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The Issue of Errors in Teaching Foreign Languages

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Abstract

Correction of errors belongs to the basis activities carried out by foreign language teachers. An analysis of errors in students' written assignments helps to reveal and identify typical errors made by Czech native speakers. The aim of this study is to present a research project analysing what errors are made by Czech students of German as a foreign language in their written assignments, and to present preliminary findings brought by the research project.

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Introduction

When learning a foreign language, students are guided by their teacher, who (through the instructions, assignments and materials given) shows them the way to be taken to reach the required language abilities and skills. Language structures and the order in which they are learnt are not chosen by the learner, they are chosen by the teacher, textbooks and curricula. Despite this – or maybe because of this – learners make mistakes in their process of learning (Wode, 1978).

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A systematic kind of research began in the 1950s. According to the founder of behaviorism, Skinner (1957), learning of foreign languages is about creating habits, about consolidating of the relation stimulus-response (input-reaction) and about making this relation automatic. The acquisition of a new language is affected by previous habits from the native language resulting in an incorrect way of using a foreign language. Such habits are to be removed through such a kind of practising which minimalizes possibilities of an incorrect use of the language. If errors still appear, they have to be immediately diminished through correcting (stimulus - response). The teaching process aims at removing of errors. While evaluating errors, the most decisive factor is a conviction that errors reflect an insufficient way of learning, i.e. they reflect a learner's irresponsibility, or a minimal intensity of practice.

Lado (1967) presented the concept of contrastive analysis, through which it is possible to look up the most problematic spheres of learning a language. He supported the idea that if the differences between individual languages are described in a detailed way, errors can be predicted. Habits obtained from the mother tongue result in difficulties with learning a foreign language if similar phenomena do not exist in such a language. Simultaneously, there is also so called positive transfer, which makes learning a foreign language easier. The identical spheres of language systems are not sources of errors, however, errors have to be expected in the spheres which are different in those particular languages. Predictions formulated by contrastive linguistics in the sphere of expected errors have been proved, however, as only conditionally valid. Norrish (1983, 28) made a statement that never can a prediction be made concerning the moment at which the biggest number of errors will be made, it does not matter whether the linguistic phenomena are different or not. That is because not all the contrasts result in errors and in difficulties in the learning process.

A simplified form of the contrastive analysis focused just on a clarification of errors, and it proceeded from a linguistic comparison of two languages to an explanation of errors made by learners. Lindemann (1995) considered the contrastive analysis and contrastively arranged teaching materials as the beginning of the present kind of research into acquisition of foreign languages. Teaching of a foreign language supported by a textbook presenting a scientific description of both the target language and the student's native language proved to be the most effective method. Through a systematic contrastive analysis of the first language (i.e. the native language, L1) and the second one (a foreign language, L2), errors could be anticipated, the teaching process could be essentially improved and the quality of study materials could increase. Linguistic connections not seen by laymen (learners) are more evident for linguistically better trained experts who are familiar with the linguistic systems of both the mother tongue and the target foreign language. The teacher firstly has to go back to the learner's level to be really able to understand what and how the learner thinks. Errors cannot be seen as deviations from the norm, they have to be understood as a learner's mental process. Lindemann supports her opinion by an interesting experiment: a test was distributed to learners, they were asked to evaluate certain German sentences as "surely correct", "probably correct", "surely incorrect" and "probably incorrect". Some of the incorrect sentences presented in the test had come from these students' performances. All these incorrect sentences were considered by these students as "surely correct" because they were equivalent to the form the students themselves had created when using the target language. On the contrary, completely correct German sentences which were contrastive to the students' mother tongue were evaluated as "surely incorrect". Lindemann came to the conclusion that "learning a language is more than just photographing of the system of the target language on a film made in the mother tongue."

An error is an indicator of the teaching process, it has a correcting function and it becomes a starting point of new progress in further learning because it is its important "interstage". The meaning of errors was defined already in the twenties of the twentieth century by Weimer, according to whom "errors due to their insufficiency encourage the forward-striving human being to other activities and can be useful for learners' progress." (Weimer, 1926, 9). A diagnostic value of errors was pointed out also by Nickel (1972. In Koutiva a Storch, 1989): Errors indicate the spheres which are still insufficiently mastered by learners, and they are the basis for a successful therapy. For both the learner and teacher, errors are a kind of a stimulus towards thinking about a cause of their occurrence. Errors inform teachers about deficiencies in the arrangement of lessons, presentations and practice, the quality of textbooks

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