission and substitution involving time and number errors.

Mukattash (1978) examined the results of the written productions of a group of more than 1,000 freshmen at the University of Jordan. The study results showed that students encountered the most difficulties in the use of verbs (errors of time, agreement and omission of the copula), articles and prepositions. There was also a large percentage of errors in the use of modals.

Kharma (1981) analyzed the errors committed by Arab learners of English at the University of Kuwait in the use of articles. The study was conducted in three phases: the first

was to fill the gap by using *a, an, the* or zero article. The second involved a comparative study of the use of Arabic and English articles. The last phase consisted in an analysis of essays. Based on the frequency of errors associated with the use of articles, Kharma has found that most errors in the use of articles were attributed to the interference of the mother tongue.

Kambal (1981) analyzed errors in three types of creative free compositions written by first-year students at the University of Sudan. The study identifies major syntactic errors in verb phrases and noun phrases. In this study, Kambal maintains that the errors were mainly caused by intralingual interference rather than interlingual factors. He concluded that the errors of verb formation, time and subject-verb agreement are mainly due to the verbal system of English.

Sharma (1981) studied the results of ten compositions by Saudi students learning English as a Second Language at the University of Indiana. The compositions were collected at the beginning, middle and end of the English program. Following the methodology of Scott and Tucker (1974) and the typology of errors in finite verb phrases and relative pronouns, the data were subjected to analysis of errors that gave results broadly similar to those of Scott and Tucker. The auxiliary and the copula represented the most problematic areas for students. Sharma has attributed most of the errors to universal processes of simplification and generalization.

Al-Muarik (1982) examined the errors in writing and learning strategies for students of English preparatory and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. The study was based on translation by students from 36 Arabic sentences in English. The types of structures were discussed issues partial Wh-questions, comprehensive yes/no questions, passive voice and negative form. He also asked students to write compositions to check their use of time. The errors were grouped according to their categories, their frequency and their source, and then explained. Al-Muarik found that a small percentage of errors was due to interference with the L1 and that strategies such as overgeneralization, simplification and avoidance have been used by students.

At the University of Illinois, Khalil (1984) went further in his study of the effect of communication errors committed by Arab EFL learners and judged by native American speakers. Syntactic and semantic errors that are most common in the productions of Arab EFL learners at the University of Bethlehem were judged on the basis of their intelligibility, their naturalness and their interpretability. 240 American students were asked to evaluate deviant structures presented in four different questionnaires.

Khalil concluded that semantic errors are less intelligible and less interpretable as syntax errors and that the immediate linguistic context does not influence the ability of native speakers to interpret the intention of the learner.

Conclusion

Investigations on the errors made by Arab learners of EFL reveal a similarity of difficulties in English syntax: in the use of verbs, articles, prepositions, relative names and word order.

We consider Error Analysis (EA) as a useful tool for addressing the difficulty of the language, while recognizing the existence of other factors that affect the performance of the learner. When all these factors are taken into account, we get a clearer picture of the problems in learning English, which may contribute to improve the practices of teaching and learning languages.

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