To err is human: Error analysis at a glance

Workshop

AMEP National Conference 2006

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Great feedback!

A: I think your speech today was fantastic and thought provoking. You should have it published in a newspaper soon.

B: Thank you, I haven’t got time. *(Jokingly said)* It might have to be done posthumously.

A: Great! I can’t wait!

(Exchange as told by the VC Macquarie University, June 16, 2006)
Communicative competence as being composed of 4 areas of knowledge and skill:

- Grammatical competence
- Sociolinguistics competence
- Discourse competence
- Strategic competence

*Canale 1983*
What is an error?

- A **mistake** is "a performance error that is either a random guess or a ‘slip,’ in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly."

- **Errors** are problems that a native speaker would not have. = noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the *interlanguage* competence of the learner."

- A **slip** is what a learner can self-correct, and an **error** is what a learner can’t self-correct. An **attempt** is a guess or when neither the intended meaning nor the structure is clear to the teacher.
Error analysis

• Error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language.

• Errors are significant in three respects:
  1. They tell the teacher what needs to be taught
  2. They tell the researcher how learning proceeds
  3. They are a means whereby learners test their hypotheses about L 2

Causes of errors

- Interference from the native language
- An incomplete knowledge of the target language
- The complexity of the target language. (e.g. the s in the third person singular present tense), spelling
Errors VS Mistakes

CORRIGIBILITY  × ✓

- Slips (or lapses of the tongue or pen) can quickly be detected and self corrected by their author unaided.
- Mistake can only be corrected by their agent if their deviance is pointed out to him or her
- Error requires further relevant learning to take place before they can be self-corrected.
Error detection

• not as simple as you might think.
• harder to spot error in spoken, informal language than in written, formal texts.
• Spotting one’s own errors is more difficult than spotting other people’s errors.
• differences between the error-detection capacities of:
  - native speaking teachers VS with NESB teachers
  - teachers and non teachers
• Sentence: Neither of us was happy.
Levels of errors

• Text errors
• Lexical errors (Form/semantic (confusion sense of relation – collocation- verbosity))
• Grammar errors (Morphology /Syntax)
• Discourse errors (Coherence/ Pragmatic)
Form: Examples

- Formal misselection eg considerable /considerate (suffix), seat/set (vowel based)

- Misformations (3 types) eg borrowing words from L 1 in stead of using L 2

- Distortions –eg the *depths* of the ocean
Semantic errors

• 1. Confusion of sense relations eg *The flowers had a special smell.* (scent/perfume)

• 2. Collocation errors – eg *make an attempt,* *have a try not make a try,* *have an attempt*

• Adherence to the collocational conventions of a Non NESBs contributes greatly to one’s idiomaticity and nativelikeness, and not doing so announces one’s foreignness.
Verbosity

• Heavy pressure from Nola eventually forces his hand, resulting in a morally ghastly climax redeemed by a genuinely inspired dramatic twist that beautifully and bitterly dovetails with the philosophical notion posited at the outset.

• From Posted: Thurs., May 12, 2005, 9:27am PT by By TODD MCCARTHY Variety Com

Match Point

What Shaw (1975:vii) calls ‘wordiness’ is not a monopoly of FL learners but is also a failing of the native speakers. It seems to reflect insecurity on the user's part: an overcompensation for the sense of linguistic inadequacy they harbour.
Grammar Errors - examples

1. Morphology errors – eg *He like icecream*.

2. Syntax errors (errors that affect texts larger than the word, namely phrases, clause, sentence and ultimately paragraphs eg

   A. Phrase structure errors
      - *He is a cleverest boy in the class* (misselection of the article)
      - *That fat big fish is a sword fish.*
      - *He no can swim* (misselection and misordering of negator)

   B. Clause errors – involves whole phrases entering into the structure of clauses eg
      *Watson sent to him the letter.*

   C. Sentence errors

   D. Intersentence errors (cohesion) – conjunctive, logical connectors, ellipsis and substitution
Discourse errors

- Coherence – underlying ‘conceptual’ relationship
- Pragmatic errors – putting linguistic knowledge into practice (arising when speakers or hearers misencode a message)
- Receptive errors
Pragmatic errors: Examples

A German says *Bring me a beer!* (Command – not request)

*Some Sociopragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983)

- Taboos eg sex, defecation, food, cancer and AIDS
- Size of the imposition – *Would you like something to drink?* – *No thank you.* (No drinks!)
- Values – eg ‘*a bit of garlic*’ ‘*a lot of garlic*’
  “*We really must get together some time*’ / “*How are you?*”- = insincere?
- Power and social distance eg *du* and *tu* in German and French (there are approx 30 words for “I” in Thai depending on gender, social status, emotive language etc)
Receptive errors

1. Misunderstanding = reflects failures to process linguistic (phonological, lexical and grammatical) features of respective texts. 

   Communication strategies are a systemic attempt by the learners to express or decode meaning in the target language (Tarone, Cohen and Dumas 1983:11).

2. Misprocessing – the extratextual knowledge we bring to the text

3. Misinterpreting - a person has a ‘mind set or ‘schema’ of idea (possibly culturally determined (which deposes him/her towards a certain view and blinding him/her to the converse interpretation)
Intelligibility

Intelligibility = the accessibility of the basic, lateral meaning, the prepositional content encoded in an utterance.

eg *Why you not speak like me?* = intelligible but not grammatical

but

*Why you not like me?* (ambiguous between *Why are you not like (= similar to) me?* And *Why do you not like (= love) me?*.)
Intelligibility (Cont.)

- Grammatical accuracy is not always essential for accurate communication.
- Where inaccuracy is transparent, it need not impede intelligibility.
- Unintelligibility is thus closely related to the lexical level of errors.
- Johannsson (1978:109) the morphology errors eg 
  shelf/shelves; have went/gone - no problem

But *strings* for *shelves*, caused by transfer from L1 Swedish does
Cross cultural mismatches

- Cross cultural mismatches: An error tends to cause irritation (or embarrassment) when it has sociopragmatic consequences, that is, when it is not so much language rules as social norms that are violated by the error.
  - social distance
  - power
  - rights and obligations

(Thomas (1983:104))
Rhetorical moves

= What’s considered polite deployed in writing:

• Maxim of Politeness (Lakoff)
  “Your scholarship is my only chance to make a study visit to the USA, since…..” = emotional blackmail here

• Modesty Maxim -minimizes praise of self and maximize dispraise of self (1983:136)(Leech) –”I speak 4 languages … do not have problems socializing with other people… also I has one degree already in Social Policy. = arrogant, egotistic
Culture – a bit of sidetrack!

• Culture is embedded in language as an intangible, all pervasive and highly variable force. How then are we to capture it in order to teach it?

Hierarchy/Ranking

- error gravity types of errors

The NESBs teachers were consistently more severe in their judgements

(Mccretton and Rider (1993))
Universal hierarchy of errors

• MOST SEVERE    LEAST SEVERE
Lexis > spelling > negation > word order >
   prepositions > verb forms > concord

(Significantly agreed by both ESB and NESB teachers)

McCretton and Rider (1993)
To correct or not to correct

• A blob of cream on the face! – At the gym/beautician
• A choice of what German class to take (levels of correction – too much or too little?)
  • http://static.flickr.com/26/44906251_63e6450144_m.jpg
Should teachers correct every error students make when using English?  


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To correct or not to correct?

PROS

1. Correction works. - 44% improvement on content expression.
2. Learners want to be corrected.
3. No evidence that correction adversely affects learning cognitively.
4. Careful learners will not self correct. Without teachers correction, they could be disadvantaged.
5. Teacher has to prompt the learner to alter their hypothesis.
To correct or not to correct?

CONS

• (Krashen 1982) Correction can raise learners’s levels of anxiety and that this impedes learning.
• errors are normal and unavoidable during the learning process.
Correction – strategies 1

1. Establishing lesson objectives
   • to develop accuracy? - correction is necessary.
   • to develop fluency? - correction may not be desirable. (irritating and disruptive), - the teacher can make a mental note to provide feedback after the activity.

• **Approach** (to focus students’ attention and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy):
  a. self-correct
  b. peer correction.
  c. teacher’s correction
Correction – strategies 2

2. Discussion of the learning process - our rationale for correcting or not correcting

Some useful strategies in correcting:
1. Use humour
2. A brief explanation of interlanguage
3. Encourage students to make logical guesses about new words and structures in the target language
4. Doing some contrastive analysis of L1 and L2
5. Highlight a few of the most difficult aspects of English (eg grammar/pron/spelling)
How to: some options and principles

• 1. Correct effectively — be explicit, form focused and subject sensitive
• 2. Correction should be sensitive
• 3. Correction should be non-threatening - extend the wait-time between hearing the erroneous utterances and correcting it. (formative = aimed at bringing about improvement: summative = justifying award of a grade)
Teachers’ and students’ expectations – Cultures of learning

• No matter who or where we teach, however, we can begin to address the problem of differing expectations by talking to our students on the metacognitive level about errors, mistakes, and correction. What are their expectations? Do theirs differ from ours? Such a discussion can give them a clearer understanding of our teaching, as well as a better understanding of the language learning process.

• W. Ancker 2005