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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Volume 3, Number 6, 2011

S/No	Contents	Authors	Pages
1	An Appraisal of Technical Education Programme in Technical Colleges in the Niger Delta Region Nigeria	E. D. Beeman-Dighein	1-9
2	Gender Differences in the Academic Performance on Senior Secondary School Students in Agricultural Science in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State	Akarue, B. O. and Ilia, P. A	10-16
3	Assessment of Dietary Pattern among Undergraduate Students in Ogun State Nigeria	S. S. Nupe, J. V. Akinlotan and Olumuti P. A	17-23
4	Re-Engineering the Teaching of Textile Design in Vocational Education: Challenges and the Way Forward	Abdullahi I. Musa	24-28
5	Relevance and Benefits of Management by Objectives to Secondary School Management in Anambra State: Teachers Views	Ofojebe Wenceslaus	29-35
6	Effective Promotion of Functional Education in Nigerian School for Sustainable Development of the Third World	Adesanya Anu O. and Banjo E. A.	36-41
7	Language and Culture for Sustainable Development of Teacher Education in Third World	Sani Abubakar Wasagu and S. O. Eguare	42-45
8	Studies on Moon Eclipse and Rampage Vandalization in Maiduguri Borno State, Nigeria: Implication for Counseling Strategies	Umara Mustapha and Umar Goni	46-51
9	Equality of Women's Status with Men through Open and Distance Education System	Gana Matthew Attahiru	52-57
10	Integration of Information and Communication Technology in Education	Adamu Babale and Omar B. Adamu	58-64
11	Counseling in the Context of Universal Basic Education and Rural Development in Yobe State, North Eastern Nigeria: Challenges and the Way Forward.	Usman Mohammed Dakasku	65-72
12	A Critique of the Assessment Techniques of Candidates with Special Needs	Imabong Udo Nsehe	73-78
13	Challenges for Teacher Education in Nigeria.	Isaac Abiodun Ajayi, Festus Oluwole Afolabi and Boladale Joseph Adamu	79-84
14	Prevalence of Child Abuse and It's Implications on Education.	Agnes Ojile	85-90
15	Attitude of Vocational Education Teachers in Akwa Ibom State Secondary Schools towards Instructional Supervision in Akwa Ibom State: A Concern for Sustainable Development in the Third World.	Patrick S. Ebong, Isaac, I. J., Hogan S. Usoro, E. B. Usoro and Anthony A. Offiong	91-97
16	Science Process-Skills Acquisition and Secondary School Students' Achievement in Physics	Utibe-Abasi Scepter Stephen	98-101
17	Entrepreneurship Education for Women Empowerment through Distance Education.	Ngurukwem, Chinyere and Ngurukwem, Emmanuel C.	102-106
18	The Phenomena of Mistake and Error Correction in Learning as a Second Language	Amina Gogo Tafida	107-114
19	Effect of Prior Knowledge of Instructional Objectives on Senior Secondary School Students' Achievement in Biology.	Josiah A. Ogbeba	115-123
20	Influence of Gender, Age and Academic Status on Level of Stress among University Lecturers in South Nigeria.	Ogunsanmi, Joyce Olufunke and Mary Banke Iyabo Omoniyi	124-127
21	Impact of Tertiary Institutions of Learning on Proximate Residential Property Values: Case Study of the Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria.	Ajayi Mary Adebola and Nwosu Akuakanwa Eziukwu	128-136
22	A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Co-Operative Learning Strategy and Traditional Learning Method on Academic Achievement of Senior Secondary Chemistry Students.	Pepple Tamunosisi Furo	137-141
23	Relevance of Social Work Practice to Adult Learners in Nigeria Formal and Non-Formal Education Settings.	Mustapha, Muhammad Kano and Adamu Jiddah Gabasa	142-146
24	Influence of Microteaching on Science Students Teachers' Teaching Practice Effectiveness.	Nwoke, Bright I. and A.O. Iwu	147-153
25	Impact of HIV/AIDS Awareness on Progress towards its Eradication: A Case Study of Esan West Local Government Area.	M. O. Asokhia	154-161
26	The Significant Others and Adolescent Socialization into Sport.	Aderonmu Kehinde A. and Adediran, V. O.	162-165
27	A Critique of Current (Organized) Academic Conferences.	Jones M. Jaja	166-172

International Journal of Research in Education, Volume 3, Number 6, 2011

THE PHENOMENA OF MISTAKE AND ERROR CORRECTION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in a language is only attained if that language is frequently put to use by the learner or speaker. In the process of language use however, mistakes and errors are inevitable. These mistakes and errors may influence or hinder the learning of a language depending on the situation the learner finds himself. The role of this paper, therefore is to highlight the fact that mistakes and errors are facilitators in the language learning process and should not be seen as signs of failure on the part of the learner. The paper distinguishes between slips, attempts, mistakes and errors, why they occur and how they should be treated. Some of the causes of mistakes and errors identified are first language interference, the intricate nature of English language, improper teaching which leads to overgeneralization or incomplete application of rules among others. Some recommendations offered include: allowing learners to communicate even with errors, presentation of activities that will allow learners to learn the language in free manner and giving learners the opportunity to correct their errors

INTRODUCTION

Language learning is not easy at all. Even our mother tongues are learned through a gradual process starting from learning to produce a sound to word then sentences which later make up a discourse. This process of learning the native language is mostly controlled by a "well educated parent" (father/mother) – Gibson (2008). However, even at this stage mistakes and errors are still inevitable because even the larger environment is full of imperfections, (Richards, 1974). Erdogan (2005) opines that, the fact that children learning their native tongue make plenty of mistakes is a natural part of language acquisition process. As they get feedback from adults, they learn how to produce grammatically and semantically acceptable sentences in their native language. He also concludes that what a foreign language learner does in operating on the target language is not different from that of a child acquiring his first language.

When learning a new language, too many mistakes can be made from expression, pronunciation, writing and lexis. This is because English as a second language poses two main challenges to the learners. The first challenge is that, the learner already has a mother tongue (1st language) which shapes his views of the world, the most frequently used language in his environment, the language which surrounds him from cradle and in which he grows. The second challenge is the 'Strangeness' of the English language to the learner. The language was brought to the country from far away west due to some historical circumstances and has become one of the most important languages in the country. Added to this is the intricate nature of the language itself. For, English language is full of contradictions in its rules and regulations. For instance, its rules are full of exceptions – Tafida (1998). Example – rules regarding formation of past tense and noun pluralization.

The situations above put a learner of English in some forms of difficulties, which result in mistakes in speaking and in writing. As teachers of English language, there is need to view these mistakes or errors, so as to facilitate the learning of the language. The aim of this paper therefore is to highlight different dimensions of mistakes, their causes and their contributions to the language learning process. The paper would also provide an insight into whether mistake/errors should be corrected and by who, as this would facilitate the effective learning of English as a second language.

Mistakes

Cotter (2009) defines a mistake as a previously learned grammar point, vocabulary, word or phrase which a student uses incorrectly. In this situation, somebody might have studied a material, but found it difficult to produce it correctly.

Edge (1990) went further that teachers usually mean improper use of language form when they talk about mistakes and that some mistakes can be more important than the others. For instance, mistakes that affect meaning and communication are more important than those that affect grammatical aspect.

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E.g. "Are you come here yesterday?" (Did you come here yesterday?). The first part of the sentence is difficult to interpret, but as soon as we hear 'yesterday' we have no trouble understanding what it means. Some mistakes have a much wider effect e.g "how long are you here for?" (How long have you been here?). The wrong verb form has caused misunderstanding. Edge (1990) therefore maintains that when we talk of people being polite it is more important than being linguistically correct and that a mistake which affects a long stretch of language is more important than that which has a local effect e.g. "some people think that the mountains is the best place for the holiday". On the contrary, "the seaside is the favourite for most people". In this sentence, there is doubt as to whether the first sentence is contradicting the second etc.

Categories of Mistakes

Edge (1990) opines that we can divide mistakes into different categories according to the teacher's opinion of how a mistake fits in with an individual student's stage of learning in his/her class. Such categories are:

1. Slips – These are tiny mistakes of linguistic form which could be self-corrected by the learners. These could be termed 'careless' mistakes. For example

1. He had been their for many years.
2. She left school two years ago and now work in a factory.
3. My father is a trader, he wanted me to be a lawyer.

The mistakes in sentences above could be corrected by whoever makes them if pointed out.

2. **Errors**

These are mistakes which could not be corrected by individual even if they are pointed out. Such mistakes will be different for different students or for the same students on different days. Edge (1990) Example:

1. Although the weather is very nice, but I don't like it here.
2. It is fortunate the fact that she loves you.
3. That was the first Nigerian film which I have understood it.

An error is systematic i.e it is likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. It has to do with linguistic competence and has a more severe effect. Errors are as a result of ignorance or negligence. Richards et al (1992) also state that an error is the use of linguistic item in a way that a native or fluent speaker of the language regards it as showing faulty or incomplete learning. In other words, it occurs because the learner does not know what is correct, and thus it can not be self corrected.

An error may vary in magnitude Erdogan (2005). It can include a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a sentence or even a paragraph. (Brown 2000) views errors as being either global or local. Global errors hinder communication and prevent the message from being comprehended as in

* I like bus but my mother said so not that we must be late for school.

On the other hand, local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because a segment of a sentence allows the hearer to guess the intended meaning as in

If I see you, I would show you.

3. **Attempts**

Attempts can occur in the situations below.

1. when the teacher knows that student has not yet leaned the language necessary to express what he wants to say or
2. When it is not clear what the students mean or what structure they are trying to use. For instance, when students who have not learnt much English, but have learnt simple present and simple past tenses utter a statement like –"I wish I went my mother's house last year".

That student means to say something but has no real idea of how to structure the meaning correctly in English.

This categorization of mistakes notwithstanding, teachers may still need to depend on the knowledge of their learners in order to decide how to categorise mistakes as they occur. This is because, a similar mistake e.g 'I wish I went my grandmother's house last year'. Could be a slip for one student, an error for another, and an attempt for a third. Or, for the same learner, it might be an attempt today, an error next month, and a slip next year Edge (1990).

There are two ways to distinguish between an error and a mistake according to Ellis (1997). The first one is to check the consistency of learner's performance. If he sometimes uses the correct form and sometimes the wrong one, it is a mistake. However, if he always uses it incorrectly, it is then an error, the second way is to ask the learner to try to correct his own deviant utterance. Where he is unable to, the deviations are errors, where he is successful, they are mistakes.

Causes of Mistakes

One of the causes of mistakes or errors in learning a foreign language is the influence of the speakers' first language, Corder (1987). This can be noticed in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. For instance, in

English man learning Hausa is likely to carry over the features – phonetic, lexical and grammatical grammatic of his own language when he speaks Hausa in the same way as an Hausa man does when he speaks English. This, Corder (1987), refers to as interlingual transfer. For instance, Nupe people also have problem with the English Dental fucatives /Θ/ and /ð/so pronounce 'that' as 'dat' or even 'zat'. The Hausa people insert a vowel between consonants even where they originally do not exist e.g. *sitation' for 'station' *sitate' for 'state' etc and also have problem with the English 'f & v'. The Ibos have problem with 'L' and Yoruba people with /_/ and /_/ and so pronounce 'chalk' as 'shock'. Many Spanish speakers also have difficulty with words starting with 'st' as such instead of 'star' they say e-star (Edge 1990). The reality is that, wherever people have problem with any word or structure in English language they tend to use words or structures from their own language to fit in to it.

Interlingua transfer also comes from the grammar and lexis of the mother tongue. Here, major areas of difficulty usually lie in the handling of English tenses, countable nouns, articles and prepositions Tafida (1998). For example, in Nupe, tense is not so much connected with time as with aspect, particularly the notion of completed and uncompleted action. Time is usually indicated by context or by association with certain adverbials. Thus, "wun kpe ye" (completed action) can mean "he knows" or "he knew" according to the context'.

Furthermore, the mastery of English prepositions also constitutes major problems for non-native speakers. For example, there is only a limited correspondence between English and Nupe prepositions and as a result, learners may have difficulty in selecting the right one. For example, the use of the preposition 'by' 'be' in Nupe can be used differently in English. For example

English	Nupe	Direct Translation
By day	be yigidi	by sun
In the morning	be ladzin	by morning
At night	be yeshi	by night
On foot	be bichi	by leg
By hand	be egwe	by hand
With Audu	be Audu	with Audu

(Tafida 1998)

Mistakes or errors are also made due to intra-lingual interferences which Richards (1976) refers to as items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. Intra lingual interference can also be regarded as developmental errors which are caused by the structure of the target language and through the strategy by which a second language is acquired and taught. Tafida (1998).

Intra-lingual errors are caused by over generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. Richards (1976). Over- generalization is associated with redundancy reduction, Tripp (1979). This may occur for instance, with items that are contrasted in grammar of the language but that do not carry significant and obvious contrast for the learner. The 'ed' marker in narrative or other past tense contexts appear to carry no meaning since 'pastiness' is usually indicated lexically in stories and the essential notion of sentence in narrative can be expressed equally in the present. For example, "yesterday" I go to the university and I see my lecturer". Here, the learner cuts down the tasks involved in sentence production.

The second type of intra lingual error is ignorance of rule ' restrictions'. This has to do with failure to observe the restrictions of exiting structures to contexts where they do not apply. Some of these errors may be accounted for in terms of analogy and the rote learning of rules. Richards (1985). For instance, a learner encountering a particular type of preposition with one type of verb may attempt to use the same proposition with similar verbs. e.g 'He showed me the book' may lead to

He explained me the book

Or

He asked me the book.

The learner might also use his knowledge of the –ed (past) as in "showed him the room; to say

He eated the food

She sleeped on the mat

Thirdly, incomplete rule application may also cause intra lingual errors. This, Richards (1985), defines as "the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of developmental rules required to produce acceptable utterances". For example, in many African languages, there is systematic difficulty in the

use of questions. Sometimes, statement form many be used as a question or one of the transformations in series may be omitted.

The fourth type of intra lingual error is false concepts hypothesized which Richards (1985) defines as "a class of developmental errors that derives from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language sometimes resulting from poor gradation of teaching items. For instance, after learning about comparisons in English with 'er' or 'more', he might think that both can be put together as in

Your class is more bigger than mine

Or

Your room is more tidier than hers.

Other examples of errors of this class include

- he made me to laugh
- I don't know why he did travel
- I want learning Ibo
- The food smells freshly etc.

Thirdly, people may say things that they know are not correct because this is their best chance of getting their message across.

Learners also make mistakes due to lack of attention, fatigue or carelessness.

Looking at the causes of mistakes above maintains that the exact details of mistakes which are caused by native speakers and by learners will be different. Slips of the tongue or of the pen are found in everyone's English Edge (1990).

Role of Mistakes/Errors in Second Language Learning

Errors inform the teachers how far towards the goal the leaner has progressed and what remains for him to learn (Corder, 1987) They are a means of feedback for the teacher, reflecting how effective he is in his teaching style and changes he has to make to get better performance from his students. Erdogan (2005) also offers that, following the student's progress, the teacher is able to carry on his studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy to change or reconstruct.

Edge (1990) refers to learners' errors as learning steps. He considers them as signals that students are successfully learning the language. The errors also provide evidence of the system of the language that a child is learning at a particular period in time. Richards et al (1992) offers that errors are significant in three different ways. First, to the teacher in that they tell him how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently what remains to be learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are indispensable to the language learner himself because it is a way the leaner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning. Errors are also significant for syllabus designers as they show what items are important to be included or what items need to be recycled in the syllabus.

Keshavars (1997) adds that an error-based-analysis can give reliable results upon which remedial materials can be planned and constructed. Bartram and Walton (1991) also opine that mistakes are often a sign of learning and must be viewed positively and that teachers should remember that learnability varies from person to person and all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and correct hypothesis testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them.

Mistakes/Error Correction

The paper has taken a critical look at mistakes and errors and their causes. This section would therefore highlight the phenomenon of error correction. Many views have been expressed by researchers on whether or not to correct students when they make mistakes. For instance, Edge (1990) opines that it is not the teacher's job to correct all the non-standard English that learners produce but to help them improve their English which is sometimes best done by not correcting. According to him, if we pay too much attention to correctness, we don't seem to be speaking a language at all. Edge's view is in line with most theories of language acquisition such as communicative Audio-lingualism, monitoring theory etc. Ur (1996). These schools of thought claim that not all mistakes need to be corrected and that focus should be on the message rather than mistakes. Edge (1990) also reinforces this view when he says learning a language means more than learning lots and bits of linguistic form, and the only way to learn to communicate in a language is actually to communicate in that language.

In a famous study by Robb, Ross, and Shorteed (1986) as quoted by Gray (2000), four kinds of grammar corrections used on the surface errors of Japanese students were compared to see if they had an influence on the students' writing over time. These types were (a) explicit correct, where errors were pointed out and correct forms offered (b) marking mistakes with yellow pen without explanation (c) a tally kept in the margin of the number of errors per line, and students told to examine and correct them (d) the use of

correction code which showed both the location and the kind of errors. In all these cases, the students were told to write their essays again, making necessary corrections. However, results still showed that no significant differences existed between all the groups in terms of accuracy.

Thus, Truscott (1996) adds that

> *Veteran teachers know there is little connection between correction and learning. Often a student will repeat the same mistake over and over, even after being corrected many times. When this occurs, it is tempting for the teacher to say the student is not attentive or lazy, however, the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, even with successful students, argues against any such explanation. Rather the teacher should conclude that correction is simply not effective*

Kavaliauskiene (2003) also opines that learning a foreign language is a slow and gradual process during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. According to him, mistakes are therefore a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. Numerous studies have also revealed that grammar correction to second language writing students is actually discouraging and even harmful to their writing ability Kepner (1991), Sheppard (1992), and Truscott (1996). This is because those who do not receive grammar corrections have a more positive feeling about writing than these who did. They also wrote more and with more complexity, than those who did Gray (2000). Moreover, the time spent by students and teachers on correcting grammatical errors should have been given to other important elements of writing, like organization and logical development of content.

Further problem of correction has to do with the practicalities associated with teachers' comments and the students' understanding of these comments. Research has shown that corrections made by second language writing teachers are frequently arbitrary, inconsistent and greatly dependent upon the age and amount of the time the teacher has with L2 students. Zamel (1995) adds that teachers also commonly misread student texts and evoke abstract roles and principles in their comments. They also use red ink, underlining and crossing out which is a powerful visual statement of the fact that their written English is terrible Students often find these comments vague, confusing and contradictory. Cohen (1987) also utters that students generally only make a mental note of the corrections they have understood, and if they have to rewrite their papers, regularly, do not incorporate these mistakes in to their work.

How to treat Learners' Mistakes/Errors

The proceeding paragraphs have dwelt on the dangers of correcting every mistake/error a learner makes while learning English as a second language. This portion will therefore take a look at how teachers should treat students' mistakes/errors, because if we allow errors to go uncorrected, and indicate understanding where there is none we may reinforce learners' errors and even their persistence and that would make correcting far harder, if not impossible and this may spread to the whole class. Therefore, Brown (2000) opines that necessary correction is indispensable for teachers to improve students' performance. Harmer (1998) suggests three steps to be followed by the teacher if errors occur. The first is to listen to the students, second is to identify the problem and third is to put it right in the most efficient way.

Since it is not possible for teachers to deal with all the errors the students make, a hierarchy should therefore be established for the correction of errors according to nature and significant of such errors. In such a hierarchy, Erdogan (2005) maintains that priority should be given to errors which may affect communication and understanding. For, if a teacher does this, he can direct himself accordingly. For instance, Brown (2006) suggests that Local errors need not be corrected as the message is clear and correction might interrupt a learner in the flow of productive communication. For instance, the sentences below have local errors;

"I gave he a present"] I gave him a present

"Please will you to show me cards?"] Please, would you show me cards?

"Are you come here yesterday?"] Did you come here yesterday?

On the other hand, global errors need to be treated in some way since the message is not comprehended clearly. Examples:

1. Daddy my car happy today buy
2. I wish I went my grandmother's house last night.

Erdogan (2005) also adds that Errors in pluralization, use of articles, tenses etc are less important than errors regarding word order, the choice of placement and appropriate connectors in terms of the comprehensibility of the sentence. He therefore concludes that priority in error correction should be given to global errors in order to develop the students' communicative skills.

However, different kinds of tasks may require a different treatment. The reaction of the teacher towards errors and the type of feedback to be given is usually determined by the position of the error in the objective of the task. For oral works, Ur (1996) recommends that students making mistakes should not be interrupted but be reminded of the mistakes and talk about the reasons. The type of the feedback – form or content should be decided on according to the goal of the study. If the goal is to make students practice a certain grammar point, it may be necessary to give a form feedback or else, if a pronunciation item is being practised, the teacher should correct the related mistakes without interrupting the speaker.

For correcting written works, Ur (1996) advises that the teacher should not correct the students' mistakes directly but should put marks indicating that there is something wrong with that sentence, word, or punctuation. This is done by using symbols such as 'sp' for spelling mistake, 'rw' meaning to re-write, 'p' for punctuation. T-tense etc rather than writing the correct form. Thus, students are able to correct themselves.

Each language teacher must therefore consider carefully when, what and how to correct. Whatever kind of error correction teachers conduct, they should keep in mind Michael Lewis message in Bertram and Walton (1991), which says, 'you never correct a mistake you always correct a person'.

Forms of Correction

This paper would also take a look at three main ways by which learners of English as a second language can be corrected.

1. **Self - Correction**

Kavaliauskiene' (2003) opines that self-correction is more practical in written rather than in verbal work although some learners are capable of self-correction in oral presentations. In written work, the teacher's role is to indicate the mistakes but not to correct them. The indication can be done by underlining or coding them e.g 'T' for wrong tense etc or ticking the erroneous line.

Edge (1990) also adds that it is important to give a chance for self-correction if the mistake is a slip. Such mistake should not be corrected but the teacher should just show that a mistake has been made. In oral work expressions like Er -----or Mmmm--- (questioning expression on face), or by making a sign with a hand can help. Research has shown that learners' ability to notice errors without teacher's aid is a qualitative leap to conscious cognition. Kavaliauskiene (2003).

(2) **Peer correction**

Peer Correction is a situation where by other members of the class correct a person's errors. Peer correction according to Edge (1990) is particularly useful in the case of error correction. This can take place in oral works where the teacher asks some students question one by one and if any of them fails to answer it correctly, calls on another to offer the correct answer and thereafter asks the person who has been corrected to say it once again. Peer correction has some advantages such as firstly, both learners are involved in listening to and thinking about the language. Secondly, the teacher gets a lot of information about the ability of his students. Thirdly, the student becomes aware of the fact that, they can learn from each other. This ensures cooperation and less dependence on the teacher. In addition, if students are used to the idea of self correction peacefully, the same spirit can be used to help them learn when they work in pairs and in groups. However, some of the problems associated with peer correction are: the same set of students may always want to correct others and secondly, students who are corrected may feel they are being criticized by people who have no right to criticize them or that the teacher is not doing his job. Teachers therefore have to be careful about how they exploit this form of correction so as not to jeopardize the language learning process.

3. **Teacher correction**

If self correction and peer correction fail, at first the teacher can sometimes help by focusing attention on the place where the mistakes occur. The teacher must realize that the point has not been generally learned. Even though he might think that he/she has taught it. This obviously needs teaching again in a different way. The teacher should not teach the mistake of form but correct them. If for instance, the students are being taught oral exercise, he/she must keep to natural stress and pronunciation so that students can actually hear what they are supposed to produce instead of over stressing the corrected part in order to make the correction clear.

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a look at the phenomenon of mistakes and errors, why they occur and their roles in the language learning process. It's also an eye-opener that mistakes and errors should be expected in any language learning situation whether formal or informal. English as a second language teachers should therefore be prepared to entertain learners' mistakes and errors and utilize them as strategies that would boost effective learning of English as a second language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Making mistakes or errors in language is a natural process that cuts across different sectors, different age groups and different academic stages. As a result, anyone that is always conscious of mistakes anytime he wants to speak or write would find it difficult to do so. In order to ensure fluency in speaking a language, mistakes should most of the time be ignored both by the speaker and the hearer. English as a second language teachers should therefore note the followings recommendations.

1. If a child makes mistake allow him the chance to find out the mistake as well as correct it himself.
2. If it is a written work, allow them the chance to write and re-write and if mistakes are not corrected, help them indicate areas and nature of the mistakes.
3. Mistakes are not signs of failure it could be because a part or some parts still need to be taught properly to avoid over generalization of rules.
4. Teachers should inculcate in students the ability to communicate even with errors because this is more important than becoming tongue-tied and obsessed with grammatical correctness
5. To avoid mistakes, extensive use of drills and practice to teach the language forms should be used. This would make the language familiar to the learners
6. Organise and follow controlled activities with the chance to practice the language in a free manner. Role plays, discussions, presentations or task-based activities should be used in the class.
7. During the final stage of the lesson, mistakes should be presented for review. This will ensure that
8. students can use the language uninterruptedly and naturally. If the mistakes are many, they should be used as a guide for future lessons or when assigning home work. If there are more errors than mistakes, then the teacher has done a good job.

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