

# Error Analysis in China English Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** Error analysis developed as a branch of applied linguistics in the 1960s. It is of great importance in second language teaching. This article tries to deal with the nature and treatment of learners' errors. It mainly talks about classification of errors, sources of errors and significance of errors.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis; English Teaching

## 1. Introduction

Error analysis developed as a branch of applied linguistics in the 1960s. It set out to demonstrate that learners' errors were not due to the learners' mother tongue but reflected universal learning strategies. Error analysis was therefore offered as an alternative to "contrastive analysis". Error analysis may be carried out in order to 1) identify strategies which learners use in language learning; 2) try to identify the causes of learners' errors and 3) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials. (Richards, 2002)

To consider how things might be improved, we might begin by asking why it is that students get things wrong. There are at least two reasons. One reason is that the students either don't have the appropriate knowledge, or have some false knowledge. They may either not know how a tense in English works, or form a wrong idea. In this case, the result is what Corder (1981) called an error. The other reason for students getting things wrong is a lack of processing ability. For example, I know I should not lean forward on the horse, and when simply trotting around the paddock I don't do so. The problem ap-

pears when approaching a small jump. My feet may fall out of the stirrups, the horse may begin to get difficult, and I lean forward. It is not my knowledge that is at fault here, but my ability to perform my competence in difficult operating conditions. The result is what Corder called a mistake.

Native speakers may make many mistakes but few errors; students learning English as a foreign language make both errors and mistakes. When a student says "he" instead of "she", it is probably an error, showing that the student has not mastered this distinction in English. Sometimes it is not easy for us to tell the differences between errors and mistakes. For example, when a student gets a poor score in a test, was he merely careless (making mistakes), or does he perhaps not know the language (making errors)? As a good test, one of its characteristics is that most of the wrong answers from the students are really errors, showing us what the students have not yet mastered, rather than mistakes caused by poor directions, confusing questions, etc.

## 2. Classification of Errors

For pedagogical purposes, it is important to know what are the main learning difficulties of the learners. To achieve this, we need a qualitative clas-

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sification of errors, and a quantitative statement of the relative frequency of each type of errors. The traditional classification into errors of omission, addition, substitution and word order is too superficial to be of benefit. From the levels of language description, errors can be classified into errors of orthography or phonology, of morphology or syntax, of vocabulary. Here we deal with Corder's three types of classification.

### 2.1 Pre-systematic errors

During this period, the students don't realize the existence of some rules. They have not mastered them. The students themselves can't explain how the errors take place. They can't correct them even if the teachers point them out. So teachers don't need to correct every error. Even if they do, the students don't understand the reasons.

### 2.2 Systematic errors

The learners have formed some rules, but not complete. For example, when a student has learned the past tense and its form which is a verb plus -ed, he doesn't know there are some irregular verbs. So come such errors as "comed", "goed", etc. If you ask him why, he can explain. But he can't correct them, for he lacks the knowledge. To these questions, teachers need to make some explanations, and give the correct forms, which will help him to build up the complete knowledge.

### 2.3 Post-systematic errors

The learners have learned comparatively complete knowledge. For example, they know the past form of the verb "go" is "went". At this stage they don't often make errors. They can correct them themselves even if the errors appear. Teachers don't need to point out the errors and their task is to provide the students with more opportunities to practice.

## 3. Sources of Errors

It's very important for English teachers to know the various sources of errors. The traditional idea about the sources of errors is that a great number of errors are caused by mother tongue interference, which is certainly where most teachers would look first for an explanation. That's what Selinker (1969) called "language transfer", which gives rise to in-

ter-lingual errors. E.g.

\*---- Is your room not large, is it?

\*---- Yes, it is not large.

The above error is caused by the interference of the learner's native language, for we can find the same expressions in Chinese. But there are many more errors which cannot be satisfactorily explained in this way. We would like to consider the following.

### 3.1 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of the other structures in the foreign language. For example, from: A) Jane advised me to give up drinking. The students may infer: B) Jane asked me to give up drinking. But due to overgeneralization of language rules, it will be misleading, as in:

C) \* Jane suggested me to give up drinking.

Clearly the learners are guided here not by the grammar of their native language, but by what they already know of English, and by their intuitions.

### 3.2 Ignorance of rule restrictions

We can say this is another kind of overgeneralization. Learners often learn the rules by heart, but ignore the rule restrictions of existing structures, e.g. the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. For example:

A) He said to me.

B) \* He asked to me.

A) We talked about it.

B) \* We discussed about it.

We think that the pattern drills and transform exercises are probably the indirect cause of these errors.

### 3.3 Induced errors

Very often we find that some errors come from the state of learning itself, that is, from the way in which an item is explained, the order of presentation, the lack of context or the failure of distinguishing different varieties. For example:

A) \* I want to do some recordings.

might come from teaching "do" without clear distinguishing with the use of "make".

B) \* The man left soon because his eating so quickly.

might come from the lack of contrasting "be-

cause", which should be followed by a clause, with "because of", which should be followed by a noun phrase.

### 3.4 Performance errors

So far we have covered overgeneralization, ignorance of restrictions and induced errors. These are in themselves insufficient to account for the complexity of language learning, for they don't enable us to say whether errors are occasional, or represent permanent state in the speaker's competence. Take the indefinite article deletion for example. When a learner says, "\*Behind the lens is little screen." He omits the indefinite article. What does this error really represent? One possibility is that he doesn't know when to use the indefinite article. The other is that the speaker realized the error as he said it but forgot to correct it----- that he would have corrected it if he had had more time to think about it.

So the error is related not only to competence, but to performance. Performance errors are quite normal aspects of language use. Teachers should not correct every performance error, or it will interrupt the students' language performance and dispel the students' interest of learning English.

### 3.5 Lack of the knowledge related

Language is closely connected with culture. When learners learn a language without its culture, history and customs, it will lead to a lot of errors. The Chinese students don't know how to begin or end a talk with a foreigner, although their sentences are all right in grammar and pronunciation. For example, the Chinese students often ask foreigners:

- A) Where are you going?
- B) Where have you been?
- C) What are you doing?

These questions, as Chinese greetings, are exactly what foreigners do not like to answer.

They may think you are invading their privacy. The natural reaction of most English-speaking people to these greetings would most likely be "It's none of your business!" So culture teaching must be strengthened in foreign language teaching. The teacher should provide as much background knowledge as possible. Only in this way can the students use the

correct English in the right place.

## 4. Significance of errors

The pedagogical significance of error analysis is related to the four categories: the problem of correction; the design of syllabuses; the remedial work; and the writing of pedagogical grammars. The problem of correction is two-fold: what to correct (not all errors) and how to correct (so as to let the class activity or communication continue). The design of syllabuses should be based on some "natural" sequence of elaboration of the approximate system of the language learners. An ideal syllabus should contain the psychological logic to the ordering of materials. We shouldn't think errors are bad. On the contrary, errors are a necessary part of learning and therefore they are good. A lot of remedial work should be done according to the errors. The effectiveness of the presentation and practice of materials (the pedagogical grammars) should depend on what is discovered about the actual processes and strategies of language learning.

## 5. Conclusion

We have been considering the nature and treatment of learners' errors. We can see that the mother tongue has an influence on the way the learners learn the foreign language, but it is not the only or even the chief influence. Many errors derive from the strategies employed by the learners in language acquisition, and from the mutual interference of items within the foreign language. We language teachers should place contrastive analysis and error analysis together as techniques, which can provide us with insights into the language learning process.

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