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ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a discussion of the meaning and importance of error analysis in language teaching and learning. The practical implications of what error analysis is for the classroom teacher are discussed, along with several possible systems for classifying learner errors. The need for the language teacher to establish certain priorities in error correction, since some errors are more detrimental to effective communication than others, is stressed. Brief guidelines are given on how a teacher might begin to collect data to study the kinds of errors made by his or her students. (PMP)

# ERROR ANALYSIS

# IN THE CLASSROOM

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Good teachers have always used their awareness of students' errors to judge student progress and to modify their own teaching strategies. It is rare, however, that the teacher has the time (or the expertise) to do more than make mental notes of errors as they occur, hoping to be able to act on the data at a later time. This approach, because of its randomness, is clearly likely to have few significant effects on teaching or on learning. Since the late 1960s, however, among teachers and others concerned with language learning, there has been considerable interest in detailed and extensive analyses of learners' errors, since there is evidence that such analyses may lead to a better understanding of the language learning process.

Before proceeding to a consideration of error analysis, it would be helpful to arrive at an acceptable definition of what constitutes an error. There has been much discussion about the distinction between performance and competence, e.g., whether an error is merely a slip of the tongue or truly represents what the student knows about the language. It has been suggested that errors in performance, i.e., those which the student is capable of correcting if given the opportunity, are less important than errors caused by a lack of knowledge. However, to the classroom teacher, the former type may be just as important as the latter.

If our goal is not a simple 90 percent accuracy on unit tests and an 80 percent accuracy in classroom drills, then it seems evident that we language teachers must be less concerned about drill behavior and more concerned about the language that is actually produced for communication. A useful definition of an error is that proposed by H. V. George: "An error is the production by the student of a form unwanted by the teacher."[1] (This definition also takes care of such problems as whether the student's production of a wrong form his teacher has taught him is to be considered an error.)

Perhaps we ought also to amplify here the idea of "production." It doesn't make much sense to spend a great deal of time analyzing forms produced in a drill activity for the same reason that analyzing multiple-choice responses can't give us much information about production. There is a difference between choosing among a limited number of alternatives (as in a multiple-

choice item or in a drill) and choosing from the hundreds of alternatives floating around in one's head. Therefore the language which most deserves our attention is that which is produced in a communication (or communication-like) situation. (I will not attempt to define that explicitly, but would like to point out that in "real" conversation the participants rarely can predict the questions or answers.)[2]

The current interest in errors has arisen primarily from the work of cognitive psychologists and transformational grammarians. The behaviorists saw language learning as the building, through practice and reinforcement, of a complex network of automatic responses to stimuli. However, these theories break down when confronted by the systematic errors that children make while learning their native languages. Behaviorist theory seems to have no way to account for the fact that English-speaking children learning the past tense begin by using irregular past forms correctly; but after learning the formation of regular past verbs, they generalize the regular endings and produce forms such as "goed," despite previous extensive successful practice with "went."[3] Since many errors, such as the one just cited, seem to follow rules or patterns, and are not always random, it can be assumed that something creative is within the child.

The cognitive theories of language acquisition hypothesize a psychological structure in the child which processes incoming linguistic data and from these creates grammatical rules. Since the linguistic data are at first limited, and the child's capacity for processing them is presumably even more limited, the first rules created by the child do not produce the same language as those of an adult speaker. But as he learns more about the language, his system of rules is modified, so that it increasingly approximates an adult's. (This is not to suggest that such rules are formulated in any conscious way.) It is not at all clear what happens during this processing, but the product--the language produced by the child--is our only key to finding out. Similarly, the only way we language teachers can really know what goes into our students' heads--what they've learned--is by carefully examining what comes out. It is possible that the errors they produce are primarily due to the particular set of grammatical rules which each has hypothesized.

S. P. Corder suggests that students of a second language employ an "idiosyncratic dialect," and that, given similar linguistic experience, they will share some rules which are not part of the target language.[4] For example, at very early levels, students of French and Spanish often delete the verb "to be," e.g., Paco y Luisa en casa or Pourquoi vous à la maison? Nemser talks about the same concept in terms of "approximative systems."[5] However, since these dialects or systems are constantly changing, it is probably impossible to describe them in any detail.

After their disillusionment with audio-lingual theory, it is hardly surprising that many language teachers became convinced that there is little similarity between first and second language acquisition. However, it is also possible that, as a result of recent cognitive theories of language acquisition, we now have a better understanding of what processes are involved in the learning of a first language, and an indication that these processes may also resemble those involved in the learning of a second language.

It is still too early to make any absolute statements about why errors occur or how they can be eliminated, but there are already some very suggestive results of analyses of errors, and the techniques which have been developed may eventually be more fruitful as they become more widely used. Therefore, before turning to error analysis in the individual classroom, it may be helpful to look at the work which has already been done in this field.

There has been considerable variation in method both in how a sample for study was gathered and in how it was subsequently treated by the researchers. The methods were, of course, influenced by the purposes for which the studies were conducted. Buteau, for example, used the results of a written multiple-choice examination to support the claim that contrastive analysis (comparing the grammar of the native language with that of the target language) did not provide enough information about the relative difficulty of structure to serve as the unique basis for determining FL curriculum.[6] Students often made errors in items where the two structures were parallel. However, the results of analyses of such tests may give us more information about the validity of the test items than about language learning.

Richards used citations from numerous published works for one study.[7] In another[8] he gave subjects a passage to read and then asked them to summarize it in their own words. He found evidence to support the contention that errors frequently arise from sources other than transfer from the native language, since his subjects, students of English from extremely varied linguistic backgrounds, made many of the same errors.

Valdman's subjects were instructed to formulate appropriate questions in French from instructions given in English, e.g., "Ask him how old he is."[9] His purpose was to collect extensive data concerning a single grammatical point (the interrogative in French) in order to pursue in depth possible causes of error and to suggest ways of improving instruction.

Similarly, Powell posed as a French speaker who understood no English, and students attempted to gain specific information, determined by a list in English, by interrogating her in French.[10] Her purpose was similar to Valdman's, but she was interested in gathering speech samples in a simulated conversational setting.

A practical approach for the teacher interested in error analysis in his own classroom might be to record a conversation or use written material in which the student was concentrating more on message than on form. This might be done in a small group conversation where the topic is very general. (One possibility is to start a gossip session about a well-known school figure with "do you know _____?" with directions to the participants to share all possible information about that person with each other.) Compositions written to supply information in a testing situation can provide a corpus for analysis of written forms.

A language sample should be large enough to permit the detection of mere slips of the tongue (or pencil). This means that the sample from each student must provide more than one instance of a particular error, or that enough students must be involved to produce more than one occurrence of an error.

Once data have been collected, either on tape (in which case they may have to be transcribed) or in writing, some way must be found to compile the information. Various procedures have been used.

Most analyses are based on frequency counts: Which structures produce the greatest number of errors? What specific errors seem to occur most frequently?

Rojas proposes the following categories for classifying errors in a written corpus:

(1) Lexical/grammatical

(2) Graphical/oral (spelling errors which would have oral consequences), e.g., nous parlon/ils parlont

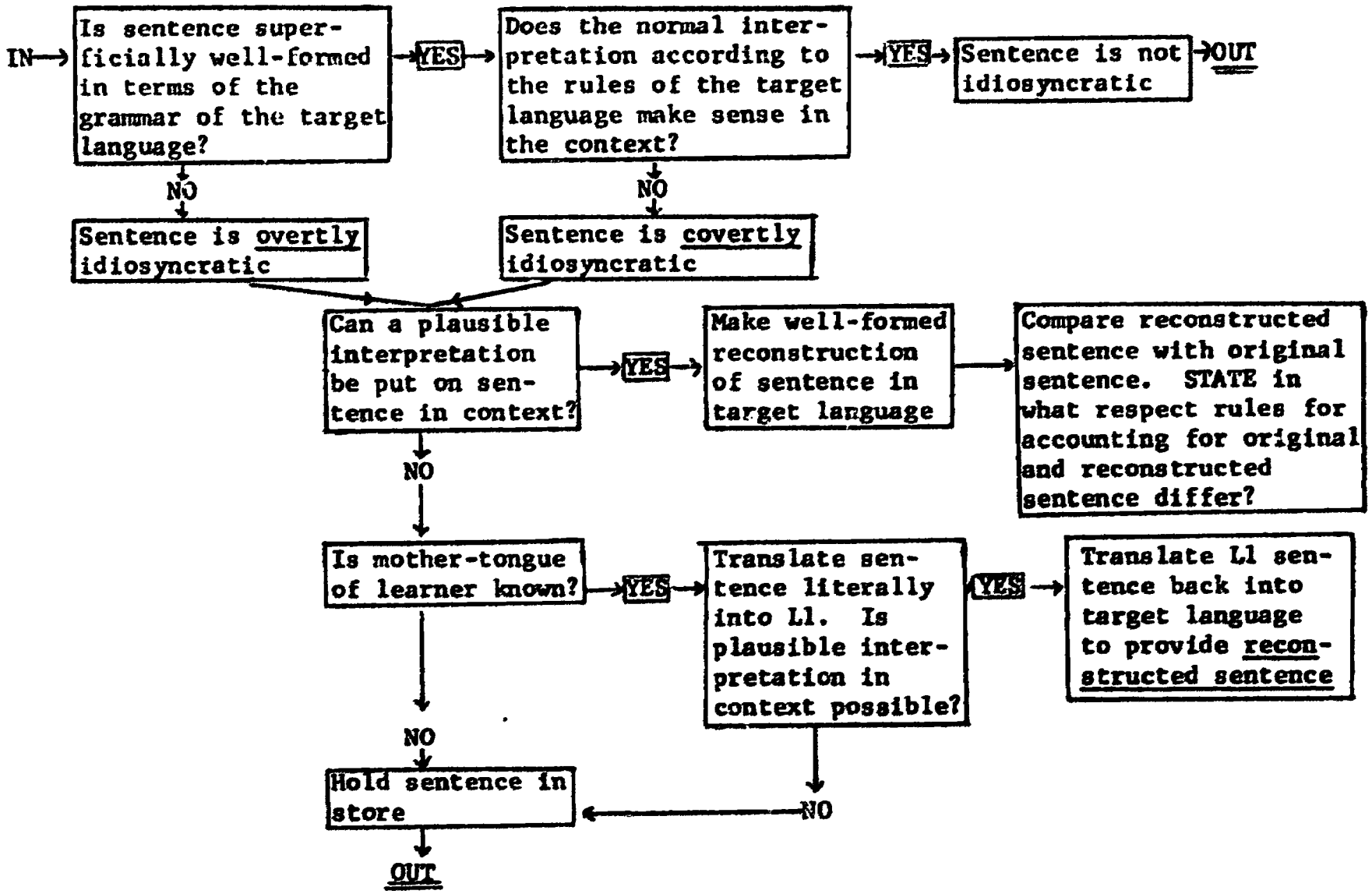
(3) Absolute (nonexistent forms)/relative (correct form in an inappropriate situation), e.g., ils parler/Je m'appelle Marie in response to Comment allez-vous?

(4) Morphological/structural, e.g., Elles sont grand/Il donne moi le livre

(5) Within a phrase/between phrases or linguistic segments[11]

For example, the errors in the sentence Quand êtes-vous partir would be classified as grammatical/oral/absolute/morphological/within a phrase. This approach, of which the end result is a frequency count of types of errors, would yield extremely general information, and it seems to me of little interest whether errors are morphological or structural. I prefer to know what specific errors occur, why they occur, and how to correct them.

Corder suggests what may be a more immediately useful procedure.[12] Following the steps in the flow-chart on the facing page will




Algorithm for Providing Data for Description of Idiosyncratic Dialects

result in a set of rules which describe what Corder calls the learner's "idiosyncratic dialect." Unfortunately, we are not at the point where we can deal with the complex rule systems of each of our students, though we can attempt to deal with those "wrong" rules which are shared by a relatively large number of students.

It is also probably true that without a great deal of expertise in linguistics, many of us will be hard put to it to formulate rules that reasonably account for many student errors. However, with a large enough sample, there is much we can do. A native speaker of Spanish who has spoken English here in the United States for 11 years regularly produces sentences such as "I didn't found it." Obviously, her rule says something about marking the past tense twice, both in the auxiliary and in the main verb. I first assumbed that she was confusing "I haven't found it" and "I didn't found it," since the structures are similar. However, more data, such as "I didn't saw him" and "I couldn't left," showed that the second marking involved the simple past, rather than the past participle. Therefore, her idiosyncratic rule might more reasonably be interpreted as a negative transformation applying to the sentence "I saw him," and requiring (as does standard English) the insertion of an auxiliary marked for tense. What she has to learn is an additional rule which drops the tense marker from "saw." Correction might best take place by contrasting "I saw him" with "I didn't see him."

The various procedures for gathering and analyzing errors are accompanied by various approaches to the interpretation of the results.

Burt and Kiparsky talk about "goofs," which they define as "productive error made during the language learning process."[13] They make a strong case for attributing all errors, at least on the part of language learners who have not yet reached puberty, to interference between structures within the target language. For example, they suggest that "Now she's putting hers clothes on," a goof produced by a native speaker of Spanish, may be better explained by analogy with other possessive forms in English, such as Paul's or the dog's rather than by interference from the Spanish sus libros.

Since most of us are concerned with students past the age of puberty, the hypothesis may be too restricted for our use. One of my students, who was doing an exercise requiring him to make constrasts, recently produced Pierre est blond, mais Marie est blonde. Since blond and blonde are merely variants of the same word, it seems unlikely that a native would produce precisely this sentence as an example of a contrast (unless of course he were a teacher). But Burt and Kiparsky's hypothesis does offer a very suggestive point of departure. Since the most obvious explanation is not necessarily the most accurate or the most fruitful, starting an analysis by considering every error as

being the possible result of interference between structures within the target language, rather than as transfer from the native language, may yield some new insights.

Richards concluded that there are five general factors which can account for errors made by students of English:

(1) Language transfer: structure, pronunication, or vocabulary from the native language is used in the target lanugage, e.g., Faites-vous parler anglais? (Do you speak English?)

(2) Reorganization of linguistic material: overgeneralization of target language rules, e.g., Je veux d'aller. These errors would not be made by a child learning his native language.

(3) Strategies of learning: "erroneous" rules that are common to both native and second language learners, e.g., "Where Bobby?"

(4) Strategies of communication: more or less conscious distortions for reasons of economy of effort, e.g., deletion of known tense markers.

(5) Transfer of training: interference within the target language caused by teaching methodology, e.g., "Ask him if he speaks English." "If he speaks English?"[14]

The distinction Richards makes between numbers (2) and (3) above (both of which involve transfer within the target language only) may not yet be very useful to us as teachers of a second language, since we are really not informed about developmental stages in the languages we teach. On the other hand, if the time comes when we have a more complete description of those errors which are common to first and second language learners, we will have a better idea of which errors most deserve our attention.

Let us examine Richards' categories one by one to see if there is any way we can minimize student error.

Language transfer

If we are realistic, we must try to be especially patient with errors caused by negative transfer from the native language, since we profit much (at least in Western European languages) from positive transfer. Consider what it would be like to have to teach word order from scratch, or all of the grammatical concepts such as verb inflection, modification, tense, etc. (Granted that our students rarely know the grammatical terminology, but they can apply the rules in at least one language, which is better than floundering around in total ignorance.)

Reorganization of linguistic material

The same may be said of transfer within the target language itself. It has more good effects than bad. The only thing we can do in both cases is to handle these errors as they arise and consider them inevitable--within limits. On the other hand, students must be made aware of the practical limits of transfer. They should be encouraged to risk attempts at transfer, but also to be prepared to be wrong.

Strategies of learning

Second language learners make so many of the same errors that are made by the child acquiring his native language that Corder talks about the student's "built-in syllabus," which may not resemble the syllabus the teacher proposes in very many ways at all.[15] Studies of child language point to considerable evidence that language learning is a developmental process--that there are stages through which everyone must pass and that the stages have some kind of fairly fixed order. Sometimes trying to correct an error by asking a student to repeat a sentence, especially if it is such a long one that he can't mimic it, results in a repetition of the same error. It may be that the student simply isn't ready yet to take that particular linguistic step. Valdman's work in teaching the French interrogatives led students through some of the same steps usually experienced by a French child, and produced positive results.[16]

The present problem is, however, to discover what developmental stages exist for the native learner and the language appropriate to each. At the moment we simply don't have enough information to be able to build a course of study on such considerations. However, we must be receptive to the possibility that the students' language acquisition would be more effective if we were able to base its ordering on the stages a first-language learner passes through.

Strategies of communication

Errors sometimes seem to be almost deliberate. Under the stress of communicating a message, recalling vocabulary and structure seems to be a selective process. For example, although a student is perfectly capable of distinguishing between masculine and feminine subject pronouns, he will not always do so. It is almost as though there were some kind of subconscious judgment that there are more important things to be concerned about. Powell found that when her subjects used a phrase which established the temporal setting (e.g., Quand vous êtes petit . . . to indicate the past, or en 1974 to indicate the future) they were less likely to try to mark the verb for past or future than when there was no such phrase.[17]

This is also evidence that the reductions which occur in extemporaneous speech (and sometimes turn it into "telegraphese") are influenced by what is necessary and sufficient to communicate the desired message. The two principal reasons for a student's striving for grammatical accuracy are the desire to communicate, and the desire to conform to the social dictates of the peer group. In the native language setting, one conforms to the linguistic norm for emotional, psychological reasons, and these reasons (avoiding ridicule, preserving an appropriate self-image, etc.) are probably the strongest motivation available. But in the foreign language classroom, this kind of motivation is not really available (except in classrooms where the peer group in ascendance is one which finds accuracy important). So generally we're left with the communicational drive.

The real problem for us arises from the fact that we have developed remarkable skill in comprehending the idiosyncratic dialects of our students. Even the native speakers among us can't consistently make corrections in terms of the comprehensibility of students' utterances to non-English-speaking natives. Obviously, there are some errors which would make transmission of a message difficult, if not impossible, and others which would have very little negative effect. At any rate, if students are going to choose to use structures in terms of communicational requirements, it is imperative that they have realistic notions of what these are. Since usually the only way they can acquire these notions is through their success in communicating with one another and with us, we must try to put ourselves in the place of the non-English-speaking native and react accordingly.

Transfer of training

It may well be that we should first concentrate our efforts on the errors that seem to be the result of instructional strategies, if only because these seem to be the ones over which we have the most control.

In the beginning French classes, the question Comment vous appelez-vous? is often taught by the direct method. The teacher asks the question, answers several times with respect to herself, and then asks a student to respond. There is absolutely no way for the student to be aware of the reflexive nature of this verb, and what we do amounts to covertly encouraging him to make a wrong translation to "What is your name?" The same is true of direct approaches to other structures which are not parallel in both languages, e.g., Tengo hambre or Wie geht es Ihnen? It is not fair, nor does it seem pedagogically sound, to mislead students in this way.

Perhaps we might consider this problem as a part of a larger one. Errors which arise from faulty generalizations, either within the target language or between the native language and the target

language, may often occur because the student doesn't have enough linguistic information to be able to form a correct hypothesis. Because we are often pressed for time, we can't always present what might be an adequate exposure. For example, in the first instance above, we do not also teach other reflexive verbs simultaneously. We are teaching a single, isolated usage of one verb, and that simply does not constitute enough data to make the grammatical situation clear.

Similarly, especially in a dialog approach, telling the student to try to grasp the general idea and not to worry about the meanings of specific words can produce very wrong generalizations, since the student is not exposed to several instances of this material in use. I have heard, for example, a student use an inflected form of the verb "to have" as a modal in French: (Où j'aurais-vous aimer habiter for "Where would you like to live?"

Once we find examples of errors such as these we can easily reorganize our presentations to include a large enough number of examples of the item in use to permit an accurate generalization, or we can decide to postpone its introduction.

What is even more appalling is that in the interest of teaching grammar we sometimes run the risk of providing inaccurate linguistic data. For example, it makes no sense at all for a teacher to hold up a pencil, ask "What is this?" and model the response "It's the pencil," when it is obviously a pencil. Similarly, even in most drill situations, it seems foolish to teach grammar as if it were removed from reality. A student teacher recently wanted to elicit some conversation in which students would use the imperfect tense. The visuals she chose (magazine cutouts) were pictures in which various actions were manifestly in progress, but her planned cue was "What were they doing?" We all have so much past to discuss, why not talk about reality? Students could be asked to bring in one of their grade school photos and be prepared to tell what was happening then, where they lived, who their friends were, what they were like, where they went to school, etc.

If students are constantly processing linguistic data, whether or not we bring them to their attention, it is extremely important that we give them the most realistic samples of language we can. We cannot afford to waste time correcting unnecessary misunderstandings.

One of the traditional techniques of instruction has been to provide contrastive drill of the structures and vocabulary which are subject to confusion by students. However, Richards points out that "classroom experience and common sense often suggest that a safer strategy for instruction is to minimize opportunities for confusion by selecting non-synonymous contexts for related words, by treating them at different times, and by avoiding exercises based on contrast and transformation."[18] I am not willing to

concede that drawing attention to problem areas by contrasting them is never productive, but how many instances can you think of where you know that two similar expressions distingush two facts, but can't remember which is which, e.g., "principle" vs. "principal?"

Lenard in her high school French series presents the verbs "to be" and "to have" in the imperfect before presenting verbs in the compound past.[19] She maintains through several lessons the separation of verbs which most often occur in the imperfect ("to be," "to have," "to want," "to know," etc.) and those which most often occur in the compound past. Students don't discover until much later that all verbs occur in both tenses, and this seems to establish a basis for realistic distinction on which later exposure to both tenses for all verbs can be built.

Valdman produced more correct interrogative forms by using the following order in teaching French interrogatives:

(1) Intonation (yes/no questions)

(2) Qu -fronting, i.e., adding the question word at the beginning of the sentence without other alterations

(3) Repetition of the subject with Qu -fronting, e.g., Ton frère comment il s'appelle?

(4) Insertion of est-ce que.[20]

(Another remarkable thing about this study is that students in the experimental group also made four times fewer errors in selecting the appropriate question word.)

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to modify the order of presentation of structure and vocabulary within a given textbook. After the introduction of a given point, it is assumed that students comprehend it. and the better the text, the more frequently the point will be repeated. However, one can modify the ordering by treating lightly those items which seem to produce errors and stressing those which seem to conform better to what might be called a "built-in syllabus."

There are seemingly incredible numbers and varieties of errors that may occur, since the possible combinations of sources of errors are nearly infinite. As Burt and Kiparsky have pointed out, it is essential to establish some kind of priorities for correcting errors.[21] Trying to correct all of them at once will not only probably result in failure, but will drive both you and your students completely mad. The policy must be based on some kind of value system: What is most important: increasing MLA Coop Test scores? impressing the principal? (pronunciation might come first here) or improving the students' chances of successfully communicating with a native speaker? Let us assume

that the last of these is our goal (though many others are legitimate). Which of the errors in the following sentence is most likely to make the student's language incomprehensible?[22]

Je donné vous mon copie.

If we correct only the possessive adjective for gender, the sentence is:

Je donné vous ma copie.

If we correct only the past tense verb, the sentence is:

J'ai donné vous mon copie.

This would probably still be confusing to a native speaker of French, because donné vous (gave you) and donnez-vous (are you giving?) are aurally identical. If we merely put the indirect object pronoun in its proper place, the sentence is:

Je vous donné mon copie.

The form donné would possibly be interpreted as donnais, which, though incorrect, still signals the past tense.

If we were to choose to correct the error which would cause the most confusion for the native listener, it would probably be the error in word order, and error in word order is perhaps the most serious threat to communication. But compare for a moment the amount of time we spend on number and gender concord with the amount of time that we spend on word order.

Another point we must consider when deciding what is worth correcting is the frequency with which the structure occurs. The error may be one which totally destroys meaning, but would appear only once in perhaps 100 hours of conversation, e.g., J'avais Georges venir instead of J'ai fait venir Georges. There are errors in structure which occur much more frequently and probably are more deserving of our initial efforts.

In addition, we might want to consider the emotional effects of errors. Richards observes that for social reasons, some errors may have more negative impact on the native listener than others.[23] He hypothesizes that speakers of English are irritated by the ommission of articles, perhaps because it sounds like baby talk, whereas a wrong preposition is not upsetting. Similarly, many speakers of English make negative judgments about people who say "dat" instead of "that," but are somewhat intrigued by "zat." We can hope for the researchers to give us more information, but for now we can only fight our own bêtes noires and try to guess at the effects of particular errors on native speakers.

Once a number of errors have been isolated in the teacher's mind and a decision has been made about which are worth concentrating on, there are several procedural options.

(1) Nag, i.e., correct the error every time it appears.

(2) Drill the item intensively at repeated intervals. (Pimsleur suggests that optimal learning occurs when the time lapse between exposures increases geometrically.)[24]

(3) Give a word-for-word translation, or equivalent error in English. The combination una azul falda sounds as strange to a Spaniard's ear as a skirt blue sounds to ours. The more absurd the error sounds, the more effective this approach is likely to be.

(4) Give a grammatical explanation. Some of the errors which seem to result from faulty generalizations can be eliminated simply by pointing out where the generalization has broken down. For example, Faites-vous parlez français? seems fairly clearly to be a result of analogy with the English interrogative construction "Do you speak English?" Pointing out that "do" or "did" has no meaning except to signal that a question will follow, and that the French equivalent of this is est-ce que, usually stops the error. However, no matter how many times I point out that English has two present forms ("I speak, I am speaking"), but French has only one (je parle), I still hear je suis vais with awful regularity.

George has an interesting suggestion for written work.[25] After a particular error has been isolated for a student and he can correct it, that error becomes verboten, and the teacher refuses to accept any work containing that particular error. Similarly there is a notorious typing teacher for whom the acceptability criterion is five errors per page. When correcting papers, he stops at the point where six errors have been counted. The student who makes more than five errors per page is required to re-do and re-submit the work. Not knowing whether or not there are additional errors in the assignment, and not wanting to re-do it ad nauseam, his students soon become careful proofreaders.

What does all this mean to us in the classroom? Aside from the specific comments above about methodology, what are the implications which the work in error analysis holds for us? What percentage of our students, most of whom we have for only two years, are capable of using the foreign language in any functional way? Most of them seem to know a very little bit about an awful lot of things. Verb endings, vocabulary, pronouns, etc., which we have worked so hard to fill their minds with, have become so

scrambled that the end linguistic product is often barely comprehensible. But what solution is there? Obviously, we need to seriously reconsider our objectives. Personally, I am not willing to eliminate any of the four skills, or culture, or even fun and games, since I can't know which aspects of the foreign language will eventually become useful to any one student. Where can I change my program to permit the development of better control of language skills?

I think the clue lies in the distinction which Valdman makes between the acquisition of active skills (speaking and reading) and passive skills (comprehension in both listening and reading).[26] It is probably at least slightly masochistic on our part to try to teach all the elements of the traditional syllabus (the "main grammar points" included in beginning texts) for both active and passive use. If our goal is really, as many of us say it is, guiding students to communicative competence, we can greatly limit the number of structures and vocabulary that we teach for active use and concentrate on passive acquisition of the rest. For example, it is probably important that our students comprehend the intimate form of address when they hear or read it, but they can communicate very well with only the formal mode. They might want to understand the differences between "run," "stroll," "walk," "drive," and "fly," or even between "saunter," "stroll," "loiter," "amble," "meander," and "ramble," but "go" would probably suffice, at least at the early stages, for active use. The past conditional is not difficult to comprehend, but I would not expect a second-year student to use it.

So why do we spend so much time on oral drills and written exercises on the past conditional--time that might be better spent in practice on word order? Because that's the way we've always done it, and that's the way our textbooks do it! But consider the differences that would occur if, as we went through our textbook, we stressed only what we thought was absolutely essential for active use, that would allow our students to meet their basic physical and emotional needs. I'm not suggesting that the rest be ignored--far from it. Number and gender concord can be powerful tools in comprehension, and students ought to have extensive practice in listening to and reading these signals. But instead of expending considerable time and emotional energy correcting all these errors, we can provide our students with realistic practice on those points we believe they should control for active use.

One indication of the rich possibilities that error analysis has to offer is that to date, the results of analyses have probably raised more questions than they have answered. Which errors most interfere with communicating a message to non-English speaking natives? What are the effects of various sequencings of exposure to linguistic material? What are the effects of practice schedules on errors? What errors do first-language learners make? What are

the differences in errors made by first- and second-language learners? To what extent is it possible to eliminate errors? Most of these questions are the same old ones with a different twist, but error analysis at least gives us another way to grapple with them.

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