# Modern Aspects of Second Language Acquisition and the Role and Function of Mistakes

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**Abstract**

Language teaching and perspectives on second language acquisition have been changing to meet to requirements of the modern day. Therefore our study aims to find out the aspects of mistakes in second language acquisition within the concept of the cultural dimension of the language. In this paper, it is suggested that mistakes are not obstacles in language learning rather they can be really useful for the development of the process if evaluated properly. In this context the role and function of mistakes are discussed and their effects on second language acquisition are examined.

**Keywords:** Language acquisition, Intercultural learning, Language teaching, Mistakes

# 1. Introduction

In a more and more globalized world communication is a key asset. People who speak more than just their native language have better chances on the international market. But language is more than just words. There is also a whole cultural dimension of knowledge behind it. Therefore 'the Global Education' is very important (Florio-Hansen, 2010). So it becomes of greater importance that people are able to communicate together. Therefore foreign language learning is becoming more popular all over the world. But how should modern language teaching be like? What aspects are important to learn a second language and how do they work? Language teaching has been an issue in schools and other educational institutions for a long time. Compared to this, the study of second language acquisition is a relatively young field. This is why there are many aspects in second language acquisition that require a closer look. Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how a second language is learned. The question is how the knowledge and acquisition strategies of the primary or native language may apply also in the second language acquisition and how the learners create a new language system. Most learners acquire certain knowledge in a second language, but not to the degree of their first language. It is interesting to observe that some learners can build up a proficiency in a second language that is relatively close to their native language, while others seem to stagnate at a certain level without making any more process. That is why linguists focus on the process of the acquisition strategies under different aspects. There seems to be many factors and conditions that influence the acquisition process and the final level of language knowledge. There is a classic distinction between first language acquisition and second language acquisition. While acquiring the native language, children automatically take in the cultural and global knowledge of their language group. When acquiring a second language, the learners also revert to this kind of knowledge. This can cause several problems. Most of the time, second language acquisition is considered to be more difficult than native language acquisition by learners, because this process is influenced by more complex factors. One aspect is the new field of intercultural learning, because language and culture are closely connected to each other. Language evolves mainly from cultural conditions; it is creating them as well. In the process of Second Language Learning it can be a good idea to have a closer look at different models of language Acquisition. This can be very helpful to illuminate the very stages and single phases of the learning process. So it is possible to find out which principle is used for learning and acquiring a new language. Under this aspect it is especially interesting to focus on the function of mistakes in the learning process of second language acquisition and at how these mistakes are dealt within the classroom in the context of modern second language teaching. Therefore, the question is what role and function do mistakes play in second language acquisition. And also to what extent are those mistakes could be caused by the teaching methods. As a result the right question to ask is, in what way the teacher should deal with different kinds of mistakes. To explain the different categories of mistakes in second language acquisition, it is helpful to look at the psycholinguistic model according to Levelt (Multhaupt, 2002), because this illustrates the competence during the speaking process. After examining the causes and reasons for mistakes, a classification of different types of mistakes will follow for which the psycholinguistic model will be used to display the different strategies for correcting and minimizing these mistakes and evaluate

them. Also bilingualism and intercultural learning, as well as the function of the interlanguage, will be discussed to answer the final question of how a modern teaching of a second language should be designed.

## 2. Bilingualism and Intercultural Learning

When discussing second language acquisition, it is advisable to have a look at bilingualism as well in order to find out how language acquisition works under different conditions. Bilingualism is not only about proficiency in two languages. Most learners achieve a balanced bilingualism, which means that they are not able to reach the same level as others. So bilingualism does not necessarily mean that a speaker has a native-speaker-competence in two languages. Zydatiß (2000) claims there are a *strong* and a *weak* language. Both are based on a continuum of complex and different skills in each language which can be constantly shifting. It is even doubted by different experts that complete bilingualism is not really possible because of the subjective-individual consciousness which is necessary to feel at home in both languages. Bilingualism opens a greater mental and intellectual horizon for the speaker. This can also be transferred to the second language acquisition process.

Another important factor in second language acquisition is intercultural or cross-cultural learning. This means that a speaker is able not to interpret a comment made by someone from a different culture with his own cultural knowledge. For foreign language teaching it means that culture should be a part of the class. Through cross-cultural encounters the learners will achieve cross-cultural communicational competence (Bredella, 2010). This goes far beyond the mere linguistic approach of second language acquisition and is a more holistic learning and teaching concept that is appropriate for the modern world.

Communicative language didactics have changed the second language teaching. Now the focus lies rather on the authentic everyday language and the target language communication. This is why the teaching methods are putting more emphasis on the standards of the target culture. Language and culture are seen as an entity rather than single aspects. The didactic aim is to teach native linguistic competence in the second language.

Though in the past, it became clear that it is hard to impart this position to teachers and learners, because the ability to comprehend this modern educational and communication-focused approach is not an easy task. At the same time, the research of different cultures, intercultural communication and second language acquisition have brought up new insights that show ways of how to integrate these aspects in a constructive way. Under this aspect, the learner is no longer seen as a passive element, but he should be able to act as an agent between the cultures. This is why it is important to teach the skills and knowledge fields as well that go beyond the mere linguistic aspects.

Still linguistic actions and competences are highly important in this context. As we will see, language and cultural knowledge are also connected in the mental lexicon (Roche, 2005).

Language helps us to name the important elements of the world and we create mental pictures. Understanding them is essential for successful cross-cultural communication. For example: In German the heart is an important example for expressing emotional issues whereas in Turkish

it is the liver. Or Americans would express a refusal relatively directly, in Japanese the word "no" would not occur and the refusal would be expressed rather indirect. Another aspect is the conversation-management that is handled by different cultures in different ways. Linguistic and non-linguistic means are used and interpreted according to the individual linguistic and conceptual understanding. And if there is a lack of understanding in this field, the possibility of misunderstanding is high.

## 3. Factors That Influence Second Language Acquisition

The learning process of second language acquisition is influenced by different and multiple factors and aspects. There is a difference between skills and activities. Speaking is a skill, but it is also an activity and from a psychological point of view skills are more recommendable to explain the process of speaking than the theory of activities (Butzkamm, 2002). Skills like speaking can be learned and brought to perfection „Sprechen, Lesen und Schrieben stellen in ihrer vollendeten Gestalt keine elementaren Funktionen, sondern vielgliedriger, miteinander verschmolzene Koordinationshandlungen dar" (Butzkamm, 2002). Theoretical models which illustrate the process of speaking can be helpful to describe the highly complicated cognitive processes that take place in the human brain while speaking. This goes from the intention to speak to the articulation in the speaker's brain.

Basically the cognitive or psycholinguistic language processing theory implies that the processing of language is a very complex and complicated process which is not easy to observe. This makes it also very complicated to describe and it takes a complex model of knowledge-components, skills, actions and plans to do so. Things we do, because we can do them, are different from the mere addition of parts of skills (Butzkamm, 2002). Levelt (Multhaupt, 2002) criticizes the interactive models mainly because they are so difficult to be tested empirically. Instead he proposes serial or modular psycholinguistic models.

Sociolinguistic focuses on the social use of language by people (Edmonson, 2009). Psycholinguistic focuses on the conditions and activities (Edmonson, 2009).

Psycholinguistic is a scientific discipline that applies to the exploration of speaking under special aspects. This includes the acquisition and understanding of language and the processing of language as well. It uses different possibilities for analyzing. Here the interactive model of Levelt (Multhaupt, 2002) is very interesting, because it is a hybrid model that combines serial and interactional approaches.

What this alternative model for word and language procession does, is not based on the network-theories, instead it implies a modular theory. „Zu den Komponenten, die an Sprachproduktionsprozessen beteiligt sind, gehörten, nach Levelt, der *Conceptualizer*, das *mentale Lexikon*, der *Formulatur* und der *Articulator*" (Multhaupt, 2002). This means that the actual action of processing is not connected directly to the stocks of knowledge that are stored long term and the ones that they represent. The lexicon is a considerable factor for language processing. According to Levelt there is a connection between serial and the parallel processing, because during the process of word-production in different stages the information are processed in a serial way. But before the speaker has access to a word, it is necessary that

a concept is activated in the beginning. But still all those processing activities are in every single stage parallel (Multhaupt, 2002).

Basically it is assumed that all the processing activities and processes in the brain are spread over many different areas and for the execution of an action the required knowledge is activated through spreading waves within the neural network. The cognition and production of words takes place in many different ways and many complex processes apply here. According to Levelt each learned language has its own lexicon that is used for building words and that this lexicon is an indicator for mistakes (Multhaupt, 2002).

Of course the individual motivation is a key factor as well as the type of learner, his socio-cultural and intellectual background or the ability to learn another language. There are also some similarities between the acquisition of the first and second language. For example some mistakes are the same with children who learn the native language and adults who are learning a second language. The different theories that analyze language acquisition are often based on each other, but also they are not very well connected.

The factors that influence the acquisition are numerous, equally numerous are the kinds of mistakes and errors which will be analyzed now.

## 4. Mistakes in Second Language Teaching

What is a mistake and what categories of mistakes are there? These questions can help identify the different kinds of mistakes and errors that occur in second language acquisition. During foreign language teaching, it is normal that mistakes occur. This also happens in many different areas of life. Mistakes can bring the chance for the learner to improve his knowledge by analyzing the mistakes after once he becomes aware of them. To discuss the function and role of mistakes in second language acquisition it is necessary to define them first. So it will be easier to identify their causes and outcomes and evaluate the suitable strategy to deal with them in the learning process.

## 5. Definition of Mistakes

There are different kinds of mistakes in second language acquisition. But before defining these categories in a more detailed way, it is advisable to look at a more general definition of what a mistake actually is. A mistake breaks a rule or diverges from the standard language and is considered as different from what the recipient is esteeming as norm. For a language mistake the following applies: something diverges from the norm that underlies the speaking system of the very language. It can also be a breach of the rules of the language or the actions of a language group or something that the communicating partner does not understand. It can also be a breach of the rules and norms of the textbook and grammar book or just a way of speaking that is unsuitable to the given situation (Marossek, 2007).

In the course of time the assumptions and the approach towards mistakes in second language acquisition have been transformed. In the ancient world mistakes which appeared in the educational context were punished. Only in the beginning of the 20th century experts began to look at mistakes under psychological aspects to convey an approach for the prevention of

mistakes. There is a difference between *slip* and mistake and between *error* and *attempt*. Slip and mistake describe misspeaking or miswriting or the non-observance of a rule that is though learnt not yet automated (Schröder, 2010).

Error and attempt are seen as competence-mistakes and they apply to a breach of the rules according to already learnt or not yet learnt Rules. Focusing on attempt means that the estimation of mistakes in second language acquisition was beginning to be more positive. The grammar-mistake in Latin teaching was seen as a severe mistake until 1980s. But from then on the evaluation of this kind of mistakes changed and was no longer seen within the context of language categories and the reasons why it appeared in the first place (Schröder, 2010).

Since the 1990s Schröder observed a process of change and now there is a consensus about the fact that communicational learning processes are not possible without mistakes (Schröder, 2010). Kleppin defines mistakes as a deviation from a language system and the applying linguistic standards or the rules that are given by text- and grammar-books (Kleppin, 2006). This mistake violates the standards within a language group and is something that cannot be understood by a native speaker or a communication partner. Also it depends on the teacher: A mistake is often defined by a teacher in second language acquisition and therefore mistakes are comparative. Sometimes what is seen as a mistake in one learning stadium is not a mistake in another one and will be tolerated. That is why a mistake should always be seen and evaluated in the actual context because personality of the teacher and the learner is important as well.

Edmondson/House claim that mistakes appear because of the fact that a learner is always applying comparisons with the native language or other already learnt foreign languages (Edmonson and House, 2009). If these mistakes are corrected it is possible for the learner to reach a language level without mistakes according to the standard and to internalize the rules. The psycholinguistic theory says that this learning process is not linear, but going back and forth from time to time.

Also a mistake can happen on a non-lingual level, when for example the conversation management of both communication partners differs and the learner violates the communication rules on an operative level. In some cultures it is normal to make longer pauses between the linguistic acts, while in others this will be considered as rude or irritating.

Many mistakes that appear as grammatical errors are in fact caused by incorrect conceptual transfers. A mechanical second language acquisition by any second language acquisition-machine can be a good example to show how important the consideration of cultural factors is concerning cross-cultural communication.

## 6. Interlanguage and Its Function in the Second Language Acquisition Process

In this process the so called Interlanguage has to be introduced. It is produced by non-native speakers within the process of learning a second language or foreign language and it describes a competence status in which a learner is at a certain stage of the learning process. The Interlanguage-concept is opening up many possibilities and gives a certain freedom to the learner, because the mistakes are not considered as simply incorrect, but as a normal

development within the process (Meißner, 2010). Interlanguage is most of the times very individual and it is highly dynamic, instable and changing and has a cross linguistic influence, which means it also affects the target language as well as the lexicon of each single language of the learner.

In former analyses experts thought that the interlanguage was mainly influenced by the structural difference between the native and the target language. This would lead to the assumption that mistakes are predictable and therefore it would be possible to treat them preventative. Newer researches imply that interlanguage shows elements of different languages and cross linguistic influences. These include for example the typological closeness of the target language to the native and other already known languages of the learner or the level of proficiency as well as the learner's age, the socio-cultural context and others. Interlanguage is based on the individual multilingualism and is an indication for the fact that the mental lexicon of the learner is also multilingual (Meißner, 2010).

The interlanguage is an important element of second language acquisition and is necessary to expand the speech competence of the learner to a greater extent. Therefore it should be dealt with sensitivity and attention by the teachers. If corrected too eagerly, the opposite effect may be the outcome.

## 7. Mistakes and Language Teaching

Experts agree that, it is perfectly normal for mistakes to arise in the learning process. They are a natural part of it and have many different causes. It is not only the lack of effort or forgetfulness that causes mistakes. Sometimes interferences can also occur when the native language or other foreign languages influence the language acquisition. This can be displayed in overgeneralizations, regularizations or simplifications (Kleppin, 2006). There are different measures to avoid this such as learning programming or the continuous correction of mistakes.

Butzkamm sees one reason for mistakes in teaching SL in the fact that the learner is always under pressure to produce and not being able to revert to his own logical development concept. This is why the learner is often pushed into certain speaking patterns that do not correspond with his actual speaking competence (Butzkamm, 2002).

According to Kleppin (2006) mistakes cannot be prevented by these measures, neither learning-programming nor continuous correction of mistakes will really conclude in the complete erasure of mistakes. Mistakes indicate that the learners get the chance to test their own personal hypothesis on the language and through this they improve their learning. This kind of behavior could be described as a special strategy to communicate and learn, because the learner can try something out and when he gets corrected, he can learn and use the correct form from then on. This is why it should not be generalized to say that mistakes are always deficits of the learner. Kleppin (2006) draws a distinction between the position of the mistake in the evaluation of the actual achievement and the one within the learning process.

## 8. Categories and Types of Mistakes in Second Language Acquisition

When defining mistakes different categories are already mentioned above. Now certain aspects will be examined in detail. There should be a distinction between natural mistakes and artificial mistakes (Butzkamm, 2002). Natural mistakes are caused by the development of the learning process. Artificial mistakes are the ones that arise in the teaching process. Certain mistakes only appear in the classroom and this brings up the question whether they were created by the teaching itself. If this would be the case, then these mistakes could be avoided.

If mistakes appear in the development process of learning they can also be interpreted as a sign for progress in learning. This way the mistakes can be handled with more calmness. Thus they indicate that there is a difference between situative and structural comprehension (Butzkamm, 2002). As a conclusion it could be said that some mistakes are irrelevant for the actual learning progress. But still they are very frustrating for the learner and they decelerate the learning success, because they do not give the learner the chance to learn something from them. The positive aspect of mistakes can be that they make the learners aware of their progress and the teacher can read the individual progress according to the mistakes a learner makes.

So called interim mistakes are an integrated element in the lingual-cultural learning process and the approach of the learner towards the target language and culture (Schröder, 2010). Normally these mistakes will vanish within the learning process, when the learner acquires enough competence in the target language. Especially in the beginning of the learning process learners tend to overgeneralize. But as the process evolves, it is less likely to occur. The overgeneralizations can stem from the native language as well as from the target language. For example, when an English-learner says "I goed", this derives from "I walked". But also from the native language this transfer can arise, when an English-learner uses "I become" for "I get" (=Ich bekomme) (Schröder, 2010). If a German learns French he will often use "Er fragte ihr", because the direct object in German is positioned after the verb "fragen", while in French "demander" as the indirect object stands after the verb (Kleppin, 2006).

Overgeneralizations are lingual interference mistakes that are „regelwidrige Bildung einer Sprachform nach dem Vorbild einer oder mehrerer anderer Sprachformen innerhalb der Zielsprache, die zustande kommt, wenn Lernende die Verwendungsmöglichkeiten eines Ausdrucks oder einer Struktur noch nicht sicher genug beherrschen" (Mehlhorn, 2010). Mostly they indicate that there are already some skills in the language, but a definite cause is hard to identify most of the time. Overgeneralizations are acquisition strategies in the learning process which cannot be avoided. Mehlhorn (2010) suggests they should be treated in the classroom with measures that make the learners aware of them; also they should be explicitly corrected and assisted by many various exercises to minimize them.

Sometimes errors can be caused by negative non-lingual stress. The speaker is probably too tensed in a certain situation and makes an error because of that. The more tensed he is,

the weaker is his ability to communicate. The lack of attention, distraction because of other mental activities or just a simple mistake or misspeak can be the reason. Here applies a difference between performance and competence errors (Kleppin, 2006). The more conscious a teacher deals this kind of mistakes, the greater the chance to avoid fossilization, i.e. the establishing of the mistakes.

A competence error can occur, when a learner has forgotten something or not yet understood. The teacher should explain the lingual phenomena to the learner so he has the chance to understand them and use them correctly afterwards.

## 9. The Correction of Mistakes in Teaching Second Language

The psycholinguistic model of Levelt (Multhaupt, 2002), claims that language processes underlie many and complex factors. The lexicon for example contains words which are used more frequently and therefore the access to them is easier than to others. This has a positive effect on the speed of the processing of these words. Butzkamm (2002) recommends making a distinction between the causes and ways of mistakes and also the effects they have. If for example the message is still comprehensible. Apart from that, the different varieties of learning situations and surrounding should be taken into consideration and the way and form of correction should be suitable to them.

In a complex and non-linear system the overall picture is created by the coaction of the single elements (Oskaar, 2002). It is possible that a single element is relevant and that it can be analyzed individually, but this focus on a single aspect does not give evidence about the actual coaction.

Mainly, errors in second language teaching are still seen as indication of the lack of achievement or competence. Kleppin (2006) says that the number and frequency of mistakes can be a relevant indication, but at the same time, she claims that an error gate does not necessarily indicate automatically a weak linguistic ability. According to this, the main focus should lie on a criterion that can positively be expressed and can be called as ability, instead of concentrating too much on absolute correctness. The psycholinguistic model can be helpful when the facts about neural networks and the knowledge about linguistics can be combined with the processing modes and parallel activation of processes and be transferred to the teaching methods of second languages.

The avoidance and minimization of mistakes on a non-linguistic level in second language acquisition teaching should consider the teaching methods. How can cultural knowledge be taught? Not simply by the contrasting display of both cultures, because this does not necessarily result in real understanding. Even though only a small part of this cultural knowledge is actually articulated linguistically, it is expressed by conceptual patterns and communicational conventions. The teaching measures should consider this and should be deliberate about which topics should be dealt with or not, how to handle delicate topics like politics, religion or sexuality and what can be expressed in which way.

It is problematic that in some textbooks an evident generalization is displayed that supports many clichés about the target culture. This can cause problems. It is suggested to sensitize

learners and teachers as well to prevent this. This can not only enhance the understanding of the target culture, but it also involves a reflection of the own culture of the learner.

## 10. Conclusion

Second language acquisition is an important issue of the modern world. Since the world is changing and communication is becoming more globalized, too, this should also be taken into consideration in behalf of the second language teaching methods. The general approach used to focus mainly on the linguistic didactics that have been developed by different researchers. But all these concepts and theories were not really connected to each other. Therefore it would be better to develop a new, more holistic approach that considers and includes the aspects of these different concepts and theories.

The psycholinguistic model can be helpful to evaluate errors and their causes. Here it is recommended not to apply categories that are too strictly defined because they would not withstand closer examination. Though it makes sense that mistakes should be seen within the context of their causes and surroundings, but modern teaching methods focus more on the actual speaker or listener. This is an indication that not the evaluation of the mistakes is seen as the most important educational issue. Instead it is more important to look at the errors in their position and function according to linguistic actions.

Therefore the aspects of describing, evaluating and treating mistakes should not be seen apart from each other as single aspects that are not connected. Instead they should be seen as an entity that approaches the mistake as a constructive element in second language acquisition.

The processes that take place in the brain while processing language are only partly cognizant. Mostly they are automatic and they are a concurrence of complex actions. This also applies to the processes of learning in language acquisition. This is one reason why language didactics should put more emphasis not to see and treat mistakes simply as a breach of the rules and consider them as "wrong" or "incorrect". Instead they should be seen within their context and from this point of view be corrected with suitable measures or even be ignored.

This is particularly important to enhance the intercultural learning. If a learner puts too much emphasis on the correct form it can minimize his ability to pay enough attention to the content of his linguistic action. But global education does not mean the mere teaching of the language; instead it includes the cultural codes and conditions of the language group as well.

Language is the main asset of human society and it is very important to consider the changes of the modern world also in the classroom when teaching second languages. The conditions of learning and teaching are very important when it comes to the proficiency of the learners. Until now they have been somehow neglected in many educational institutions. Also the way of dealing with mistakes in language teaching is often rather old-fashioned and therefore concludes in the opposite effect.

The research of different cultures, intercultural communication and second language acquisition have recently brought up new insights that show ways of how to integrate these aspects in a constructive way in the teaching of foreign languages. This is how a new

generation of didactics has developed, which is described as cross-cultural linguistic didactics. Its focus lies not only on the native language competence, but also on the efficient use of the foreign perspective of the learner. The learner shall be able to act as an agent between the cultures for himself and others. This is what cross-cultural competence is all about and the linguistic competence is only one aspect among others.

The modern didactic uses this knowledge as an approach to make the teaching of second languages more effective. It is advisable that the different theories should be in closer contact. The restrictions of some of these theories are not suitable to explain the second language acquisition process with all its multifactorial and complex conditions, stages and phases.

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