Criteria For Error Classification And Their Methodological Implications In German Language Teaching

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Abstract: The concept of error in foreign language learning is complex and multifaceted. This paper examines error classification in the context of German language teaching, highlighting phonetic, phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical-semantic, and pragmatic errors. Emphasis is placed on the role of metacognitive competence in future German language teachers for effective error identification, analysis, and correction. The study underscores the significance of mother tongue influence, systematic feedback, and culturally informed instruction in fostering accurate and intelligible communication. By integrating theoretical frameworks and practical strategies, the paper provides a comprehensive methodological approach to error management in foreign language education.

Keywords: Error classification; German as a foreign language; phonetic errors; morphosyntactic errors; lexical-semantic errors; pragmatic errors; metacognitive competence; foreign language pedagogy; learner errors; error correction.

Introduction: The concept of error remains difficult to define unequivocally. In linguistic and methodological research, errors are generally described as deviations from established language norms; however, the authority responsible for defining these norms is not always explicitly specified. Depending on the theoretical framework adopted, such norms may be determined by native speakers, linguists, grammarians, or foreign language teachers.

This paper examines the classification of errors in the context of foreign language learning and teaching, with particular reference to German as a foreign language. Error classification has been extensively explored in applied linguistics, among which the typology proposed by Kleppin (1998) has gained considerable recognition. Kleppin distinguishes competence-related errors, performance errors, errors that hinder communicative intelligibility, covert errors, and errors associated with different linguistic levels. From a methodological perspective, this classification provides teachers with a structured framework for identifying, interpreting, and evaluating learner errors.

METHOD

Competence-related errors constitute one of the most frequent error types in the language learning process.

According to Kleppin (1998), such errors cannot always be corrected autonomously by learners. They may occur both within previously acquired material and in linguistic structures that have not yet been introduced. Errors produced in unlearned areas are referred to as trial errors, reflecting learners' attempts to hypothesize and construct new linguistic forms. Errors resulting from inattention also belong to this category and often stem from forgotten or insufficiently internalized rules. While some inattention-based errors may be self-corrected, others require instructional intervention. Consequently, fostering learners' metacognitive competence is essential, as it promotes self-monitoring, reflective thinking, and autonomous error correction.

The successful self-correction of competence-related errors largely depends on the nature of teacher feedback. When learners are able to eliminate an error following a prompt or signal from the teacher, such errors are referred to as slips (Kleppin, 1998). In written tasks, visual marking of errors enhances learner awareness and revision, whereas in oral communication, subtle verbal or non-verbal cues encourage learners to reformulate their utterances.

A further distinction in error classification concerns

errors that affect communicative intelligibility and those that do not. According to Ondráková (2013), errors that impede intelligibility may result in misunderstanding or complete communication breakdown and are primarily related to meaning and lexis. In contrast, grammatical errors often allow partial comprehension, although intelligibility cannot always be guaranteed. In addition, cultural discrepancies and the inappropriate use of culture-specific concepts may lead to pragmatic failure and negatively affect the authenticity and sincerity of communication.

Pronunciation errors may also influence intelligibility; however, communication can remain effective despite imperfect pronunciation or grammar when compensatory strategies such as gestures and facial expressions are employed. Errors that significantly hinder communicative intelligibility should therefore be classified as major errors and addressed systematically in instruction.

Ensuring intelligible communication represents a primary objective of foreign language education. Consequently, errors that impede intelligibility require consistent correction. Such errors occur relatively infrequently and generally do not require excessive instructional time. As emphasized by Jalolov (2012), prioritizing meaning-oriented communication over formal accuracy helps learners overcome psychological barriers, reduces fear of making mistakes, and fosters fluency and confidence in speech production.

Errors that do not affect intelligibility are predominantly grammatical and are often tolerated by native speakers of the target language. This tolerance is closely linked to positive attitudes toward non-native speakers' efforts to learn the language. Nevertheless, despite their limited impact on communication, such errors should not be neglected, as systematic attention contributes to the gradual development of linguistic accuracy.

Grammar-related errors can further be classified according to their level of difficulty. Jalolov (2012) distinguishes three categories: highly complex grammatical phenomena with increasing error frequency across proficiency levels; moderately difficult structures with variable error frequency; and grammatical phenomena that produce minimal errors or show a gradual decrease in error occurrence. Errors may also be categorized according to linguistic levels, including phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic domains.

Phonetic and Phonological Errors

Phonetic errors relate to pronunciation, whereas phonological errors result from violations of the normative rules governing a language's phonological system, including phonemes, allophones, and suprasegmental features such as stress, accent, and rhythm. These errors manifest at segmental and suprasegmental levels, with pronunciation errors occurring most frequently at the phonemic level. In foreign language learning, mother tongue interference plays a particularly significant role.

Uzbek learners of German, for example, often experience difficulties in pronouncing the sh sound, umlaut vowels, and diphthongs. In Uzbek, the sh sound has a single phonetic realization, whereas in German the grapheme sch and the letter s in clusters such as sp and st are pronounced as /ʃ/. Consequently, learners frequently mispronounce words containing these sounds. Confusion between the German ich-Laut and ach-Laut is also common. At the initial stages of learning, Uzbek-speaking learners tend to produce orthographic errors involving letter combinations such as ph, tsch, sch, sp, st, z, s, and v, as their pronunciation differs considerably from Uzbek phonetic conventions.

Therefore, in the training of future German language teachers, particular attention should be paid to phonetic and orthographic contrasts between Uzbek and German. Preventing phonetic and phonological errors requires targeted instructional strategies, including the use of authentic audio materials and podcasts.

According to Jalolov (2012), pronunciation errors should be corrected immediately in exercises specifically designed for pronunciation training, whereas in communicative tasks they should be addressed after the main communicative goal has been achieved. While this principle is generally valid, certain pronunciation errors may cause serious semantic misunderstanding. For instance, pronouncing schön [ʃøːn] as [ʃon] may lead to confusion between the meanings "beautiful" and "already."

Kleppin (1998) emphasizes that correcting pronunciation errors at the initial stage of language learning is crucial, as uncorrected errors tend to fossilize over time. Research by Huneke and Steinig indicates that learners under the age of 15 are more likely to acquire native-like pronunciation, whereas older learners require longer periods of instruction. Consequently, systematic and timely correction of pronunciation errors is essential, particularly in early stages of instruction.

An effective approach to overcoming pronunciation-related errors involves explicitly explaining differences between the phonetic systems of the mother tongue and the target language. Instruction on articulatory positioning, as well as systematic practice of rhythm and intonation patterns, is also indispensable. The use

of authentic listening materials further enhances pronunciation acquisition. As Jalolov (2012) notes, pronunciation instruction should be based on contrastive phonetic analysis, learner error analysis, and the identification of typical pronunciation difficulties.

Morphosyntactic Errors

Morphosyntactic errors arise from violations of morphological and syntactic rules, such as incorrect person–number agreement or inappropriate word order. Morphological errors are particularly evident in areas such as plural formation in German, which poses considerable difficulty for Uzbek learners. Such errors often result from insufficient familiarity with grammatical rules and learners' attempts to formulate hypotheses, thereby contributing to conscious language development and metacognitive growth.

When learners encounter unfamiliar grammatical structures, explicit teacher guidance and direct correction are often necessary. Peer support may also be effective, as some learners may have already internalized structures not yet formally introduced. Metacognitive competence enables learners to assess their knowledge, identify gaps, analyze errors, and develop strategies for self-correction.

Even when grammatical rules are known, errors may occur due to forgetting or misunderstanding. In such cases, non-verbal prompts can encourage self-correction. Kleppin (1998) regards non-verbal feedback as a simple and effective correction strategy, particularly when learners have already been exposed to the relevant rule.

During free speech activities, teacher interruptions should be minimized. Errors can be noted and discussed after task completion, encouraging learners to identify errors in both oral and written production. Teacher feedback may then supplement learner-generated corrections.

Lexical-Semantic and Pragmatic Errors

Lexical-semantic errors occur when inappropriate lexical items are used, partially or completely distorting meaning and leading to misunderstanding. While learners often have opportunities for self-correction, teacher explanation remains essential, particularly in clarifying contextual usage and semantic nuances. Lexical errors frequently result from confusion between near-synonyms, similar-sounding words, or direct transfer from the mother tongue.

Pragmatic errors arise from violations of cultural norms and communicative conventions. Such errors are typically caused by insufficient intercultural competence and are often less tolerated by native speakers than grammatical or pronunciation errors. According to Koll-Stobbe, pragmatic errors should always be corrected, as they are relatively rare and have a strong impact on communication.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development of metacognitive competence in future German language teachers requires a clear understanding of error types and classification criteria. Such awareness enables teachers to select appropriate correction strategies, enhances the effectiveness of instructional feedback, and promotes learners' reflective engagement with their own language learning processes.

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