WHY AND WHEN DO WE CORRECT LEARNER ERRORS?
-- AN ERROR CORRECTION PROJECT FOR AN ENGLISH COMPOSITION CLASS

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Introduction

This article sums up an error correction project which ran from December 1986 to May 1987. It begins with a brief outline of theories related to Error Analysis and Error Correction and goes on to give a detailed discussion of the project. The aim of the project is to show how an error correction method can be developed and how it can be used for learners who have a reasonable level of competence. It also argues that, for these learners, most errors are performance errors which can be corrected by the learners themselves.

As some figures and details of the project have been left out, readers interested in the original work may consult the dissertation 'Developing an Error Analysis and Error Correction Strategy for Form 6 English Composition Classes in Hong Kong', M.A. Dissertation, Hong Kong University, (1987) on which this article is based. Except for the added section entitled 'Extension of the experiment', this article follows the sequence of the sections of the original, but concentrates on the error correction project.

Contrastive Analysis

As an integral part of language teaching, the treatment of language errors has probably been in existence ever since language teaching began. The systematic analysis of second language errors, however, was developed fairly recently and attracted scholarly attention only as late as the 1940's, with the Audiolingual School of linguistics. Fries and Lado proposed a scientific description of both the first and second languages of the learner for the teaching of English to non-native speakers in the U.S. Language patterns from the learner's first language were taken to be a major cause of errors in his target language.

Error Analysis

The main tenet of Contrastive Analysis was much used by linguists and language teachers until the 60's, when mother-tongue interference errors in the target language of the learner were re-examined and became a subject of controversy. By the late 60's, the Chomskyan view that the infant was born with a language acquisition device inspired and extended second language learning theory to emphasize the provision of the right environment for learning.
Errors were no longer seen as deviations to be eliminated, but were used as data for analysis. They were seen to provide important information about the progress, or language system, of the learner. The goal of language teaching shifted, at the same time, from linguistic competence to communicative competence.

**Error Correction**

The pedagogical treatment of second language learner errors follows the changes in language theories. In the structural-audiolingual era, the prevailing classroom procedure was intensive grammar practice aimed at providing the learner with the ability to communicate with native speakers.

Since the advent of transformational-generative grammar in the 60's, however, the emphasis in error correction has changed from teaching students to make error-free sentences to encouraging them to learn the target language by communicating in it about things related to them. Moreover, learner errors are used as data which indicate the learner's unique ways of learning (Corder, 1967).

Constraints of classroom teaching nevertheless predetermine the scope of second language learning: the teaching of grammar cannot be forsaken entirely. In this development, Hendrickson (1978) made a systematic attempt at listing the most important areas for error correction, emphasizing communicativeness to be the principle for error correction. He is in favour of providing the learner with teacher correction which concentrates on correcting communicative (global) errors, rather than minor linguistic (local) errors.

**Performance and Competence Errors**

When a second language learner develops his language system, he makes errors. As in first language learning, some of these errors are 'lapses' or 'slips of the tongue' due to physical or psychological reasons - they are non-systematic (Corder, 1981). Some, on the other hand, occur regularly and show the misunderstandings of the second language system. The first kind of error is what Chomsky calls 'performance error' and the second kind 'competence error'.

Competence is "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language", while performance is "the actual use of language in concrete situations" (Chomsky, 1965: 4). The artificial classroom setting is then a restricted environment where practice often means one-way production exercises with few opportunities for employing interational strategies for authentic communicative purposes (Hymes, 1971; Tarone, 1981).
Background of Project

Against this theoretical background, a project was carried out to demonstrate and argue for a process of correcting composition errors which would be applicable for other kinds and levels of composition errors by second language learners. The compositions elicited for this study were written by Hong Kong 6th formers, native Cantonese speakers who had learned English for over 10 years and had successfully passed the 5th form English examinations.

A basic task of this study was to clarify an error area that has been treated in a confused manner. The term 'error' has been used to mean both performance mistakes and competence errors made by the learner, with no explicit division as to whether they are a reflection of the learner's lapses of the moment or whether they are due to linguistic misunderstanding. Consequently, the teacher, following the suggestions of teaching texts (e.g. Geoffrey Broughton et al., 1978: 133-144), misses the distinction between performance and competence errors and loses a chance of dealing effectively with the two kinds by not considering them separately.

The assumption in this study was that these two kinds of errors should be clearly distinguished, and the teacher should have a clear knowledge of the learner's competence errors for the design and development of his teaching.

This project asked the subjects to go through several stages of writing and correction. The subjects, 21 of them in total, were asked to write an essay in class of between 150-200 words to describe a picture story. It was then marked by the teacher twice: the first time using underlining as the main indicator and the second time using more explicit symbols. Each time the student had one chance of self-correction.

The corrected errors were then divided into performance errors - those that the subjects themselves corrected rightly, and competence errors - errors that the subjects could not correct or corrected wrongly. The teacher also asked a group of 6 native-speakers of English to write a story on the same pictures. The ideas shared by this group were termed 'kernel ideas' and were used for a comparison with the ideas expressed by the students. The teacher then taught the picture description before letting the students rewrite the story. This second attempt (not included in this summary) at describing the same picture was used for an analysis of error and error shift.

The Subjects

The 21 subjects of this project were students in a lower-six standard Use of English class at the Hong Kong Baptist College. They were all Pre-music I students of the Music Department (i.e. lower-six equivalents of secondary school students) preparing for the Hong Kong University A-level entrance examination so as to move up to the Senior studies music programme. The Use of English course they took followed the standard Use of English format and the students were taught the skills involved in the examination for four one-hour periods each week.
The Project

The very first part of this project, the design stage, began around December, 1986 with the choice of a topic for written essay. As the aim was to have a controlled essay from the students, it was decided to make use of a comic strip from an Old Master 'Q' (Lo Fu Chi 老夫子) collection by making changes in the drawing to change the appearance of the characters. The outcome was a six-picture sequence of a fishing adventure involving an unexpected twist of events mid-way in the story-line.

The second part of this project was the writing task for the students. In January, 1987, 21 of the 33 students in the class were chosen as subjects. This number represented 31.4% of the entire Pre-music population and made it possible to break up the group into 3 ability ranges of 7 each. The subjects, however, were not told that their work would be analyzed. Instead the whole class was told to write a story based on the picture, as a writing exercise like other written composition exercises in class. The intention was to make everything look normal so that the writing job would not appear any different from other in-class exercises.

For ease of control, the length of the story was fixed at 150-200 words and the duration of the exercise was one class period of 50 minutes. The first writing task took place on January 9, 1987. Before being given a copy of the comic strip, the students were told not to use reference materials such as dictionaries when writing, and not to consult each other or the teacher for assistance. Ten minutes before time, the class was told to proofread what they had written before handing it in. From the set of descriptions produced, 21 were chosen for analysis.

Marking the essay for the first time

The objective of the first marking was to pick out grammatical errors and to see whether the subjects could correct them. Underlining was thus used as the major indicator for errors. With cases involving a large unclear area, square brackets were used and the word 'Rewrite' was put on top. When a word was omitted, the symbol 'A' was used, and for an omitted punctuation mark, the symbol 'A punc', with the abbreviation 'punc' on top.

The following is the first paragraph produced by one subject after the first marking:

Mary is a very beautiful girl so she has many many boyfriends. Among these boys, she wants to choose a brightest boy to be her husband, so she decides to test them [by solving a very difficult problem]. She tolds her boyfriends that if anyone can catch a fish from a reservoir, he will have the chance to marry her.

The aim of the underlining was solely to designate grammatical errors; areas that would be regarded as 'clumsy' were not marked. As some errors were made up of more than one word, in order to quantify the errors, it
was decided to call each underlined area an 'error area' rather than just an error. Repeated errors, on the other hand, were counted as new errors, as were punctuation marks that were wrongly used.

After marking the essays, an error count was made with observations as follows. The students who wrote the longer essays made more errors. The longest essay of 267 words, which exceeded the word limit, yielded 35 errors, the second largest number of errors of the group. On the other hand, the shortest essay of 151 words brought a fairly sizable number of 16 errors. Otherwise, the number of errors ranged from 4 to 39. One very expressive student made as many as 30 errors in 236 words while one average student made only 4 errors in 180 words, the lowest error number in the group. The student considered the best in English in general made 8 errors in 153 words whereas one weak student made 14 errors in 198 words. ('Words' here refers to the actual number of words, not counting punctuation marks.) Thus, when the quality and complexity of the writing attempt were taken into consideration, the marking became less straightforward.

After examining the errors of the 21 students, it seemed that the performance of the students in this attempt did not match fully their performance pattern in general, i.e. some good students made a relatively large number of errors and some weak students made a relatively small number of errors and, judging from sentence complexity and vocabulary, some students had tried to play it safe by using short sentences and simple words, producing few mistakes.

Having considered the difficulty involved in quantifying grammaticality, linguistic complexity, sophistication in content and style, and criteria of fluency and accuracy as used by Brumfit (1984), it was decided to simplify the error count and take every essay as one unit, regardless of the number of words used. The number of error areas would then be counted and ranked for a comparison. Then, the three ability ranges, to be called the High, Mid, and Low groups, would be established according to the number of error areas made.

The strongest group, the High group with 7 students, ranged between 4 and 11 error areas. The intermediate group, the Mid group, ranged between 12 and 18 error areas. The weak group, the Low group, ranged between 24 and 39 errors. It was the objective of the next stage, the self-correction exercise, to see how the number of errors changed as a result of the underlining.

The first self-correction exercise

The first self-correction took place on February 27, 1987. The main reason for this long break was that it was considered necessary to let a period of time elapse so that the process of writing the essay and also the content of the essay would not be fresh in the memory of the student-subjects. As mentioned before, the aim of the self-correction exercise was to find out whether the errors made by the students were performance errors or competence errors.
The method employed in this project was to let the students read the essay which had already been marked by the teacher, and self-correct by using a blue pen (to make the colour of the corrections different from the black colour of the photocopied essay) to write in the space on top of the marked areas the word or words that they considered to be correct. In asking the students to do this self-correction exercise, it was assumed that the students would agree or be able to see that an error had been made and detected by the teacher. But there were always instances when the students did not agree or did not know what had gone wrong. For this particular project, the students were told not to correct errors marked that they regarded as correct already. There were consequently a small number of uncorrected areas. A reminder to the students was that some underlined areas could be unnecessary words that the students could delete by crossing them out. The self-correction exercise, with no help from either the teacher, fellow classmates or reference materials, took 20 minutes.

Marking the essay for the second time

The objective of this second marking was to separate the correct corrections from the incorrect 'corrections' made by the students. The right corrections would be taken to be performance errors, whereas the wrong corrections would potentially belong to the category of competence errors. For the marking, rightly corrected areas were left untouched but wrongly corrected areas were surrounded by a rectangle in red and, on top of the rectangle, a correction symbol was given to serve as an aid to the student. The correction symbols used were the same as those used for other writing exercises and so were easily understandable to the students. They included the following:

- **Sp.** = spelling error
- **Pr.T.** = use present tense
- **P.T.** = use past tense
- **Sing.** = use singular form
- **Pl.** = use plural form
- **Sml.** = use small letter
- **Capl.** = use capital letter
- **W.W.** = wrong word
- **?** = meaning unclear

The following is the beginning paragraph of an essay by a subject after the second marking:

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W.W.
[In]
I am mad of fishing. Oh! wait a minute.
W.W.
[would]
I, better say fish-catching. Do you like fishing? Don't tell me you don't! Anyway, let me tell you a story.
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As errors from the first marking were underlined and those from the second marking were surrounded by a rectangle, the two groups of errors were quite easily identifiable, and an error count showed that the first marking had had a strong effect in reducing the number of error areas. The total number of error areas for all the subjects was reduced from 371 to 78 (a reduction of 78% of the errors). Moreover, of the 21 students, 4 eliminated all of their errors through self-correction; 3 corrected (rightly) 90% or more of their errors; 4 corrected 80% or more; 6 corrected 70% or more; 3 corrected 60% or more; and only one corrected 41% of the errors.

From these figures, it appears that most errors (in this case 78% of them) can be corrected by the students themselves and are therefore performance errors. Thus, correction work can be reduced and teaching made more effective if students have this kind of self-correction opportunity. It was tentatively assumed that the remaining 22% of errors were competence errors. But, as planned, the students were given the possibility of further correcting their work for performance errors.

The second self-correction exercises

The description, with the remaining errors in rectangles, was given back to the students on March 13, 1987 for the second self-correction exercise. The rationale behind this exercise was to give the subjects one more chance of reflection - to see if they could detect and correct their own mistakes before the teacher stepped in and re-taught the incorrect items. Students who had self-corrected (rightly) all errors were told to reread their essay before the teacher collected it again, and those who had errors left were to finish the job in 20 minutes. No questions or discussion were allowed.

After reading and marking the essays again, the total number of errors for the whole group fell to 43, a reduction of another 35 errors, representing a further 10% for the total reduction. Added to the previous percentage of 78, the number of self-corrected error areas was now 88% of the initial number.

In terms of the three ability ranges (i.e. the High, Mid, and Low groups), something similar seemed to have happened. The number of errors and the ability to self-correct were inversely related - subjects in the High group self-corrected better than those of the other two groups. The total number of errors for the High group was reduced to 2, comparing favourably with the reduced number of 15 for the Mid group and 26 for the Low group. In other words, the decisive element seems to be linguistic competence - the better the subject's competence, the better the self-correction.

In terms of total error elimination however, individual subjects from the Mid and Low groups managed to do very well: after the second self-correction, the number of error-free subjects increased to 3 for the Mid group and 1 for the Low group. There was therefore a possibility of catching up by correcting more errors correctly. The next stage of the project was to interview the students to give them another chance for reflection by allowing them to reread their twice-corrected text.
Interviewing the subjects

The interviews began on April 2, 1987. The total number of subjects for the interviews was 12 as only these, out of the 21 students, still had errors uncorrected from the second correction exercise, i.e. errors that the subjects had failed to correct after two exposures to their own text. This suggested that competence rather than performance errors were involved. The aim of the interviews was to discuss with the subjects the error areas and to provide them with explanations for the error areas. To make the interviews more effective by avoiding possible communication obstacles, the interviews were carried out in Cantonese, the native language of both the teacher and the subjects. The subjects were asked to choose a date to see the teacher for about 20 minutes to discuss the problem areas.

When the meetings began, as soon as an error area was pointed out, a few subjects said that they could remember the correct form. In some cases, the 'correct' forms were not correct but in 2 cases involving 2 words (one spelling error and one vocabulary item) the subjects were right. The interviews then served as a last chance of self-correction for some students.

The teacher went over the sentence and sometimes the paragraph with the subjects, to talk about the reasons why the areas were regarded as wrong (e.g. tense-verb agreement). In most cases the subjects said they had learned the grammar points some time back, but had forgotten them. With lower-level errors (local errors), as in spelling and pluralization, they almost all agreed they would have been correct if they had been more careful. With higher-level errors (global errors) such as prepositions and choice of vocabulary items, they showed a lack of knowledge and readily accepted suggested solutions. Otherwise, the meetings, brief as they were, provided a chance for the subjects to ask the teacher questions in their local dialect and thus seemed to have encouraged more questions and more self-correction.

Preparing and teaching the kernel ideas

For the next stage of the project, the writer wanted to follow Hendrickson’s example for measuring the quantity and quality of information (Hendrickson, 1981: 47-53) by, first, collecting kernel ideas about the picture from a group of six native-speakers of English, second, teaching those kernel ideas to the students and, third, evaluating the quantity and quality of information in their rewritten essays. A kernel idea, as defined by Hendrickson, is "a message that communicates a key element of a picture story's visual content". The number and content of kernel ideas that make up the essence of a picture story are used here as one way of evaluating the students' quantity of information.

The six native English-speaking colleagues approached were asked to list the kernel ideas of the picture story. The most frequent ideas were then grouped together and arranged into a coherent sequence of 8 sentences.
On May 1, 1987, the subjects were briefed on a way of looking at and describing the picture story. Each picture was described, giving the students a clear idea of what native-speakers of English had done with the same story. Special attention was paid to the more detailed descriptions by emphasizing the differences between the students' choice of description and that of the native-speakers. It was pointed out that the native-speaker descriptions were 'more accurate' attempts, representing a 'more careful' way of looking at the pictures. The grammatical areas that the students were weak in (e.g. consistency in verb-agreement) were reviewed and students were reminded of the need to follow the picture sequence. All this was done in preparation for a rewriting exercise 4 weeks later.

Conclusion

After the project was completed the implications of the errors in the various stages of the project became clearer. It appeared that the first two groups of errors (the 371 errors after the first marking and the 78 errors after the second marking) were made up largely of performance errors, i.e. errors caused by the physical or psychological condition of the moment.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, two more errors were corrected by the subjects themselves in the interviews. This is an example of the unstable application of one's competence in error correction, which appears to be closely related to the ability of the learner to self-monitor. If the situation is such that he feels at ease, recollection might cause a learned point to reappear for correction, and the error becomes a performance error. Because of this, competence errors are harder to classify than performance errors, and for this project, if there had been more self-correction chances, it is possible that a further small reduction could have been made.

However, self-correction, useful as it is, does not eliminate the repetition of errors to any significant extent. Errors, even performance errors, keep reappearing. The same performance errors that have been self-corrected may appear again in a different essay on a different or even the same topic. In the rewritten essay of this project, for instance, errors that had been corrected by the subjects a month ago or so surfaced again in slightly different sentence environments. The cause of this discouraging cycle could be the new composing process of the new essay - a new writing situation brings a new complexity. That means errors are an abiding component of second languages and have to be treated with tolerance and care; improvement will only come with time.

In terms of correction ability, it is generally true to say that learners who make fewer errors are the ones who self-correct better. There are exceptions. There are learners (possibly highly concentrated drafters) who try to say everything in a hurry at the expense of grammatical accuracy, and then, when there are chances to self-correct, will start to focus on grammatical accuracy and correct a large number of errors, showing consequently both good fluency and accuracy.
Nevertheless, as found in the project, most learners of the higher range of writing ability are on average better in self-correction ability; but as they often start off with fewer errors, the job is probably easier.

One rather nice development of the project is in the number of kernel ideas the subjects had in their essays. Even in the first essay, the average number of kernel ideas used was about 7, and the number was more or less the same for the 3 ability groups. This means that despite the difference in grammatical accuracy, the communication desire was the same for almost all subjects. What is more, if the creative development of the essays had been taken into account, some essays would have been found quite interesting, having in a few cases a complex narration arrangement for a fairly imaginative plot - and all these were developed from the same 6-picture sequence. If a 'relative' measure of quantity of information had been used, tallying both the pre-established kernel ideas and the additional ones created by the subjects, some subjects would have had a large number of kernel ideas - both the kernels produced by native speakers and their own.

Implications for Language Teaching

The implications of this project for language teaching involve two areas. Firstly, self-correction is useful for the student and convenient for the teacher. A larger number of errors are performance errors caused by the constraints of the composing process and they can be corrected by the students themselves after the writing is completed. Thus, allowing a period of time to pass before giving the students the marked errors can widen the awareness of the students towards the errors. For competent learners, a hint in the form of an underlining is often sufficient assistance. Further help with a correction symbol is useful but only for 'easier' areas of grammar (e.g. verb agreement or spelling). With 'difficult' areas such as choice of lexical items or prepositions, giving the students more teaching or exposure to the language would be a better solution.

In practical terms, it means having a system to keep track of the errors. Using an exercise book will, for this purpose, be more efficient than using loose sheets for both the teacher and the students, since the student can then be reminded of past errors and their correct forms. Giving the students the correct form of an error should then be used as the last resort and only used for difficult errors which resist correction.

Secondly, the usefulness of kernel ideas can be extended. For an essay of any kind, it will be very helpful if a group or even just one native-speaker of the language can write a list of kernel ideas or a model for a comparison with non-native speakers' responses on the same topic. This will provide a way of assessing the quantity of information produced by a non-native writer and will also make the learner aware of the linguistic and cultural differences as revealed in the native-speaker's text.
Extension of the Experiment

After the completion of the project, the error correction experiment continued by asking the students (the same class from which the 21 subjects were picked) to use an exercise book for their in-class writing exercises. They were asked to write on every line and leave the right-hand side page blank for correcting errors. The essays the students wrote were either compositions of about 400 words or summaries of about 200 words. A combination of both the underlining method and using symbols for marking errors was used to save time. The reasons for using symbols was that it was thought that some error areas could have already been fossilized errors rooted into the memory of the students (for instance, the same word misspelled 5 times in the essay), or the error areas might require the help of a symbol for them to become clear to the student.

For some global errors, e.g. prepositions, alternatives were supplied to the students by writing the correct ones directly on top of the errors. By doing this, local errors that belonged to the performance errors category would get more attention. It was also considered better to use more underlining for the errors of students with better competence, basing the judgement on the students' background. This meant that for weaker students, relatively more correction symbols were used rather than just underlining. Thus there was a discriminatory choice of correction symbols to suit the needs of the students.

When an essay had been marked, it would be handed back to the students for immediate correction in class. The students self-corrected, but they were also allowed to ask their neighbours for help. They were also allowed to come out to ask the teacher for help if their classmates could not help them. Therefore what was involved was a combination of self-correction, peer-correction, and teacher-assisted correction. The correction exercise was usually finished in about 15 minutes.

When the exercise book was used again for a writing exercise, the teacher would read the correction attempts. Since they were isolated words or short expressions written on the same area of the opposite page, finding them was easy, and so was reading the underlined errors. If a correcting attempt was incorrect, the teacher would either underline it or, depending on whether the student was strong in English, would supply the correct word or expression. As there were errors on the opposite page being underlined, the teacher had to reread the previous correction before he marked another essay. Sometimes, he would have students putting question marks or questions by the error areas to ask for help and he would either supply them with the correct forms in writing or talk to the students.

So far, after 7 essays, the result has been fairly satisfactory. Most strong students have managed to correct most (i.e. at least more than 70%) of their own errors and the strongest ones have just a few (i.e. two or three) errors left wrong. Rereading and remarking the corrections of strong students often took less than 3 minutes. With weak students, the exercise book seemed to provide good psychological support as most of them tried very hard to eliminate their own errors. They were usually able to correct about 50% of the errors and were thus the ones who needed most direct assistance from the teacher.
REFERENCES


