

## A CASE STUDY OF AN ADVANCED ENGLISH LEARNER'S ERRORS IN NATURALLY OCCURRING SPEECH

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### Abstract

Identifying ,describing and analyzing errors have been seen by many linguists as one of the main ways of investigating L2 acquisition .The present paper will focus on analyzing an advanced English learner's errors in naturally occurring speech . Firstly ,it describes in detail the errors that a Chinese advanced learner made in her first few months of naturalistic communication ,then analyzes the main types and causes of errors .Lastly ,there is a conclusion that language errors are caused by the limits of human language ( L1 /L2 )abilities and L2 errors are closely related to L1 interference .

### Key words

error ;L2 acquisition ;L1 interference

### 1 .Introduction

It is human to make mistake . So it seems that errors and mistakes are part of the nature of human behavior ,including language behavior . Identifying ,describing and analyzing errors have been seen by many linguists as one of the main ways of investigating L2 acquisition . The Rod Ellis(1997 :15 ) believes that errors are “the a conspicuous feature of learner language ” and worth focusing on . Michael Garman also attaches much importance to the value of the study of language errors :

“ Errors have considerable potential to shed light on the nature of the language system since they mark those points at which the system breaks down . The symptomatology of errors can thus ,in principle ,carry information on where in the system the breakdown occurred and how ,in the sense of the possible mechanism involved .”(1990 :151 )

Since language is such a complex phenomenon that justice can't possibly be done by a single paper ,a focus on one of its most important aspects —errors ,should be a good start point to look at the nature of language . This paper tries to track down the errors that a Chinese advanced English learner frequently made during her very first months of naturalistic communication after arriving in Britain .

### 2 . The Choice of the Subject and Methods Used

Ms .Ais currently a 29 year old MA English literature student in a British university ,a native speaker of Chinese . Before she came to Britain 6 months ago she had had very formal instruction in English for more than 13 years(the 3 years primary school + the 6 years middle school + the 4 years university with English as her major )and she had had 5 years experience in teaching English in a Chinese college . While she was in China ,her contacts with native speakers were very few . It was only after she came to study in Britain and especially after she began to go out with a British boy friend that she had regular opportunities to use English in naturalistic surroundings . As a non native speaker myself ,having studied English many years yet without much chance to use it ,I often feel jealous of her opportunities for practice . Yet every time I showed her my jealousy ,she laughed and said with much discouragement that the more she

practiced the more mistakes she made and she never made so many mistakes when she was a teacher speaking a lot in her classroom . Surprised and curious , I asked her to pay attention to and if convenient , take notes of her mistakes perceived by herself or pointed out by her boyfriend in their conversations . I wish I were an invisible woman and could have been there sitting in on their dates to take a whole picture of their conversations . Obviously Ms . A was more interested in something else other than her language errors in a romantic date and thus as result she produced a note much smaller than I expected . Yet I felt very thankful to her in that her note , however small , carries some information useful to me and what is more , she is so generous that she managed to find a slot between their dates to let me have a talk with them about her errors .

### 3 . Results and Analysis

The following are the notes and interview .

#### Data 1

Ms . A s notes

- 1 . I feel ( felt ) very dry in my room last night with all heaters on .
- 2 . What does ( did ) your Mom do before she retired ?
- 3 . Did you mention me to your Mum ?
- 4 . What does ( did ) he ( she ) say ?
- 5 . I had ( have had ) [ in t ] ( enough ) of these sandwiches .
- 6 . You drive too much everyday traveling to work . You are not easy . ( It is not easy for you )
- 7 . Could you please get me some potato ( potatoes ) when you pass Asda ?
- 8 . This is the boy who took up Rose the s room and he got a letter of her ( hers ) .
- 9 . He want ( wanted ) me to pass the letter to him . ( her — Rose )
- 10 . The computer play ( was playing ) up and I can ( couldn t ) send it
- 11 . I told you before that you could call me anytime and I mean ( meant ) it .
- 12 . You talked about Alice so much but I didn t expect he ( she ) is so small .
- 13 . I am ( am going to be ) away next Saturday and back on Sunday .
- 14 . I dreamed my mom last night and in my dream he ( she ) is ( was ) ill .
- 15 . Have a good trip and hopefully you weren t ( won t ) get carsick .
- 16 . He work ( s ) as a cleaner in his part time .

#### Data 2

Records of the interview

Ms . A :

Mostly I can find the right words to express what I mean . Maybe not very exact , but adequate for meaning . Most of my mistakes are lower , elementary mistakes , like pronouns , 3rd person singular and the use of tenses . All of these I know ( have known ) very well since I was in my middle school . And I taught ( have been teaching ) them to my students so many years . I never made such stupid mistakes when I write ( wrote ) or talk ( talked ) in my classroom . Otherwise I would have been kicked out years ago .

Actually more often than not I realized my errors the moment I finished the sentences . Sometimes I was too anxious to stop to correct myself if they didn t prevent understanding , but I felt frustrated and distracted by them and they occurred even more often in the following talk .

Ms . A s boyfriend :

Her English is very good for a non native speaker . Clear pronunciation and tone in each and every individual word , as if she were giving a lecture letting the voice reach ever corner of the classroom . Her sentences are long and perfectly structured . And sometimes she could even help me out when I got words stuck on the tip of my tongue . So mostly our talk went smoothly ok , except when sometimes she plays her tricks with numbers and persons and tenses . She likes to omit odds and ends like s and ed and use a simple form of the verb or noun instead . I can notice all these but feel no difficulty in understanding what she means to say . However I was often confused and had to question more closely when she made a mess of “ she ” and “ he ” , the otherwise I didn t know who did what in her stories .

Let the sort out the errors described in the notes into the following table ,in which case we can have a better look at their patterns .

| Types     | Omission of ed | Omission of es | Personal pron | Slip of tongue | Others |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--------|
| Frequency | 10             | 2              | 5             | 2              | 1      |

Since the errors have been identified and described ,now comes to the point when their types can be classified and causes diagnosed .

#### Type 1 Slip of tongue ,slip of mind

Ms .A said she often made funny utterances that meant nothing (as shown in note 5 ,15 ). The She felt she was thinking one word (“ much ”) while speaking another (“ enough ”) and as result she embarrassedly pronounced something in the middle ,an intelligible mixture of the two .

With this type of errors ,Ms .The A doesn t have to feel embarrassed at all in the eyes of Rod Ellis . According to Ellis (1997 :17 ) ,“the an accidental slip of the tongue ”is universally found in both native speakers and any nationality non native language learners .Most people have had the experience of hearing themselves say something not quite as they intended it . There must be moments when the writing between our brain and oral organ is fused and our mouth works deviant from the instructions by the brain . Garman called it “the articulatory in nature ”(1990 :23 )and it is part of the limits of our language abilities .

What has caused the fuse ?Ellis thinks people makes slips when they are tired or under pressure to communicate . Garman believes that ,more often with L2 ,it is due to lack of proficiency .In the case of Ms .A ,advanced learner she is though ,understandably she “slipped ” a lot in her first months naturalistic communication due to lack of both ease and proficiency .

#### Type 2 Omission of grammatical suffixes {e}s /ed

Ms .A tends to omit {e}s /ed and use simple forms instead .(note 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 ) For an advanced learner like Ms .A ,it is least likely that she lacks the knowledge of the correct form of plural form or past tense . And besides ,she seldom makes such mistakes in her writing or classroom lecturing . The reason lies in that she is a native Chinese ,in whose language there is no such a thing at all as to change forms of verbs or nouns .

#### Type 3 Confusion of the uses of personal pronouns she /he .

Ms .A constantly makes mistakes in the use of “she ” and “he ” .(Note 4 8 9 12 14 )It is relatively easy to tell stories compared to other spoken tasks ,and they should have been the most interesting and frequently occurring part of a private conversation between the lovers ,but she makes them a mess with too many mistakes . An advanced learner who studied English for 18 years (including 5 years teaching it) seems never able to get rid of the mistakes that a native child can easily deal with ,but it is not at all surprising . In Chinese language “she ” and “he ” are written slightly differently but they have exactly the same pronunciation . The Chinese say [t ] referring to any third person singular without consciously making a difference between a “she ” or “he ” .

So as we can see ,Type 2 and Type 3 errors are both caused by L1 interference .If we say that Type 1 errors are universal to all speakers ,then Type 2 /Type 3 errors may be common to Chinese learners whose mother tongue manifests the same linguistic property .If we say that Type 1 errors can be explained by the fact that the limits of human language abilities are deep rooted ,then from Type 2 /Type 3 errors ,we may feel equally true of the limits of L2 acquisition abilities due to the long standing L1 interference .

## 4 .Conclusion

In the above paper we explained and analyzed three types of errors that a Chinese advanced learner made in her first few months naturalistic communication . And we reached the conclusion that language

( Continued on p .105 ... )