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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the analysis of errors adults make while learning a second language. The underlying objective of most of these analyses has been to reveal the systematicity of adult errors in an effort to understand the process of adult second language learning. This paper deals with errors from a different point of view, namely, from the listener or reader's point of view. The question asked is, which types of errors cause the listener or reader to misunderstand the message intended by the EFL learner? Based on the judgments of native English speakers about the comprehensibility of hundreds of sentences containing errors of EFL learners all over the world, linguistic criteria for determining the communicative importance of learners' errors are suggested. Areas of English syntax that cause important communicative errors usually neglected in most EFL training materials are discussed. The paper concludes with the application of this particular error analysis approach to the EFL classroom. (Author)

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ERROR ANALYSIS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM[1]

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Introduction

One of the joys of being an EFL teacher is to hear a student speak flawless English. It is unfortunate that most of us are more familiar instead with the frustrations of teaching English--correcting the same mistakes over and over, or having to teach parts of Lesson 3 again when the class is on Lesson 20.

Although the correction of student errors is a major part of language teaching, virtually nothing is said in textbooks on how to deal with errors--except that they should be corrected. Likewise, most training programs for EFL teachers consist largely of the presentation of English grammar rules and how to teach those rules to non-English speakers. However, given that students attempt to use English before they have mastered it, it becomes necessary for teachers to be prepared to handle the variety of errors that inevitably occur in student speech and writing. For example, when a student makes several errors in a single sentence, such as "I no come that it snow," what should a teacher do? Model the correct sentence hoping the student will notice all the corrected errors? Or drill each grammar point one at a time? And what should be done about the errors

1 This paper draws on ~~the~~ research presented in Burt and Kiparsky, The Gooficon: A Repair Manual for English (Rowley Mass.: Newbury House Publishers) 1972.

students make that have not yet been covered in class? This paper presents some guidelines for dealing with this pervasive but neglected aspect of teaching English.

Familiarity with the types of errors students actually make is a valuable guide for determining the sequence and emphasis of instruction in the EFL classroom. In recent years the acceptance of this notion has led to a great deal of empirical research on adult foreign language errors. This "error analysis approach" differs from that of "contrastive analysis" in that error analysis does not assume that first language interference is the major predictor of adult errors. Rather, no assumptions are made about the causes of error types. Errors in the actual speech of foreign language learners were simply collected, then classified into categories. The results of investigations indicate that although interference from a students' first language is the major predictor of phonological errors (as most experienced EFL teachers already know), interference errors are only one of the types of errors found in the syntax, morphology and lexicon of student speech and writing in the target language (Richards 1971, Politzer 1974, Ervin-Tripp 1970, George 1972, Olsson 1972, Dušková 1969, and Grauberg 1971). For example, in his analysis of 193 German foreign language errors, Grauberg (1971), found that mother tongue interference could account for only 25% of the lexical errors, 10% of the syntactic errors, and none of the morphological errors in his students' essays.

Most of the current work in error analysis focusses on either the linguistic classification of errors or on the causes of errors made by adults learning English and other foreign languages. All these efforts contribute to the description of the process of adult foreign language learning.

This paper deals with errors from a different point of view, namely, the listener or reader's point of view. In real communication situations, the (non-native) speaker or writer comprises only one-half of the communication event. The other half is the person who receives the message being communicated, i.e., the listener or reader, who is usually a native speaker of the target language. Sometimes, despite errors in learner speech, the native listener can understand the message easily, while sometimes even a single error can cause serious misunderstanding or no comprehension of the utterance at all. For example, the four errors in

#I trying for drive more slow.[2]

do not affect a listener's comprehension of what the speaker is saying. It may be broken English, but the message is clear. On the other hand, the question

#Does your mother worry you when you drink?

(asked during a party) may cause the listener to think he is being asked a probing psychoanalytic question, instead of the intended considerate question "Do you worry your mother when you drink?" (Or "Does your mother worry about you when you drink?") Given the importance of successful communication, we

will focus here on the distinction between errors that cause miscommunication and those that don't, giving particular emphasis to certain areas of English syntax that are usually neglected in EFL teacher training programs.

Criteria for Determining Communicative Importance of Errors

The criteria proposed here for determining the communicative importance of errors in adult discourse are based on several thousand English sentences containing errors actually made by adult EFL learners from all over the world--from Germany, Japan, France, Turkey, Ethiopia, Korea, Thailand and Latin America, as well as foreign students in the United States. The errors were taken from taperecordings of spontaneous conversations and from written compositions and letters, many of which were gathered by Peace Corps Volunteers and EFL teachers.

In order to determine the relative importance of error types, we selected from our corpus of ungrammatical sentences those containing two or more errors. We then asked native speakers of English (the company janitor, the car mechanic and shopkeepers) to make judgments about the relative comprehensibility of a sentence as each error was corrected, one at a time or several at a time. For example, the sentence

*English language use much people

contains three errors: the article "the" is missing in front of "English language", "much" is used instead of "many", and the

subject and object are inverted. We asked our native-English-speaking judges to tell us which of the following partially corrected versions of the original sentence was easiest to comprehend:

1 The English language use much people (the inserted)

2 English language use many people (much corrected)

3 Much people use English language (word order corrected)

The unanimous verdict on this sentence was that version 3 was the most comprehensible, whereas 1 and 2 hardly improved the original sentence. Moreover, the correction of both "the" and "much" in version 4:

4 The English language use many people

was still considered much less intelligible than the single word order correction in version 3.

Let's take another example:

#Not take this bus we late for school.

Correcting each of the errors in this sentence results in five versions:

1 We not take this bus we late for school (we inserted)

2 Do not take this bus we late for school (do inserted)

3 not take this bus we will late for school (will inserted)

4 not take this bus we be late for school (be inserted)

5 If not take this bus we late for school (if inserted)

The first four versions of the sentence were judged as not having much effect on the comprehensibility of the sentence. In

fact three out of four judges pointed out that, though unlikely, the speaker could have meant to say "we shouldn't take this bus. If we do, we'll be late for school." In version 5, the insertion of the connector "if" makes the speaker's original intentions immediately clear, and prevents any misunderstanding. The single insertion of "if" did more to convey the speaker's intended meaning than the four other corrections combined in version 6 below.

6 We do not take this bus we will be late for school

Version 6 is still ambiguous, whereas

5 If we not take this bus we late for school

clearly communicates the speaker's intention.

We followed this procedure for some 300 sentences containing more than one error, and discovered that errors which significantly hinder communication (in the sense that they cause the listener or reader to misunderstand the message or to consider the sentence incomprehensible) are of a certain type, while those that do not hinder communication are of another type. Both types of errors are easily distinguishable and we describe each type with examples below:

1. Global Errors

Errors that significantly hinder communication are those that affect overall sentence organization. Because of the overall nature of such errors, we have labeled this category "global". The most systematic global errors include:

a. Wrong word order

e.g. #English language use many people

b. Missing, wrong, or misplaced sentence connectors

e.g. #(If) ∧ not take this bus, we late for school

#He will be rich (until) (when) he marry

#He started to go to school (since) he studied very hard.

c. Missing cues to signal obligatory exceptions to pervasive syntactic rules

e.g. #The student's proposal (was) ∧ looked into (by) ∧ the principal

d. Overgeneralizing pervasive syntactic rules to exceptions (in transformational terms, not observing selectional restrictions on certain lexical items). (See next section for discussion.)

e.g. #We amused that movie very much

(That movie amused us very much)

2. Local Errors

Errors that affect single elements (constituents) in a sentence do not usually hinder communication significantly, such as errors in noun and verb inflections, articles, auxiliaries and the formation of quantifiers. Since these errors are limited to a single part of the sentence, we labelled them "local". Local errors are clearly illustrated in the examples discussed above.

In sum, global errors--those that affect overall sentence organization--cause the listener or reader to misinterpret the speaker or writer's message, while local errors--those that are

limited to a single part of the sentence--rarely affect the communication of a verbal message.

The global/local distinction can also be extended to the classification of errors in terms of those that sound more "un-English" to a listener or reader than others. For example, compare:

#Why like we each other?

and

#Why we like each other?

Both of these can be understood without too much trouble, but our judges found the first version to be more "un-English" than the second. The most compelling explanation for this difference seems to be that the first version violates the typical Subject-Verb-Object order in English, while the second does not. The English language (especially American English) takes great pains to maintain the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order (Bever, 1971, Greenberg, 1961). Notice that in most questions, rather than inverting the main verb and subject to signal an interrogative (as many languages do), English inverts the auxiliary (helping verb) if there is one. If there is no auxiliary, the particle do is used as a question cue. In this way English preserves its SVO order. For example:

Is he sleeping?

Why does she wear those clothes?

The lone exception to this general rule occurs when be is used as a main verb:

Is she here?

It is interesting to note that children learning English as their first or second language typically make errors like the second example above (where SVO is maintained but do is omitted: #Why we like each other?) But errors of the first type, where the verb is inverted are rarely heard. (Brown, 1973, Dulay and Burt, 1972, 1973, 1974).

When the SVO order is violated, English provides cues to signal the violation, as in the passive construction where the OVS order is signalled by be + past participle (+ by):

The proposal was looked into by the principal

Summing up at this point, our analysis suggests that the global/local distinction is the most pervasive criterion for determining the communicative importance of errors. "Global grammar" must be controlled by students in order to be easily understood by native speakers of English, while "local grammar" need not be controlled by the learner to communicate successfully. Local grammar, of course, must be learned if the speaker is to approximate near-native fluency, but if successful communication is the primary purpose of a particular EFL class, global grammar must receive top priority.

Two Neglected Aspects of Global Grammar

So far we have touched upon two aspects of global grammar--basic word order and sentence connectors. We will now discuss two other aspects of English grammar that often cause global

errors: psychological predicate constructions and selectional restrictions on certain types of verbs in sentential complements. Both aspects share an important characteristic: they are exceptions to pervasive principles of English. In natural conversations, speakers constantly generate new sentences by applying the rules of the language they are speaking. Thus, even if a student has never heard a particular sentence, he can generate it if he has internalized (learned) the relevant grammar. However, in certain instances, English requires its own basic rules to be violated, and an unsuspecting student of English will apply a rule he has learned and consequently make an error. These kinds of errors, which are made by students from diverse language backgrounds, make it clear that the mother tongue is not the source of these errors. Rather, English itself is the "culprit". The following sections illustrate this point.

Psychological Predicates

Many predicates (both verbs and adjectives) tell how a person feels about something or someone. They describe psychological states or reactions towards something or someone, as in:

She loves that color

He's glad you're here

Psychological verbs always require a) the animate being who experiences the feeling, called the experiencer, and b) the

thing or person that causes the feeling to come about, called the stimulus. Most verbs that can relate an animate noun (one that can do or experience things, a living being) and an inanimate noun require that the animate noun be the subject and the inanimate noun the object. For example:

He broke the window.

She took eight bottles of gin

Many psychological verbs also follow this rule:

They dislike latecomers

We prefer Dutch chocolate

Trouble begins when students use psychological verbs that require the order of experiencer and stimulus to be reversed, such as:

This lesson bores me

The performance amused everyone

This reverse order of experiencer and stimulus (animate and inanimate nouns, respectively) is an exception to the pervasive English order. Students who have learned the general rule apply it to the exceptional verbs (reverse psychological verbs) and produce sentences such as:

#He doesn't bother the cat

(the cat doesn't bother him)

#I don't amuse that

(that doesn't amuse me)

When reverse psychological verbs are misused with animate stimuli, we hear errors like:

#Call your mother--she worries you

(you worry her)

#He doesn't interest that group

(That group doesn't interest him)

where the sentence meaning is entirely obscured or changed.

Adults frequently attempt to use these verbs before they learn their exceptional character, and the result is miscommunication, as the examples above illustrate. A partial list of these reverse psychological verbs appears below:

Some Reverse Psychological Verbs

delight	surprise	bother	mislead
thrill	interest	disgust	shock
charm	fascinate	worry	scare
excite	satisfy	disappoint	frighten
elate	relieve	depress	horrify
impress	overwhelm	bore	insult
please	flatter	confuse	offend

Similar difficulties arise with a group of "reverse" adjectives that behave in the same peculiar fashion. Thus, after students have learned to use regular adjectives:

He's happy to see you

We're glad you came

(where the experiencer is in first position), they use reverse adjectives the same way, producing sentences such as:

#She is hard to get anything done

#I'm wonderful to see you

A partial list of reverse adjectives appears below:

Some Reverse Adjectives

good	possible	terrible
wonderful	probable	awful
important	fantastic	painful
necessary	strange	simple
easy	great	stupid
O.K.	difficult	bad

Since these kinds of errors with reverse psychological predicates affect overall sentence organization and seriously hinder communication, they are global. As students attempt to use these verbs and adjectives in natural conversation, these predicates should receive early and special attention in the classroom.

Choosing complement types

A second area of English syntax that sometimes results in global errors is the complement system. Complements, or subordinate clauses, usually take one of three forms in English: that-clauses (No one believes that we will survive this), infinitives (I want to sleep), and gerunds (He avoids working late).[3] Difficulties arise when students have to choose which complement type to use in a particular situation.

Infinitives and gerunds are often used in English when their implied subjects may be omitted because they are a repetition of a noun in the main clause anyway. For example:

We plan to go to New York next week

We avoid sleeping past noon

English speakers know that the implied subject of to go and sleeping is the preceding noun in the main clause, we.

Infinitives are used when their implied subject is the same as the subject of the main clause as in we plan to go, where the subject of to go is we. Otherwise, the infinitival subject must be included, as in:

We want him to go to New York next week.

From time to time, beginning students will omit the subject of an infinitive when the implied subject is not the same as the subject of the main clause. This results in sentences like:

#I couldn't walk yet after the baby was born so the doctor didn't want to go home.
(intended:...didn't want me to go home)

#Mother has a lot of work. Daddy expects to stay at her office late.
(intended: Daddy expects her to stay at her office late.)

Although the student's sentences sound normal, they clearly do not convey the intended message, simply because English speakers interpret subjectless infinitives to refer to the subject of the preceding main clause.

After students have learned the pervasive quality of infinitives in English, that the implicit infinitival subject is the preceeding noun, they apply it to verbs that are exceptions to this principle. These exceptional verbs require the subject to be mentioned in both the main clause and in the subordinate clause even though it is the same in both. Students who do not realize this attempt to use infinitives with these verbs, and produce sentences like:

#Anna told the priest to have six children

(that she had six children)

The verb tell requires the subject of the subordinate clause to be repeated, even if that subject is the same. English usually requires that these verbs have that-clauses as subordinate clauses, since that-clauses always require a subject to be present. For example:

He found out that he was healthy

Not: He found out to be healthy

But: He wants to be healthy

A small but well-used group of verbs in English behave in this way, and we list some of the more common ones below:

think	know	find out	report
tell	notice	say	assume
ignore	doubt	acknowledge	

Since misuse of complement types with these verbs causes the listener or reader to misinterpret the students' intended message, the errors are global. This group of exceptional verbs must receive early attention if the student is to be understood when attempting to use them.

Conclusions and Classroom Implications

After subjecting hundreds of sentences produced by EFL learners to comprehensibility judgments of native English speakers, we found that certain error types make a critical differ-

ence in whether or not the listener or reader comprehends the speaker's intended message. Global errors, or those that affect the overall organization of the sentence, hinder successful communication; while local errors, or those that affect a single element of the sentence, usually do not hinder communication.

EFL teachers are usually trained to correct any and all errors made by students of English. However, experienced teachers already know that despite their conscientious correction of student errors, many remain for a period of time, and others never seem to disappear. From the viewpoint of successful communication, the thankless task of correcting all errors is not necessary. As we have seen, the correction of one global error in a sentence does more to make clear the speaker's intended message than the correction of several local errors in the same sentence.

Besides the empirical fact that some errors are more important than others, we also know that adults do not like to be corrected. Correction of any kind in public, such as in a classroom, causes embarrassment to most adults; and when done repeatedly, correction often results in loss of confidence on the part of the learner. Limiting the number of corrections to those that affect communication allows the student to build up enough confidence to want to continue learning the language. And as global errors begin to disappear from student's speech,

their ability to communicate improves greatly.

Selective error correction, therefore, promises to be a more effective and enjoyable instructional technique than "all-out" correction. This paper has discussed some linguistic criteria teachers can use for their selection of errors. Briefly, the important errors are those that involve the global aspects of English--word order, sentence connectors and other areas of syntax that are crucial to the organization of ideas in an utterance.

The global-local distinction not only speaks to selective error correction, but also to curriculum sequencing. Rather than focussing on one type of simple sentence, such as This is a pencil, until it is learned perfectly, it seems more useful and realistic to expose EFL students to a larger range of structure types in the first few weeks of an EFL course. For example, use of coordinate clauses and some subordinate clauses is structurally very simple. They require the same structure as the simple sentence with the mere addition of the coordinate or subordinate conjunction (e.g., This is a pencil but that is a clock. That is a dress (that) she likes a lot). Causal conjunctions such as because, or conditionals like if are also excellent for beginners. (I enjoy him because he dances well. If you come I'll cook a turkey). It is true that students will make many local errors while learning these constructions, such as missing articles or missing tenses, but since these local errors do not hinder effective communi-

cation anyway, the student will have the pleasure of being able to communicate sequences of ideas that are similar in complexity to those he is used to expressing in his own language. For adults, the importance of this cannot be overstressed. Once the student knows he can actually communicate, it becomes much more meaningful for him to focus on local errors.

The classroom guidelines suggested here emerged from the analysis of errors EFL students actually make. Although the selection criteria suggested here for both error correction and curriculum sequencing are the most critical found in our reaearch, they are by no means exhaustive. EFL teachers can, however, perform this type of "communicative error analysis" in their own classrooms. By simply noting students' errors or recording their conversational speech, a teacher can use her own judgment to select those errors that make the most difference for sentence comprehensibility. Thus, a teacher can supplement the guidelines offered here to include selection criteria for errors not discussed in tiss paper. Such efforts would comprise an important step towards producing more relevant teaching, more confident learners, and more effective communication.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper draws on the research reported in M. Burt and C. Kiparsky The Gooficon: A Repair Manual for English (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House), 1972.

2. It is common practice for transformational grammarians to prefix any ungrammatical sequence of words with an asterisk (*). These include sentences that no one would say. Since we are only interested in sentences actually spoken or written we will draw the distinction by prefixing these ungrammatical sentences with the #.

3. We will not discuss subjunctives and conditionals here.

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