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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. 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
or the topics involved. Learners are informed about their learning styles and learning intensity, about the spheres to be still mastered, and simultaneously errors inform about the level which has been reached by learners.

Foreign lecturers teaching their mother tongue abroad soon reveal that their students made a big number of similar errors. The cause is seen in a negative impact of the students’ mother tongue, which means in interference. To make learners think about their errors and to teach them how not to make such errors, foreign lecturers have created publications in which examples of errors typically made by individual nations are presented. These publications focus on such cases when a particular phenomenon is difficult in the target language and non-existing or expressed in a linguistically different way in the first language; furthermore on cases when the target language and the first one use similar but non-equivalent linguistic means (e.g. in fixed structures and in the field of lexicology); and on errors caused by differences resulting from the natural development of the languages (archaisms), by different life and cultural conditions (polite phrases and expressions) or by a different way of understanding a particular extra-linguistic reality. Errors are perceived in varied ways by native speakers - sometimes they are perceived as unusual, amusing or even ridiculous, in the worst case they result in incorrect understanding.

The main sense of working with errors is to gradually teach learners to use errors and their correction as further sources for the learning process. Learners are to gradually learn how they themselves can check the correctness of their linguistic performances independently, how to use dictionaries and linguistic handbooks for correcting of their written assignments, which is a basic condition for their future ability to further develop and apply their knowledge in practice by themselves (Kulic, 1971 In Hendrich, 1988, 370). Simultaneously, learners learn how to check and critically evaluate their performances, which is very important for their further life.

Work with errors has been carried out at the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove for quite a long time. The first experience with processing of errors was gained in a kind of research the aim of which was to specify the frequency and types of the most frequent errors made by Czech learners using German language. The initial impulse for this research was the effort to gain a concrete and specific idea about language abilities of applicants wanting to major in teaching of German language, and on the basis of this idea to create syllabi of the subject called Grammar Seminar offered in the first year of studies aimed at teaching of German language. The data were collected from analyses of the written tests which were a part of the entrance examinations taken by applicants for studies of German language at the Faculty of Education in Hradec Králové in the period of 1990 - 1993. These written texts were ideal study materials for our purpose because they had been worked out by graduates from various types of secondary schools in various locations. This helped to increase the research objectivity, since these errors were not just a random errors made by students of one school or one type of school in one location. Quite an important phenomenon was also the fact that the respondents were motivated towards reaching as good result as possible in the written examination because they wanted to pass the examination and to study German at university. It was possible to suppose that the respondents had paid a close attention to studying German already at secondary schools before taking their secondary school leaving examinations. In the time period given above it was possible to simultaneously apply for studies at more universities. Therefore these entrance examinations were taken also by students who successfully passed entrance examinations for other types of universities, colleges and faculties (e.g. University of Economics, faculties of arts and law) and who finally did not start studies at the Faculty of Education at all. This fact can be considered as quite important as well - because of quite a frequent opinion that faculties of education are attended dominantly by students whose study results at secondary schools were not the best. The importance of the research was also linked with the fact that the research was started at the beginning of the new period of teaching of foreign languages (after the political revolution in 1989). It mapped results reached by the applicants who had been taught German language in a unified way (using the same textbooks and being taught with the same teaching methods for the same number of lessons), and later already by the first students who had been taught in a new way (a bigger number of foreign language lessons, courses given also by foreign lecturers, teachers themselves had decided about textbooks and
study materials, modern teaching aids had been used). The conception of the research method was created in a way which enables its application on any future sample of tests included in entrance examinations.

The research included 486 written assignments and its results have proved that the decision to divide the written entrance examinations into three parts (a dictation, cloze and translation) was well-founded, because each part focuses on a different sphere of knowledge and they are mutually irreplaceable. The research was mainly focused on errors made in translations. Therefore our own methodology was worked out - grammar errors were numerically coded. This approach could be used in a kind of computer-assisted processing of grammar errors in case of a more extended potential research into this issue. Since morphological errors were our main sphere of interest, no registration of errors in connection with sentence elements was made. The basic unit of our set was so called word form because it was necessary to quantify individual forms in connection with the other morphological categories included in a particular form (Tesitelova, 1987; Haviger, Havigerova, Loudova, 2015). Each incorrect phenomenon was labelled with a numeral code, the first digit of which indicated the part of speech with which the particular grammar phenomenon is connected:

1 – Noun
2 – Adjective
3 – Pronoun
4 – Numeral
5 – Verb
6 – Adverb
7 – Preposition
8 – Conjunction
9 – other errors (interjections, word order, spelling, expressing of negative meaning, etc.)

It means that e.g. all errors made in forms of Nouns were labelled with a code starting with 1 as the first digit. Then, a further and more detailed kind of coding was required. Similar errors repeatedly appeared in translations in case of all parts of speech. That is why a unified way of labelling of these repeated errors was created. This concerned mainly insufficient knowledge of the lexical sphere resulting in omitting of words in texts or in replacing of words by others. If a word was not translated by the respondent, 1 was used as the second digit in the code. If another word, different from the word in the Czech text, was used, 2 was used as the second digit in the code. Digits 3 – 9 used as the second digit in the code were linked with phenomena characteristic for a particular part of speech. The third digits in the code made these phenomena more specific. After a careful and thorough analysis, a coding chart of all incorrect forms was created.

Working out of the coding chart mentioned above was linked with analysing of all the sentences translated by all the respondents, and then with completing of the specific recording sheets with the codes of the found errors. These codes were then used as the input data for a computer processing in which dBase 3+ a Quattro Pro software products were used. The results were presented in the dissertation thesis called “Specification of types and determination of frequency of grammar errors made in German by Czech native speakers” (Korcakova, 1996).

The research results showed to us which phenomena have to be focused on in a more attentive way when teaching German. Therefore these tests and their results were used within the framework of the subject called Grammar Seminar offered to the first year-students. The entrance tests were commented on, the unclear and unknown grammar phenomena were explained. This process helped to unify the level of the first-year students’ knowledge during the first term of their studies, which was quite important for further courses offered to these students.

The errors analysis in our research proved (among others) that learning contents had been badly stucturalised in textbooks published before 1990 (all types of secondary schools used the same textbooks). The analysis also
revealed approach differences dependent on the age of the tested persons (not only fresh secondary school-leavers but also in-service teachers who wanted to become qualified also for teaching German were involved in the research). The secondary school-leavers translated the sentences even if they did not know all the lexical units, whereas the teachers even did not try to translate the sentences when their vocabulary knowledge was insufficient.

Due to the situational development in the sphere of the Czech educational system in the past 25 years (an increasing number of universities, mainly private ones, a reduced number of secondary school graduates caused by the impact of the population curve and a consequently reduced number of applicants for university studies), the extent of entrance examinations was reduced by universities. No entrance examinations are held any more at a lot of universities, a maximum number of applicants are admitted for the first year of studies. Also the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové waives the entrance examination on the basis of the submitted documents and confirmations (the grade "excellent" awarded for the secondary school leaving examination in German, international certificates and language diplomas, etc.). That is why – unfortunately – a similar mass analysis of written tests being a part of entrance examinations cannot be continued because the applicants with the best study results reached at secondary schools would not be included in it, and the overall research results would be distorted. Our research ambitions were consequently aimed at other types of probands.

In 2014 the analysis of errors occurring in the final written examinations taken by students of the five-year Master’s degree studies aimed at teaching German was realised. The total number of 94 pieces of work written by students who finished their studies at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové in the five-year time period (2008 -2013) was processed. Compact written texts (essays) were analysed and researched that time (differently from previous analyses of entrance tests subdivided into translations, clozes and texts focused on reading comprehension). Students in the last year of their studies were involved in the research. They had been studying for five years at the same (and just one) university (also this fact made this analysis different from the original one). However, the students’ motivation was the same – passing of the final written examination was a required condition for being allowed to take the oral part of the final state examination. Therefore all the students made efforts to succeed. Whereas during the research in the period of 1990-1993 only one person worked on coding of errors for the statistical purpose, five persons were involved in the research into the final written examinations. The increased number of the coding persons is considered as questionable – certain non-uniformity of coding was brought to the research rather than a bigger objectivity. Other problems were caused by the fact that two persons (including the head of the team) had left the research team during the research period.

In 2015 a working team was composed (1 research worker + 2 students) whose task was to analyse grammar errors in the final written examinations worked out by the third year’s students of the Bachelor’s programme majoring in teaching German language. This time, coding of mistakes is carried out by just the research worker, students only assist and are involved in preparatory work, scanning of tests, commenting on errors and the final processing of outputs and surveys. Only the grammar part of the final written examinations, namely morphology, is analysed.

In the time period of 1990-1993 the results were recorded and processed in a manual way, and the statistical analysis was followingly carried out by an informatics expert using the dBase 3+ and Quattro Pro programmes. The present research uses the ATLAS.ti. programme for coding of errors. After making a scan of the test and applying the programme on it, it is possible to work with the test in the same way as with an image, it is possible to record, code and statistically process the errors. Statistical calculations can be automatically combined and compared with each other.

A nother type of monitoring and analysing of errors made by individual students is realised within the framework of the subject Morphology of German Language, which is one of the courses included in curricula of five years’ Master’s study programme aimed at training German teachers. The courses in this subject are given for the period of three terms, in each term there are three lessons a week. During the introductory lesson (the second term of the studies) the students are distributed a test – a translation from Czech into German. The evaluation of the test is linked with the analysis of the errors made. The same test is distributed to the students during their last lesson of
Morphology (the fourth term of their studies), that means when the students have finished the three-term course in morphology. The tests are also analysed and their results are processed. In this case, however, the results reached by individual students are evaluated - whether the students repeat the same errors they made in the first test, and how the students’ performances improved during three study terms. Individual consultations are given to the students on their test results.

And another research into errors is being started - into the errors made by students of so called follow-up Master’s degree studies, whose curricula offer just one term of morphological studies since morphology courses were included in the curricula of the preceding Bachelor’s studies. At the end of that term students take the exam consisting of a written part and an oral one. The written part consists of a translation of sentences and correction of the errors included in the given text (it is not stated in advance how many errors are included in the test). The task of the students is to find and correct the errors. The analysis brings very interesting facts, e.g. it reveals kinds of errors made by students when translating sentences, it specifies the students’ abilities to find and correct the errors in the right way, it reveals whether an excellent performance in translating correlates with the ability to correct incorrect texts, etc. Individual interviews on the results of both the tests are a part of the oral part of the examination. The students make estimations about the real number of errors included in the assigned test, and about their own level of successfulness in finding and correcting of errors. Four potential situation can be expected: students are able to find and correct the error; students do not find and therefore do not correct the error; students consider the correct form as a wrong one and replace it with another correct form; students consider the correct form as a wrong one and replace it with an incorrect form. All the errors are analysed with students, the students explain why, in their opinion, the error was made. The factors having an impact on the performance are, besides interference (a negative impact of the mother tongue), lack of concentration, impetuosity, improper reading of the task formulation, insufficient vocabulary, etc. Since errors are also in this case coded according to the tailored original chart created in 1990, it is clear which part of speech or which linguistic phenomenon is the most problematic for that particular student. Students make oral comments on causes of their errors (“I did not know the Gender of that Noun.”, “I used an incorrect prepositional phrase.”, “This preposition requires only XX grammar case.”, etc.). Students often made comments like: “Actually, I do not know why I made such a mistake. I am stupid.”

It is obvious that the present way of teaching foreign languages is not limited to creation of grammatically correct forms. The preference is given to communicative competences, because the most important reason for learning foreign languages is the need to make oneself understood in a foreign language environment. Students majoring in teaching foreign languages are in a little more complicated situation. They themselves learn a language, so they are entitled to make errors, but at the same time they are trained in ways of teaching the language (that means not making errors). If these students are asked whether it is important to correct mistakes during communication in a foreign language, they persistently claim the didactic principle claiming that corrections made during speaking performances worsen communication. However, they themselves want to be permanently corrected during their language performances because they consider this correction as very important for the further development of their learning process.

According to Dinger (1993, In Foeldes, 1993) it is not problematic to say what can be considered as an error because rules presented in grammar books and textbooks clearly specify what is correct, and all deviations from these rules can be considered as errors. The problem itself is not the occurrence of errors but presentation and proportion of grammar in the learning process. Dinger contrasts Helbig’s and Standop’s conceptions of grammar. Helbig (1990) requires a big amount of grammar knowledge (he subdivides, however, this knowledge into active and passive competences, i. e. phenomena to be mastered by a learner in an active way or just a passive one), Standop, on the other hand, claims for a complete “grammarlessness” and makes a statement that morphological and syntactic errors do not have an essentially negative impact on understanding, however, lexical errors make communication completely impossible. What is more, the knowledge of grammar rules worsens natural communication. Dinger asks a question why to assess and evaluate errors made by those who learn a foreign language when even native speakers make errors in their mother tongue, and, additionally, teachers correct mistakes in a subjective way. In Dinger’s opinion, it is necessary to focus mainly on errors made in pronunciation (he literally
claims that so far they have been treated as “stepchildren” or second-level phenomena which have been bagatelized and to focus on correct formulations of utterances (communicated intentions). Within the framework of the teaching process it is important to create a non-stressing environment and encourage learners to communicate in a foreign language.

Referring to Comenius’ and Scerba’s findings, Chodera expresses a similar opinion (2007, 109): “Already J. A Comenius and L.V. Scerba emphasised the fact that not a perfect language but its certain simplification is taught. If, for example, 3,000 lexical units are the amount given by the curricula, but the active vocabulary of a native speaker with an average level of education is ten times larger, then it is obvious that a perfect communication in a foreign language is just an illusion under the existing teaching conditions and number of lessons. Therefore it is obvious that learners will make errors even at the end of advanced courses. The realizable objective of so called “mass school” can be therefore to teach learners to communicate just in a roughly correct way. Even communication in our native language is hardly always realised without a loss of information and in accordance with the norm.”

Individual errors made in foreign language performances have varied distracting impacts. Errors in pronunciation can result in a serious disruption in communication even if the speaker masters the other spheres of the language. For this reason it is very important to start with the pronunciation training as early as possible and in the most careful way when teaching a language. Lexical errors evidently prove an insufficient vocabulary and, again, make the communication more difficult. Errors often result from the speaker’s need to express his/her emotions and mainly from the effort to literally translate phrases and formulations existing in his/her native language. From this point of view it seems that grammar errors can also have a distracting impact on the overall understanding but sometimes their impact is less essential than the impact of the errors mentioned above. It is more difficult to remove the interference in the spheres of discourse and text organisation because, being influenced in a culturally specific way, learners transfer conversation and communication techniques typical of their mother tongue into these spheres. Therefore it is very important to know the learner’s first language (his/her mother tongue) when assessing the interference in the textual sphere.

Conclusion

Correction of errors is one of the most important and most frequent teachers’ activities. Teachers trained by and graduated from universities have an advantage over native speakers: Native speakers are usually able to correct a linguistically incorrect text, however, s/he cannot explain the essence of the errors made. Teachers have to be able to explain to learners where and why the errors are made and how to avoid these errors. A person who has not been theoretically and practically trained at university is hardly able to manage all these procedures. If a teacher is to be able to correctly identify, explain and correct errors, s/he has to be able to process mainly her/his own errors. The process of working with errors is to be necessarily included in pre-graduate university studies of teaching. Results of the contrastive analysis of the first language and the target language will help to create study materials suitable for students using the same first language. These materials will eliminate errors resulted from interference. Individual analyses of errors made by individual students are important for a further increase in language abilities and skills of individuals.

The text presents the research which is being carried out at the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové. The results are being continuously recorded and analysed. Their final version will be published at the end of the research period, i.e. at the end of 2015 or at the beginning of 2016.

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