

Error Analysis of Written and Spoken English: Practical Suggestions

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Even university students of English persist in making the same mistakes both in written and oral work. After looking at some of the theoretical background involving teaching and how it affects the production and reception of language errors, especially in the communicative approach, we will focus on the most common errors at university level. Practical suggestions will be made through the consideration of authentic examples and through the group analysis of responses to a questionnaire. Strategies for promoting student responsibility and good teacher practice will be discussed.

My students at the ULPGC in the Canaries are mostly young adult Spanish speakers, whose general education and culture has given them a heavier background in reading and writing English than in speaking and listening. Not only do they have a lot of problems with oral / aural skills, but they are often unaware of the nature of their problems. Given the numbers in the class (about 35) and the limited time available in their translation degree course for language work (4 hours a week in first year, three in second year, two in third year, none after that), opportunities for detailed correction and remedial work on oral skills are limited. Similarly, although there is more emphasis on written work – the exams are 90% written, most homework assignments are written, etc - this does not mean, unfortunately, that they have no problems writing in English. Added to this, there is very little enthusiasm for reading, either in Spanish or English, few libraries or bookshops, books are very expensive, and most students live with their families with little space for silent study.

As a result of all these factors, the level of English at university is not as high as, for example, the students that come here from the rest of Europe on Erasmus schemes, and there is a general sense of

apathy when trying to motivate students to produce better quality work. The entrance exam they take before entering the degree doesn't discriminate between those who really have attained an adequate level (normally those who have studied in private schools or who have bilingual families) and those accepted to make up the numbers on the course (120 new students each year). The teacher tends to grow frustrated correcting the same problems both in writing and speaking, caused by a variety of familiar factors: insufficient input of L2 for students, excessive L1 interference, lack of motivation to rewrite or correct their own work, bad or insufficient teaching earlier in the system, and a general lack of interest in written culture or other languages: films and TV are dubbed, students don't travel much, they don't read widely or critically, and they are afraid to take risks for fear of ridicule, heavy correction or failure.

Most students are simply not aware of the level of their mistakes. Any approach to correction of errors in phonology, intonation and stress, or lexis, morphology and syntax, must take into account the overall educational experience of the students, bearing in mind the need for sensitisation and awareness-building, as well as practical solutions.

As S. P. Corder noted back in 1967,

Given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data (...) Motivation and intelligence appear to be the two principal factors which correlate significantly with achievement in a second language (Corder, in J. Richards 1974).

Unless students are in a foreign country needing English to survive, or are working in a professional situation in which their livelihood depends on the quality of their English, it is unlikely that motivation will spring from within in sufficient quantities to compensate for the negative factors affecting learning described

above. The main motivation university students experience is that of exams, which as we all know are less than perfect, far from communicative, and bear little resemblance to the kind of language use necessary outside the classroom. Apart from exams, classwork and homework can be short-term motivating systems, aimed to encourage students to improve and to warn them of their deficiencies before it's too late.

So what are we doing when we correct work, both written and spoken? On what grounds do we decide what is a mistake, what is acceptable, and what is worthy of praise? And what do the students do with this information when we give it to them? Does it help them get better? Is it making them worse? Are we wasting our time?

Before we go into examples from real life, it might be useful to remind ourselves of a bit of language theory, in order to appreciate why the issue of error correction is not as simple as it might seem. Theory and practice has evolved radically over the last century, from Grammar Translation, with omniscient teacher explication of how language works, and students aiming to achieve accurate translations of cultural classics; to Behaviourism, where language is viewed as habit, students practice carefully controlled, heavily corrected accuracy drills, and the judgmental teacher can be substituted by a language lab or computer, to Mentalism / Humanism, based on the involvement of the «whole person», leading to the use of background music, warmers, fluency-based tasks, and students working out rules under a non-judgemental facilitator. Nowadays all these facets of practice coexist, though their theoretical justification is often forgotten. But it is important to remember that different practices are useful in specific situations, and one theory is probably not going to solve all our language teaching problems.

A common way of dividing up the many factors we must consider when assessing how we correct work, is the distinction between

fluency and accuracy, and the different kinds of expectations appropriate to learner's language, depending on whether the student is concentrating on one or other of these aspects. For example, accuracy-based activities are normally based on structural linguistics and behaviourist theories of language learning. According to these, language is built up of paradigmatic and syntagmatic slot and filler structures, which can be taught by breaking language down into its constituent parts. Learning is a non-cognitive habit-forming process, based on stimulus, response and reward. In the 1950s and 60s, this gave rise to the audio-lingual approach, using forms of situational teaching, speech prioritised over writing, accuracy / repetition based drills, and the use of the language laboratory. With reference to errors, this theory suggests that, as Pit Corder puts it,

if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques (...or alternatively...) we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts. Our ingenuity should be concentrated on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred (S. P. Corder, 1974: 20).

He also points out how applied linguistics claimed to provide a contrastive description of languages, so that errors caused by L1 interference could be identified and eliminated, but that in practice this has proved less than helpful to teachers, who already knew why some errors arise, but need more help in resolving them.

In contrast, fluency-based activities are based on theories of cognition, of socio-linguistics, and of language acquisition. Here language is viewed not as the reflex development of habit-patterns, but as a mentalistic process, in which the «Language Acquisition Device» innate in the brain is actively constructing its own theories and hypotheses about the nature of grammatical systems, and testing

them against real language¹. The ability to give correct responses to drills in the language lab or classroom rarely transfers to genuine communicative situations, or deal with unpredictability or fluency successfully. Students need to engage mentally with their learning, working out their own rules and strategies². The focus switched from attention to accurate grammatical structures, to interest in the learner as an individual, and the need to look at developing interlanguages (such as Corder's idea of transitional competence, whereby errors reveal the learner's underlying knowledge of the language to date) and strategies for communicating³. In the classroom, teachers became more learner-centred, developed group / pair work, and concentrated on fluency. Three different approaches to learning were highlighted: *deductive* (presentation of rule, followed by examples of practice), *inductive* (eventual discovery of rule through comparison of language structures) and *guided discovery* (a sort of halfway approach, involving careful teacher input, but mobilising students' hypothesis-testing skills).

It is obvious to experienced teachers, working in a variety of imperfect situations, that no single theoretical approach can supply the solution to all the problems students manifest in the long, slow process of language improvement. This doesn't mean they abandon theoretical considerations altogether, but only that they need to be

¹ Remember Chomsky's theory of Transformational Generative grammar - the analysis of language in terms of deep structure and the transformations made at successive stages to produce different surface structures.

² Socio-linguists such as Hymes or Labov considered language use out of the academic study, and looked at in society to consider how it is used, apparently imperfectly and inaccurately at times, to communicate real ideas and messages. The idea of «communicative competence» was developed.

³ Further academic justification for this approach came from Krashen, who argued there was a distinction between Acquisition (the natural intake of language through exposure to comprehensible input) and Learning (the «Monitor» in the student, intellectually grasping rules and checking accuracy).

aware that classroom practice is based on a variety of different theoretical approaches, as well as on common sense, intuition, bribery, threats and anything else that works on a given occasion.

Nowadays, this mixture of pragmatism and eclecticism is generally known as the «communicative approach», which is not so much a theory as a series of practices connected by a general belief in the value of effective communication achieved by whatever reasonable means. Teachers encourage learner independence and autonomy through needs-analysis, learner training in dictionary work, extensive reading, use of a self-access centre, library or the internet, project work; they use authentic materials to a great extent, grading the task to the level of the student while providing a wide range of ungraded language. In a typical class they practice communicative skills through information gaps, personalisation, focus on intonation and paralinguistics; they encourage students to take risks and make mistakes rather than repeat patterns or practice drills. The theory for all these practices comes from a humanistic / cognitive / communicative approach.

However in other areas, ideas from behaviourism can be usefully incorporated into the classroom: in the area of phonology, drills which are not communicative can be used to practice pronunciation of sounds, rhythm, stress, etc, as some pronunciation skills are learnt by forming «habits». Accuracy-based controlled practice can be useful in both written and spoken segregated exercises, to give practice in fluidity and mechanical skills.

For certain grammatical structures, teacher-based presentation highlighting a rule and giving examples can be useful, such as when teaching the passive, or reported speech; or contrasting two structures to draw attention to differences in an inductive way, drawing on the cognitive approach. When correcting specific grammatical errors an on-the-spot rule may be helpful; with others, a remedial inductive

presentation demanding hypotheses from the students is more productive. With vocabulary items, sometimes a straight translation is the most effective way of clarifying confusion.

To summarise the above, then, we have to recognise that there is no single theory of how we teach EFL, and even less agreement about how people learn. With respect to error correction, the nature of the problem determines the solution; we must understand what sort of a mistake the student makes to know how to help them, and the nature of the mistake depends on what they were trying to achieve. We need to distinguish between «performance» slips and «competence» errors (what the student produces on a given occasion, and what they know in theory). If the aim is to increase fluency in spoken English, it's no use interrupting the student if they drop the third-person «s» or pronounce Spain «Espain». These are not relevant mistakes at this moment and it would only confuse the student if we focus on them; however, on another occasion, we could emphasise the need to work on habit-patterns of pronunciation, perhaps by drilling these items, or recording their speech and getting them to identify examples. The important thing must be to get the student to view their errors as systematic, as useful and revealing: as Corder suggests, «as a device ... to learn. It is the way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning» (Corder, 1974, 25).

Understanding the value of different kinds of correction in different circumstances is vital to productive teaching. With the communicative approach, teachers rarely intervene to correct grammatical mistakes in certain activities such as task-based, problem-solving activities: they are interested in strategies, in the process, in the global resolution of the exercise. However, this may not be at all clear to the student, especially one accustomed to a classroom style based on teacher correction and intervention. Similarly, peer-correction

may be encouraged by the teacher but less welcome to the student, who may consider the teacher is not doing their job, or hasn't noticed the mistakes, or doesn't care, and that students are in no position to correct each other and provide bad models. Activities such as listening for gist or skim-reading may have the same effect: the student, not having access to underlying theory of language learning, may feel it doesn't matter if they understand correctly or not, as the teacher is not checking for detailed comprehension. Students may not realise that a language game or warmer is actually a form of controlled practice of a particular structure, and so take it less seriously than if it were a drill or exercise in a grammar book.

In conclusion then, students need feedback, not just correction in the sense of jumping on errors, for all activities, but in different ways: during accuracy activities, after fluency activities, positive as well as negative. Without going into the theory, they may also benefit from a brief explanation from the teacher as to what the activity is designed to practice and why.

WORK CITED

S. P. Corder, «The Significance of Learners' Errors» in *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. Ed. Jack C. Richards (Longman 1974).