Error Analysis in Chinese as Second Language Learning

by Means of Intermediary Context

（以中介语境的方法分析汉语作为第二语言学习中的错误）

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A Brief Introduction

The error analysis caused in the course of second language learning by means of intermediary context is the new notion about context in seconding language learning first put forward in this paper.

The ability of language a learner acquires is described as three aspects, that is, accuracy, complexity and fluency. Accuracy occurs when learner language conforms to the rules of the target language, while language error occurs when it does not. Those rules may be at different levels: pronunciation, discourse or sociolinguistics, especially at levels of morphology, syntax and lexicon.

Here language error means the language form by a learner that deviates from, or violates, the target language rule.

Error Analysis becomes increasingly significant in the field of second language acquisition research, because errors are an integral part of language learning process. The learner of Chinese language as a second language is unaware of the existence of the particular system or rule in Chinese language. So error analysis has become one of important task for researchers. Essentially error analysis will describe how the language learning happens by examining the learner's output, including the learner's correct and incorrect expression.

Researchers hold the idea that existence of errors is a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure. And they also believe that errors are a due largely to native language interference that the teacher has failed to predict the occurrence of the errors and has done nothing about the errors. However, as researchers trust, errors are wrong habits that can and should be corrected.

Mainly there are two approaches to the research of learner's errors, namely contrastive analysis and error analysis. Error analysis cannot be studied properly without touching upon the notion of contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis and error analysis have been viewed by researchers as branches of Applied Linguistic Science.

As for error theory, there are three most influential fields, it is contrastive analysis, error analysis and inter-language theory. Especially inter-language is viewed as a restructuring or a recreating continuum and, therefore; evaluates their parts they have played in second language acquisition.

Owing to the great gap between European and Chinese language system, pronunciation, discourse or sociolinguistics, especially at levels of morphology, syntax and lexicon involved,

errors occur to a learner of Chinese mainly by means of intermediary context, which forms in the learner's mind as a particular context, quite a different notion from the traditional context of the mother tongue and the context of the target language.

Intermediary context, which is the new notion about context in seconding language learning first put forward in this thesis, is not inter-context, which is the ST context and TT context shared by the two sides of source language speaker and target language learner, often viewed as across-cultural context. However, intermediary context, not the same as the context of the mother tongue and the context of the target language， is the particular context between the ST context and TT context, formed only by second language learners themselves in their minds according to their own understanding of the ST context, as a medium during the process of transfer between the ST context and TT context.
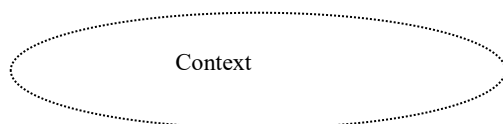
In across-culture education, intermediary context is an essential part of language learning process, which functions by means of analogy. And analogy is also an import aspect for language learning, which has been drawing more interest from linguists. While over-generalization, a wrong way of analogy, will make errors in language learning. Therefore, it is of great necessity to launch probe into error analysis caused by intermediary context, to be more exact, by over-generalization, in second language acquisition.

As can be seen in many parts of the world, there arise an increasingly heated Chinese learning as second or foreign language for various purposes and targets. But with more and more Chinese learners as second language, errors caused by fossilization and over analogy attract more attention from language teachers and linguists.

It has been much discussed that errors caused by fossilization and over analogy has become focus of the research about Chinese learning as second language due to the giant gap between Chinese and other western language such as English, French, German, Polish, etc.

This paper will discuss briefly the errors caused in the course of second language learning by means of intermediary context, the new notion about context in seconding language learning first put forward in this paper.

According to linguistics, in any language there exist two phases：sentence phase, namely formal phase of the language composed of lexical words and grammar, and discourse phase, namely functional phase composed of semantic meaning and context. The former attaches importance to the sentence structure and language feature, while the latter to the meaning of the language, as is shown as following diagram:
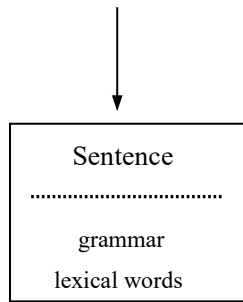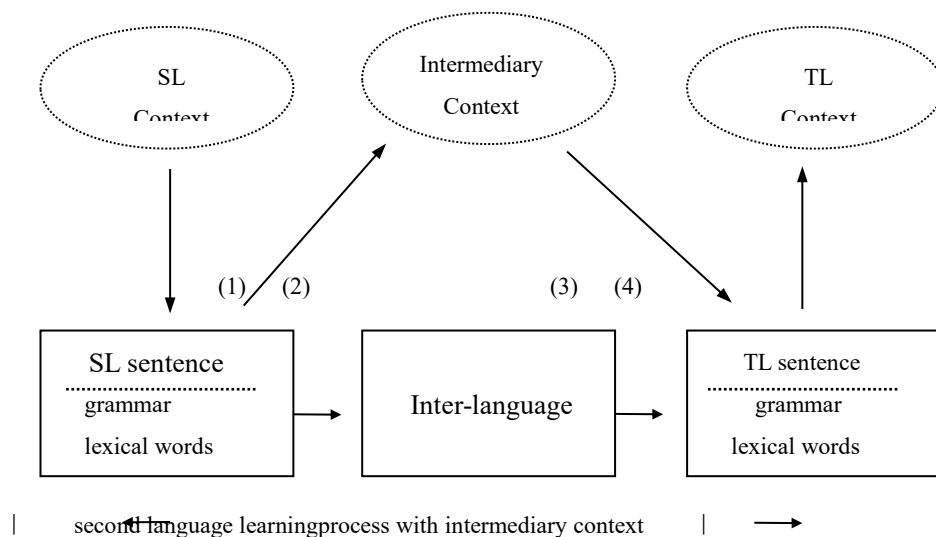
Context

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                    ↓
         ┌─────────────────────┐
         │      Sentence       │
         │ ................... │
         │                     │
         │      grammar        │
         │    lexical words    │
         └─────────────────────┘
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Figure 1   Diagram of context

*Note: I draw this diagram to show the two phases of context.

Thus the operating process of language learning is inevitably a comprehensive one of sentence and discourse, and the second language learning process is not only at sentence phase but also at discourse phase.

But, as has been probed into above, there may be a medium, inter-language, in the course of second language learning, and in such a case interference may occur, that is fossilization and overgenalization.   The following chart shows the process of second language learning in such a case with inter-language as medium, in which intermediary context contributes to the process of second language learning.


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   ( SL        )    ( Intermediary )    (  TL    )
   ( Context   )    (   Context     )    ( Context )

              (1)  (2)        (3)   (4)

  ┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐
  │ SL sentence │   │             │   │ TL sentence │
  │ ........... │→  │Inter-language│ → │ ........... │
  │  grammar    │   │             │   │  grammar    │
  │ lexical words│  │             │   │ lexical words│
  └─────────────┘   └─────────────┘   └─────────────┘
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| second language learningprocess with intermediary context | ⟶

Note: (1) Context to sentence in source language

(2) SL sentence to intermediary context

(3) Intermediary context to TL sentence

(4) Sentence to context in target language

Figure 2   Process of second language learning with inter-language as medium

*Note: I draw this diagram on bases on my own theory first put forward in this thesis about intermediary context in order to better show how the intermediary context contributes to the process of second language

learning.

It can be easily seen from the diagram that sentence of the source language cannot be transformed directly into sentences of the second language by the second language learner by means of intermediary context, but they should be both embodiment of the same semantic meaning and context, that is, he or she embodies the semantic meaning and context he wants to express in form of the sentence in the source language, and he or she analyses the lexical words and grammar of the source language and arrives at the intermediary context, and then he or she embodies the intermediary context in form of sentences. Thus the second language learner completes the process from SL to TL by means of intermediary context, and by analyzing the lexical words and grammar of the target language listener can comprehend the semantic meaning and its context. Obviously there may exist an interlingual or cross-language transformation from discourse (of the source language) to discourse (of the target language) with intermediary context in between, which just reveals the nature of learning process of the second language learner cross culture.

The above process about intermediary context is shown in the following diagram:
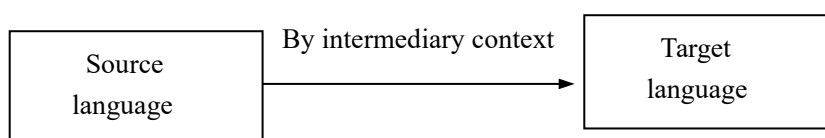

Figure 3   Process of intermediary context

*Note: I draw this diagram on bases on my own theory first put forward in this thesis about intermediary context in order to better show how the intermediary context contributes to the process of second language learning.

More significance has been attached to the study of inter-language due to the actual fact that errors caused by fossilization and over analogy occur at such process, esp. for the second language learning between such different languages such as Chinese language and other European languages, the former being theme or topic-oriented language while the latter, subject or grammar-oriented languages.

Error Analysis theory based on the analysis of the learners' errors made in their learning process, and inter-language theory based on the analysis of the features of learner language, are of crucial significance and implications to second language learning and teaching. Yet there still exist some problems with the description of the learner's errors.

On the basis of the discussion concerning learner language, it should be considered what attitude to take towards the learners' errors and puts forward some possible suggestions for remedial teaching.

Learners' errors were of no significance at all in the pre-scientific era when language teachers

concentrated their efforts on the learning of the correct forms of the target. It came of no use to make much fuss about errors as the belief generally held at that time among teachers and linguists was that it was teaching methodology that should be improved if learners made errors. It was considered that poor teaching method probably gave rise to errors by learners, and if the teaching methodology improved to perfection, errors would be avoided and the learners would be enabled to learn that pure and accurate form of the target language.

Another attitude towards learners' errors was that errors were simply inevitable in the learning process and what counted most was to design some means to deal with such errors. Accordingly, there would be no need to identify the sources of errors or the possibility of giving learners' errors their own right as a system. At the time when contrastive analysis prevailed in the field of applied linguistics and learners' errors were identified as the interference of the mother tongue of the learner with the target language they were learning.

According to the contrastive analysis hypothesis, errors probably arise where there are great differences between the learner's mother tongue or any previously acquired language and the language he or she is trying to acquire, just like Chinese-English, or Chinese-Polish, as discussed above.

The errors themselves are interference of the mother tongue and they have to be overcome in the learner's progressive learning. Such negative attitudes towards learners' errors are not inconsistent with the behaviorist perception.

The behaviorist notion of language learning is that "errors were predicted to be the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language", according to Corder.

Such persisting habits harm the second language learning. The tendency for immediate error correction is strong in the teaching practice in some language learning classroom. It was not until the late sixties that people began to probe into learners' errors. Strong evidence from researches has shown that the learners' errors are regular in their patterns and rule-governed. Studying of learners' errors could throw some light on how learners process language input as the errors themselves could be to some extent representative of the learners' intake, namely, how much the learners have learnt and how much they have yet to learn.

Therefore, the justification of error analysis could be made for two ways: first, pedagogical justification, it provides opportunity for a systematic means of eradication; and second, theoretical justification, it is part of the systematic study of the learners' language, according to Corder. [1]

Also according to Corder, learners' errors are significant in three different ways. [2]

First, for teachers, the learners' errors could tell them how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn.

Secondly, for researchers the errors provide evidence of how language is learnt or acquired

[1]See Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and inter-language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[2]Corder, S.P. (1974). Error Analysis, In Allen, J.L.P. and Corder, S.P. (1974). *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and what strategies or procedures the learner isemploying in his discovery of language.

Thirdly for, learners, committing errors is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of language he is learning.

In modern language teaching and learning, there has been a shift of focus from the preoccupation with teaching (particularly explicit grammar teaching) to identification of the learners' communicative needs in language learning. The concept of learner-oriented teaching and learning has become popular in the overall language teaching and learning. In light of the new tendency, an adequate understanding of what processes, in which the learners engage themselves for the task of learning a second or foreign language, are attributable to the very fulfillment of that learning tasks by the learners are of crucial significance to decision making concerning development of teaching materials as input and providing conditions that will promote the second language learning.

Errors by the learners in the language learning process are that the learner reveals his underlying knowledge of the newly acquired language. However, while what is going on in the learner's mind when he or she tries to produce sentences basing on his or her own grammar is hard to observe, his or her speech could provide observable data to show language and learning competence in the learner. If it is acknowledged that learners' errors are systematic and that the learner's language is independent of either the mother tongue or the target language, then it is followed that it would be justifiable to say that the study of errors by learners as well as the learner's language is of great value to the understanding of language learning and even of language itself.

When applied linguists come to deal with errors, practical problems arise as defining errors is not in any sense easier than defining learning.

Selinker declares that the inter-language shares the characteristics of two social dialects of the languages.[3]

The learner's language is systematic and has its own grammar and rules, so whatever the learner utters when he or she tries to communicate in his or her language is legal and genuine in terms of his or her inter-language. Every utterance he or she produces is grammatical and perfect except for some performance mistakes or slips of tongue or pen.

When identifying errors in the utterances by the learner, the determination of an error should be based on the situation context of the specific utterance. A well-formed sentence may still be erroneous or inappropriate in the context.

According to Corder, in the process of error analysis, concentration only on superficially ill-formed sentences is not enough. Those that are well-formed but inappropriate relating to the context must also be dealt with. Such sentences cannot be interpreted 'normally' in context.

Linguists believe that learner's errors are not negative hindering forces, rather, they are inevitable and necessary parts of the second language learning. Therefore, if there is an adequate

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[3]See Selinker, L. (1972). Inter-language

description of the idiosyncratic dialect and provide plausible explanations, it is possible to provide facilitative conditions for the learners to formulate hypotheses about the rules of the target language.

There are different errors: acceptability and appropriateness. In the learner's idiosyncratic dialect, one sentence could be well formed, in terms of the target language-based criterion, but denies appropriate interpretation in the context. Here the problems of appropriateness arise. Generally, there are two kinds of appropriateness. First, the learner's utterance must be of the truth value concerning its referential relationship, indicating that the referring expression used in the utterance must have its real referent in his or her real life. This is what Corder called *referential appropriateness*.

When a learner has already had sophisticated knowledge about one language system, it is hard to imagine for him not to exploit the advantage of prior knowledge in the second language learning. According to Corder, "it appears then that the nature of the inter-languagegrammar a learner creates for himself is to a considerable extent determined by the knowledge of language the learner already possesses and how elaborate and sophisticated that knowledge is ".

But it is true at the same time that such factors as age, settings, and motivation would play significant roles in second language learning. The younger the learners, the more communicating oriented, and the more informal the setting, the more similar the structural properties of their inter-language systems will be.

Also according to Corder, "the maximum degree of similarity between approximative systems of learners will be found in the case of young learners of any language, whatever their mother tongue in the earliest stages of learning a particular language in an informal setting, and per contra that the maximum differences in the approximative system of learners will be found among adult learners of different mother tongues learning different target languages in formal settings",.[4]

In the Chinese learning situation, people would probably place our learners on the other end of the scale: they are adult, learning Chinese for academic purposes, and have highly formal instructional settings. So much can be expected of the features that are unique to the Chinese learners. And people can base most of our interpretations of their sentences on the mother tongue to second language, as it is the case in actuality.

As the learner's language is systematic and describable, error analysis provides access to the observable data from which inferences can be made about the learner's underlying knowledge about his or her language. As a methodology error analysis has implications both for practical purposes and psycholinguistic orientation. It serves to help the teacher to gain insight into the learner's learning process and provide more facilitative conditions that can promote the process. Mere error correction, particularly the immediate correction in class, may delay the learning process.

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[4]Corder, S.P. (1978). Simple Codes and the Source of the Second Language Learner's Initial   Heuristic Hypothesis. Studies in Second Acquisition. 1, 1-10

Obviously, the ability of language a learner acquires is described as three aspects, that is, accuracy, complexity and fluency. Accuracy occurs when learner language conforms to the rules of the target language, while language error occurs when it does not. Those rules may be at different levels: pronunciation, discourse or sociolinguistics, especially at levels of morphology, syntax and lexicon.

It should be noted that language error means the language form by a learner that violates the target language rule.

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In one word, in across-culture education, intermediary context is an essential part of language learning process, which functions by means of analogy. And analogy is also an import aspect for language learning, which has been drawing more interest from linguists. While overgeneralization, a wrong way of analogy, will make errors in language learning. Therefore, it is of great necessity

to launch probe into error analysis caused by intermediary context, to be more exact, by overgeneralization, in second language acquisition.

In Chinese teaching and learning as a second language it is necessary to deal with the issue of errors in the course of teaching and learning.

Making errors does not mean failure in learning, because it is inevitable in language acquisition. As for teachers, they should encourage the students and help to correct those errors.

Teachers should develop a good attitude toward students' errors and mistakes and make a concrete analysis of each specific question. The errors learners commit can be divided into two kinds: the knowledge error and the expressing error. The knowledge error is always due to learners' ignorance of some certain language rules. They haven't comprehended and mastered the system of the target language.

Generally, this kind of error can not be perceived and corrected by learners themselves. If they cannot be corrected promptly, these improper expressions will exist in inter-language till they fossilize. Teachers should offer the proper expressions and usage of some language rules to learners so that they can learn afresh the knowledge. Errors on the expressing level, to a large extent, may resulted from a slip of the tongue or a slip of the pen or their carelessness and tension etc. during the learning process.

Teachers should give learners more chances to the authentic presentation so that learners can gradually correct the errors by themselves. In this way, learners can keep their interest more easily and keep themselves in the state of positive learning and in the end reduce fossilization. Most errors will gradually disappear with the development of one's learning. Thus, when learning a second language, learners should accept errors, by patience and self-confident to correct them.

To train the learning strategies and communication strategies is also very important.

Learning strategies are conscious, and they must be guided by purpose, based on problem-solving, and aims to increase the efficiency in language acquisition. A proper learning strategy makes the learner realize the errors and make progress. A success learner will make full use of the learning strategy to achieve their goals, and they use the strategies selectively and flexibly. In study, learners should learn to change the learning strategies in accordance with different learning contents, and check regularly whether the learning strategies are effective.

Besides, they can have a discussion with the teacher on the learning strategies, so the teacher can point out the advantages and disadvantages so as to avoid fossilization in language acquisition.

Communication strategies mean the skills that language learners use to overcome impediments when they cannot clearly express themselves because of limited language resources.

Communication strategies are important components of communication skills, and have much influence on the development of communication skills, the fluency of spoken language, and speaking skills. This requires facing the communication problem positively and train the communication skills accordingly.

In Chinese teaching and learning as a second language it is equally important to arouse the

learners' motivation of learning a language.

The motivation of learning a language is divided into four kinds-instrumental motivation (for example, some learners may want to achieve practical rewards, such as certificate and making money, etc.), integrative motivation (learners learn the language just because of sincere personal interest in the language and the cultural represented by the language.), resultative motivation (the motivation comes into being as a result of rewards or success.), and intrinsic motivation (motivation deriving from an inherent interest in the learning task the learner is asked to perform.).

Therefore, second language environment needs to be created to the largest extent, because by continual exposure to natural conversation students may learn through opportunities both to hear more of the target language and to produce new utterances to test their knowledge.

 As a consequence, student's motivation for second language learning can be enforced. In addition, different learning tasks should be set in accordance with the learners' interest so as to arouse their motivation to learn the language and at the same time avoid the occurrence of fossilization. What's more, language contest, short play performance, foreign language tour guiding and other sorts of activities should be popularized in line with the specialties of different schools.

Obviously, inter-language theories benefit a lot in foreign language and second language learning, of course Chinese teaching and learning as a second language included. With the development of the learner's acquisition, their language output gradually approaches the correct form of target language. The unique form and grammar rules of inter-language reflect not only the knowledge learners acquired in different stages but the actual capabilities of language communication.

Therefore, in foreign and second language teaching, in order to enable students to study the foreign with ease and joy, teachers should hold a tolerant attitude toward learners' errors and mistakes, especially those that cause no difficulty to communication. They can also adopt some measures to arouse the learners' motivation of leaning a second language. With regard to learners, they should try to avoid fossilization by some efficient ways. Learners should also face the errors in their second language learning correctly, and give quick and proper response and feedback to them.

Finally, trying to train the learning strategies and communication strategies is also an effective way for second language learning. Through all these ways of learning a foreign or second language, learners can gradually improve the inter-language and make their language output close to the expressions by native speakers in their language ability.

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