

Error Analysis (EA) and Correction (EC) of Written Work in the Classroom*

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Introduction - A Historical Perspective

Over the past 40 years, there has been a shift in pedagogical focus from preventing errors to learning from errors. During the era of audiolingualism in the 1950s and 60s, language learners had to repeat pattern drills and grammatical structures in a mechanistic fashion. By memorising the "correct model", it was hoped that error could be avoided because errors were considered signs of failure in the learning process.

In the late 1960s however, language teaching became more humanistic when studies of cognitive psychology influenced the theory of language acquisition. Language learning was finally acknowledged to be based on active mental involvement and not mere habit formation. Students were then encouraged to learn by communicating in the target language and not by merely repeating grammatical items.

Subsequently, a more positive attitude towards errors has also emerged. In the past, errors were deemed undesirable and unnecessary but now, errors are viewed as a natural and important part of learning because they can yield information about a student's progress in learning a language. This positive attitude towards errors is especially important in the wake of the Communicative Approach to language learning and teaching in the 1990s.

Language teaching in this country is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, not grammar per se. Since grammar is seen only as a means to an end, some learners tend to de-emphasise its importance and in the process, make many more errors. Thus, rekindling interest in the area of learner errors in the 1990s can be considered a timely move. Teachers who can analyse and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors. Ultimately, the use of error analysis and appropriate corrective techniques can aid effective learning and teaching of the English Language.

Error and Error Analysis (EA)

The term "error" is used to refer to a form of structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use (Klassen, 1991) or the use of a linguistic item in a way in which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning (Richards, 1985).

EA is the identification, description and explanation of errors either in its spoken or written form. Five stages are involved in EA. First, one has to identify the errors. To do this, one has to differentiate lapses from genuine errors of competence. Second, an initial analysis and description of the errors is made based on a grammatical model. Third, the errors are classified according to categories or sub-categories like the following: semantic errors (wrong word, wrong form, poor choice of word, slang or colloquialism), and syntactic errors (tense, preposition, article, spelling, word order, subject-verb agreement). Errors can also be classified as global errors or local errors. The system of classifying errors should be flexible and one should let the error determine the category. Fourthly, an explanation may be provided as to why the errors have been made. Examples of sources and causes of errors are mother tongue interference, loan words, overgeneralisation of rules, inherent difficulties of the target language and medium transfer. Lastly, the errors are evaluated to determine how much they deviate from the target language norm, to what extent they affect communication and which method of correction can be most effectively meted out. In the treatment of errors (especially in the spoken form), there should be a certain tolerance of errors so long as communication is not rendered ineffective. With the treatment of errors in the written form however, accuracy should be a strict criteria to adhere to due to the demands of written examinations.

Rationale

Errors are meaningful. When analysed, errors reveal which item has been incorrectly learnt by the student.

Errors also shed light on the manner in which students internalise the rules of the target language. Such an insight into language learning problems is useful to the teacher because it provides information on common trouble-spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials. Also, by being able to predict errors to a certain extent, teachers can be more well-equipped to help students minimise or overcome their learning problems.

To some extent, all language teachers conduct their own EA as they see and correct their students' work. However, these analyses are often too piece-meal and too heavily based on impressions to be of much use to them. EA can help the teacher identify in a systematic manner the specific and common language problems students have so that he or she can focus more attention on them. Thus, instead of plunging blindly into a syllabus that has been given, a teacher should conduct EA at the beginning of the semester to find out which items have not been fully learnt and remedy these first.

Lastly, EA can be carried out at many levels. It can be used to examine both the oral and written work of an individual (to discover specific problems) or a group of learners (to reveal common trouble spots). EA can also be employed on one piece of work or over a series of comparable tasks in any language so that the teacher can monitor the student's progress and create a greater awareness of the errors made by the learner.

Methods of Error Correction (EC) in Written Work

There is no single method of dealing with the errors made by students. Among some of the conventional practices of teachers are to mark every error, provide the correct answer for errors made, mark the first and only draft or work written by students, make general comments, make students re-write the corrected version several times over and view errors as signs of failure. In contrast, recent literature contains several suggestions for correcting written errors effectively in answer to the question of "to red-pen or not to red-pen" (Josephson, 1990). Some of the methods of EC advocated are the use of peer marking/editing, selective marking, code correction, correction based on the process approach to writing, effective and specific comments, a checklist of limited common errors, different coloured inks, discussion of errors on tape and direct versus discovery-type of marking.

Underlining errors is a common way of handling errors. However, Lim (1991) proposes that students be allowed to work at these errors themselves with the help of their peers. Peer-marking/editing is especially useful in the first draft of the written work. Here, students are given the responsibility to edit each other's work individually or in a group before handing in the final draft to the teacher. Besides being fun for students to be allowed to correct and learn from errors other than their own, it also reduces the need for too many red markings from the teacher. Here, students must be briefed on how to edit the work of their peers. A mini lesson lasting only five minutes of class time may be presented at the beginning of the class on a regular basis. For example, the teacher could write several erroneous sentences on the board which are to be analysed by the students themselves. This is a way of making more economical use of time where errors can form the basis for teaching.

Parents should not be too concerned or alarmed if every error in their children's written work is not corrected by the teacher. Teachers also should not mark every error just because it is expected of them or because they believe it is an indication of dedication (Singh, 1991). This is because over-correction can be a very tedious experience for the teacher (resulting in a demoralizing experience for the student).

In keeping with the belief that not every error should be corrected, Klassen (1991) deems that gravity of error should determine which correction is necessary. She suggests that teachers should focus on marking only global errors in the first draft of their student's written work and then local errors in the second draft. Also, instead of providing the correct answer every time a student makes an error, the teacher could provide clues and codes in the form of abbreviations, symbols, arrows, circles, lines and explicit marginal comments. The rationale here is that unless students recognise the type of error they are making, they will continue to make that error. Thus, a list of error codes like the following can be employed by both teachers and more advanced students during peer marking sessions.

Error Codes for Code Correction Activities

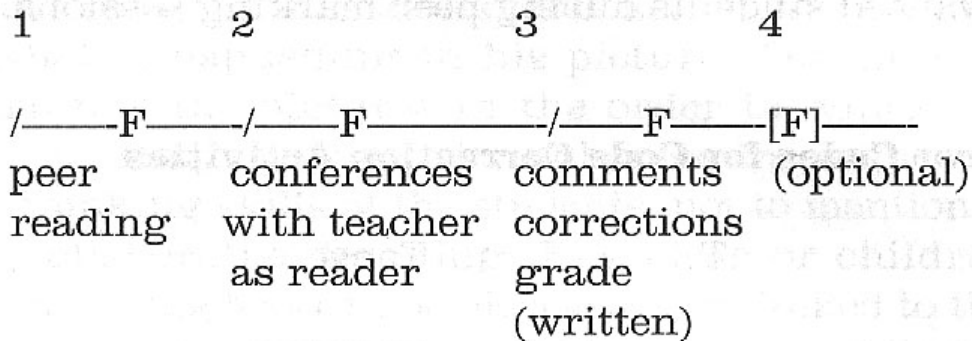
T	Tense
Sp	Spelling
Prep	Preposition
[Paragraph
^	Missing Word
A	Article
Ag	Agreement
WW	Wrong Word

WF	Wrong Form
P	Punctuation

Michaelides (1990) points out that teachers should learn not to correct every error especially if students are found to repeat the same mistakes in subsequent pieces of work. Instead of wasting his time, he could concentrate on marking only one particular linguistic item at a time. For example, he could mark only in relation to a particular teaching point or unit. This is a form of selective marking where not every error but only selected ones are marked.

Keh (1989) found that effective EC can be exploited in the process of writing. This is in contrast with the current practice of most teachers who mark the first and only draft of work written by their students during a timed writing class. In the process approach to writing, students are required to write multiple drafts of their work upon receiving feedback after each draft. The feedback is given by both their peers and teacher as illustrated below:

INPUT



[F=feedback 1,2,3,4=draft]

Comments and correction are given as feedback in the final stage (3). In a survey conducted, it was found that students do read all comments that teachers make because they want to know why they got the grade given, what they did well and/or how they could improve their writing. General comments like "good" are confusing because the student does not know what is good about his work. The following is a guide-line for writing meaningful comments which will serve as effective feedback to students:

1. Connect all comments to lesson objectives; for example, "Has used past tense form correctly" and "Few errors of agreement".
2. Use positive words to note improvements; for example, "Knowledgeable presentation", "Ideas clearly stated" and "Effective word choice".
3. For specific problems, provide a strategy for improvement; for example, "Do more exercises in the use of articles" and "Use shorter sentences".
4. Summative comments are most important because students read this part first. Provide an account of their strengths first and then their weaknesses.
Specific comments can be given in the areas of content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.
5. Comment on organisation separately from grammar, using skimming and scanning respectively.

To avoid the point of diminishing returns, students should also be deliberately helped to focus on certain types of errors at a time (for example, those which are connected to the objectives). To do this, students can be given a check-list of limited common errors like the one below:

Name			
problem	paper#	1	2
singular-plural: *equipments		/	
adverb *quickly but not *fastly			/
spelling *televisyen - television *Januari - January		/	/

It is the responsibility of the students here to participate in the analysis of his own errors by recording his own errors on the check-list every time a corrected piece of work is returned to him. More items can be added to the check-list as the term progresses based on lessons covered or the specific problems of individual students.

The following are further suggestions which I have found useful for handling EC:

1. Use different coloured ink to distinguish more important errors from less important ones.
2. Discuss errors on tape so that students will be able to remember comments given.
3. Use the direct-type of correction for infrequent written errors but discovery-type of corrective techniques for errors that occur frequently. Examples of the discovery-type of corrective techniques are underlining an error and placing dots beside erroneous sentences. For the latter, students act as detectives to find the error and rectify it themselves. For example,

He was my old friend and my neighbourhood. We chat for about half hour about our childhood, our live and what are we doing now.

Conclusion

EA and EC are related in so far as EA paves the way for effective EC. Like a doctor who can only prescribe effective treatment for a patient after having diagnosed his disease, a teacher can only claim that he has corrected his students' work effectively after having analysed it. Ideally speaking, EC should only be undertaken after EA.

It must be admitted that EA demands extra time and effort from the teacher who is already bogged down by a full work-load. However, EA conducted on a group basis can be less time-consuming or tedious, and yet can be just as effective. Lastly, EC also stands for Error Caution because of the devastating results that it might incur, affecting unsuspecting teachers and students. If EC is used appropriately, it can be an aid to effective teaching and learning. If not, EC becomes a dangerous weapon with a double-edged blade which can kill both the teacher and student; the former from sheer exhaustion and the latter from pure discouragement.

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