

Error Analysis within Newspaper Reporting Written by Japanese Secondary School Students

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1. Introduction

The errors of English language learners (ELL) provide us with a substantial amount of information when investigating the language learning process. More practically, they can guide us to take a remedial action to errors. There are various views concerning the role of errors in language learning which affect the way of dealing with errors in the classroom. If teachers can have clear attitudes to errors and appropriately deal with them, they can encourage their students to more effectively learn language. On the contrary, if teachers fail in error correction, it might have a harmful effect on learners. Therefore, we need to know how to properly analyze the sources of errors, evaluate and aim to prevent them. In this study, I shall investigate my views concerning the role of errors in language learning and the way I would deal with errors in the classroom. Firstly, I shall briefly introduce historical background of theories. Then, I shall use data elicited from a case study in order to analyze errors made by Japanese learners. An analysis of errors made by a low, medium and high level learners are analyzed. Finally, I shall attempt to account for the sources of errors and discuss feedback.

2. Historical background of theories: What are errors in language learning?

In the 60's, errors were thought to be the results of negative transfer of L1

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in the view of behaviorism. Contrastive analysis was affected by this view, which considered second language acquisition as learning new sets of habits. A main focus was on comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners. In the 70's, criticism to this view was raised by the influence of the psycholinguist Noam Chomsky, who proposed a theory called "the innate grammar system". He criticized behaviorism as a way of explaining first language acquisition (L1). Then, more attention has been paid to the role of L1 in Second Language Acquisition. Selinker believes that 'the language learner's language was a sort of hybrid between his L1 and the target language' (p. 2). Thus, there can be various sources of errors, which could be ascribed to not only transfer, but also developmental process, communication strategies, influence of the classroom and so on.

3. Error Gravity

When we evaluate the error, a question about how to evaluate error gravity will arise. It might depend on the teacher's methodology or the task type. As Davies (1983) points out, the marking context affects the evaluations of errors. For example, errors may be considered less serious in free composition than in some more structured activity. Errors may be perceived differently in spontaneous speech. At the stage of prevention, evaluation affects the way of dealing with errors in the classroom. There can be a substantial amount of ways of remedial action, which will depend on the purposes of the task, the focused skill, or the level of the learners. For example, it is possible to share the cause of the error in the classroom if it is common for all students. If it is a unique error, it can be commented on individually. Instead of correcting the error explicitly, self-correction can be encouraged by, for example, rewriting the draught. Hedge (1994) introduces techniques of revision such as 'self-monitoring, exchanging work for peer review, conferencing with the teacher, class revision of selected drafts, proofreading exercises and reformulation procedures.' The importance of conferencing is emphasized, in which the teacher can engage in conversation with individuals about their writing and support them to revise drafts into more effective writing.

3 in Appendix). They were asked to write a short newspaper story after they read a murder story, *K's First Case* (1992) as a post reading activity. Not only writing but also reading skill was concerned in this task because they had to comprehend the story correctly. The instruction was as follows: "Write a short newspaper story (150–200 words). Explain what happened at 'Flanders' on November 17th. Who murdered Sir Michael Gray? Why? How did K solve the case?" This task was homework during winter holiday, so there was no time regulation.

Stage 1: identification

We have reached step 3 and 4 in the algorithm. Errors are identified in the bottom-up process moving from substance, grammar, lexis and to discourse levels. We must constantly bear in mind that what the learner was trying to say should be correctly interpreted in the reconstructed sentence. Corder (1981) raises two ways to arrive at this interpretation:

1. If learners are present we can ask them.
2. If learners are not available for consultation, we have to attempt an interpretation of their utterance on the basis of its *form* and its linguistics and situational *context*.

The second way is applied to this case study.

Concerning substance-level errors, deviances in the spelling and punctuation are identified. Misspellings of characters' names can often be found, which are *Glay (Transcript 1, line 3 and 6), *Kirdy (Transcript 2, line 4) and *Micheal (Transcript 3, line 4 and 6).

Turning now to the text-level errors of grammaticality, the most common error is an omission of determiners, which are an indefinite article 'a' (Transcript 1, line 9) (Transcript 2, line 7–8) (Transcript 3, line 5), the definite article 'the' (Transcript 3, line 11, 15 and 22), the possessive pronoun 'his' (Transcript 1, line 11) (Transcript 3, line 9 and 18) and the pronoun 'that' (Transcript 3, line 15). A verb tense misselection often appears, which should be past tense (Transcript 1, line 4, 4, 4, 6 and 8) (Transcript 2, line 2, 3, 4 and 9) (Transcript 3, line 2 and 4) or past perfect tense (Transcript 1, line 5) (Transcript 2, line 8) (Transcript 3, line 11).

The following errors are lexis-level errors which are misuse of sensory verbs: *heard when 'listened to' is meant (Transcript 3, line 22), *thought when 'investigated the case' is meant (Transcript 2, line 3), *understood when 'discovered' is meant (Transcript 2, line 4) and *thought when 'decided' is meant (Transcript 1, line 7).

Lastly, regarding discourse-level errors, the misselections of determiners such as *the (Transcript 3, line 18) and *a (Transcript 1, line 3, 4 and 4) (Transcript 2, line) (Transcript 3, line) can be a failure to appropriately use cohesive devices. Errors of newspaper style can also be included here, where information should be concise. There is an overuse of *she can be found (Transcript 1) whereas names should be used to avoid confusion, because there are three main women in the story.

Stage 2: description

We have reached step 5 in the algorithm. Identified errors are categorized in Table 1 below (adapted from James, 1998: 274). Horizontal columns show the level of the error, phonology, graphology, grammar, lexis, text or discourse. Vertical columns show target modification taxonomy. It consists of omission, where some element of a word is omitted which should be present, over-inclusion, where some element is present which should not be there, misselection, where the wrong item has been chosen in place of the right one,

Table 1

LEVEL	SUBSTANCE	TEXT		DISCOURSE
		GRAMMAR	LEXIS	
MODIFICATION	Phonology Graphology Spelling Pronunciation	RANK: Clause-Phrase-Word- Morpheme CLASS: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb,Preposition, Conjunction, etc.	SENSE RELATIONS COLOCATIONS	COHESION COHERENCE GENRE-FIDELITY FELICITY
OMISSION				
OVER-INCLUSION				
MISSECTION				
MISORDER				
BLEND				

misorder, where the elements presented are correct but wrongly sequenced and blend, where there is not just one well-defined target, but two.

Stage 3: explanation and diagnosis

We have reached step 6, 7 and 8 in the algorithm. At the step 6, slips, mistakes or errors are chosen. Here, a question arises whether learners could have self-corrected their own errors, with or without prompting. According to James' definition, slips can quickly be detected and self-corrected by the student themselves unaided, and mistakes can only be corrected if their deviance is pointed out to them. On the other hand, errors cannot be self-corrected until

LEVEL	SUBSTANCE	TEXT		DISCOURSE
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MODIFICATION	Phonology Graphology Spelling Pronunciation	RANK: Clause-Phrase-Word- Morpheme CLASS: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, etc.	SENSE RELATIONS COLOCATIONS	COHESION COHERENCE GENRE-FIDELITY FELICITY
OMISSION	*_ne / name (6) *tought / thought (7) *Beause / Because (7) *feezer / freezer (8) *mehanism / mechanism (10) *carfully / carefully (10)	*∅ / angry with (7) *∅ / that she opened (8) *∅ / a glass (9) *∅ / come to (10-11) *∅ / his study (11)		*∅ / • <between secretary and Everett> (5)
OVER-INCLUSION				
MISSECTION	*l/r in <Gray>(3,6) him / his (5) *_ne / name (6) *l/r in <angry>(7) *methort / method (8) *c / u in <usually>(9)	*is / was (4,4,4,6) *has / had (5) *pull / pulled (8) *in / into (9)	*thought / decided (7)	*A / The (3) *a / the (4) *A / Her (4) *him / a (5) *it / her (7) * · / ∅ (7, 8)
MISORDER				
BLEND				

Table 1.1: Profile of Errors of the low level transcript (Numbers in brackets indicate line numbers)

LEVEL	SUBSTANCE	TEXT		DISCOURSE
		GRAMMAR	LEXIS	
MODIFICATION	Phonology Graphology Spelling Pronunciation	RANK: Clause-Phrase-Word-Morpheme CLASS: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, etc.	SENSE RELATIONS COLOCATIONS	COHESION COHERENCE GENRE-FIDELITY FELICITY
OMISSION	*murdere/murdered(3)	*∅/a clever mechanism (7-8)		*∅ / · <between thought and The> (3)
OVER-INCLUSION				
MISSECTION	*o/O in <One>(2) *d/b in <Kirby>(4) *S/s in <she>(4)	*is/was (2,3,9) *was murdered/murdered(3) *It's/It was(4) *She has/She had(8)	*thought/investigated the case (3) *understood/discovered (4)	*A / The (3) *a / the (4) *A / Her (4) *him / a (5) * · / ∅ (7, 8)
MISORDER	some one/someone(2)			
BLEND				

Table 1.2: Profile of Errors of the medium level transcript (Numbers in brackets indicate line numbers)

LEVEL	SUBSTANCE	TEXT		DISCOURSE
		GRAMMAR	LEXIS	
MODIFICATION	Phonology Graphology Spelling Pronunciation	RANK: Clause-Phrase-Word- Morpheme CLASS: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, etc.	SENSE RELATIONS COLOCATIONS	COHESION COHERENCE GENRE-FIDELITY FELICITY
OMISSION	*Eventually/Eventually(11)	*Ø/?(3) *Ø/a director(5) *Ø/his wife's(9) *Ø/the murderer(11) *letter/letters(14) *Ø/The substance(15) *Ø/that women(15) *Ø/on that day(18) *Ø/in his study(18) *Ø/the murder case(22)		*k, she (19,20)
OVER-INCLUSION		*suspects's/suspects'(22) *leave at/leave(15)		
MISSECTON	*ie/e in <the>(2) *f/F in <Flanders>(3) *a/e in <Flanders>(3) *n/N in <November>(3) *ea/ae in <Michael>(4,6) *t/T in <There>(9) *L/l in <loyalty>(13) *r/R in <Really>(16) *n/m in <important>(20)	*solve/solved(2) *is/was(4) *She have/She had(11) *her/she(12) * was gotten/had gotten(14) *she was wicked/she hated(16)	*right/truth(1) *heard/listened to(22) *on/in(9)	*Michael's/his(6, 14) *it/that one(15) *the/that(18)
MISORDER	*byaccident/by accident(18)			
BLEND				

Table 1.3: Profile of Errors of the high level transcript (Numbers in brackets indicate line numbers)

further relevant input has been provided and truly understood by the learners. Misspellings of *Micheal (Table 1.3, line 4 and 6) might be considered as mistakes, because Michael is spelled correctly twice (Table 1.3, line 8 and 9). As an example of an error, the distinction of 'l' and 'r' is raised. This student consistently makes spelling errors like *Glay and *angly (Table 1.1, line 3, 6, and 7).

Here six main sources of errors are considered.

1. mother-tongue influence: interlingual errors

The misselection of 'l' and 'r' in *Glay (Table 1.1, line 3 and 6) and *angly (Table 1.1, line 7) could be a negative transfer of L1. This is a phonology error, which is typical to Japanese learners because there is no distinction between 'l' and 'r' in Japanese. Even though learners can spell correctly, it does not mean they can pronounce correctly. The most common error is the wrong usage of determiners such as articles and possessive pronouns.

2. target language causes: intralingual errors

Overgeneralisation of a possessive form can be seen in *suspects's (Table

1.3, line 22). Although the general rule of making possessive forms, putting an apostrophe and a s after a singular noun has been acquired, the same rule has been applied to a plural noun.

3. communication strategy-based errors

As for a TL-based communication strategy, *right (Table 1.3, line 1) is used as a near synonym for the intended 'truth', which is not the required form. There are also examples of L1-based communication strategies: *heard/listened to (Table 1.3, line 22), *thought/investigated the case (Table 1.2, line 3), *understood/discovered (Table 1.2, line 4) and *thought/decided (Table 1.1, line 7). These are literal translation into L2 of the L1. In these cases, the knowledge of learners' language background helps understanding what they mean.

4. induced errors

Errors of past perfect were elicited from all of the three students (Table 1.1, line 5, Table 1.2, line 8 and Table 1.3, line 11). These could be syllabus-induced errors because they had not learned past perfect at that time. Therefore, these errors are quite natural for them. In terms of the whole organization of newspaper, three main points should be fully included: Who murdered Sir Michael Gray?, Why? and How did K solve the case? One of the students (Table 1.1) missed the last point: How did K solve the case? This failure would be because the student missed the instruction of the task or could not understand the story. However, if the teacher emphasised the important point, this might have been avoided. Therefore this failure could be task-induced or teacher-induced.

5. compound and ambiguous errors (unique)

Learners are not available for consultation in this case; therefore, we are always in danger of wrongly classifying errors. It is often difficult to correctly interpret what the learner was trying to say in the reconstructed sentence. *She got angly it (Table 1.1, line 7) has a few possible sources of the error. On the substance-level, the misspelling can be seen in *angly. On the grammar-

level, this is an omission of a preposition. When we reconstruct the error, a problem arises, because there are two possible interpretations. If the student intended to write 'She got angry with her', this is a misselection of a pronoun 'it' instead of 'her'. If the student intended 'She got angry about their relationship', 'it' would not be coherent on the discourse-level because what 'it' means is unclear to the readers.

6. intelligibility

If the number of errors is compared among three different level transcripts, the high level has the largest number of errors, and the medium one has the smallest number and the low level is in the middle. This order does not match with the levels. This means another criterion such as intelligibility is concerned. Intelligibility could be judged in terms of vocabulary, the length and complexity of sentences or organization. The low level transcript is made up with very short and simple sentences. Also no subordinate clauses are used. These factors give readers impression of lacking in intelligibility. On the other hand, the high level transcript gives an impression of higher intelligibility in spite of the largest number of errors, because a variety of vocabulary and some subordinate clauses are used.

Stage 4: evaluation

We have reached step 9 in the algorithm. When we evaluate the error, a question about criteria on error gravity will arise. As Davies (1983) points out, the marking context affects the evaluations of errors. The task of this case study is free writing and main purposes are to encourage students to write fluently in order to get their meaning across, and also to be aware of a newspaper style. Therefore, local errors such as misspellings are not serious as long as they do not interfere communication. Among misspelling there is an order of importance. Students can notice their slips or mistakes by themselves, however, the misselection of 'l' and 'r' might be more serious than others. In the long run this distinction would be serious, however, according to the purpose of the task, it should not be emphasised at the moment and should be dealt with later. Communication strategy-based errors such as lexical

misselections might be global errors because they can cause misunderstanding. The mismatch of tense would be serious, because it is confusing for readers to understand the process of the murder case. In the newspaper, once past tense is used, it should be consistent and mixture of past tense and present tense should be avoided. However, the wrong use of past perfect tense should not be considered important here, even though it may cause misunderstanding. This is because it is syllabus-induced and students should not know the rule. If it were introduced now, it would be more confusing for students. Frequent errors such as the wrong usage of determiners might be important, because more appropriate explanation of the cause might be necessary or students may not be ready for the acquisition. Compound and ambiguous errors cannot be overlooked because this might have a bad effect on future learning. As for intelligibility, the use of various vocabulary or compound sentences are preferable, however, it is not very important for beginner-level students.

Stage 5: prevention and feedback

Finally, we have reached step 10 in the algorithm. The ultimate purpose of error analysis is not to classify and evaluate the errors but to think about the remedial action for the errors. The final aim here is that students can acquire writing skills. Eight component skills that writers need are shown by Hedge (1988: 8):

1. getting the grammar right
2. having a range of vocabulary
3. punctuating meaningfully
4. using the conventions of layout correctly, e.g. in letters
5. spelling accurately
6. using a range of sentence structures
7. linking ideas and information across sentences to develop a topic
8. developing and organising the content clearly and convincingly

There are various ways of giving feedback, for example, correcting or pointing out in a form-or content focused way. Furthermore, As for form-

focused feedback, Robb, Ross and Shortreed's (1986) research shows that types of feedback were not differentiated by their relative 'salience'. Opposed to them, James (1998) believes that feedback types should be differentiated according to learners' level of attainment. The subjects in my case study are all beginners; therefore, it cannot be expected that they can notice their own errors without pointing them out. In this case, to underline grammatical errors in the students' texts is effective for students to improve grammatical structures. There remains space for students to think about their errors by not correcting because accurate recognition does not always lead to accurate production. In order to improve content, general comments giving encouragement and suggesting revisions will be helpful as is proved in Fathman and Whalley's (1990) research. They propose content and form feedback should be occurred simultaneously. This proves these form and content are related to each other. Also, they emphasise the importance of rewriting, no matter which teacher's feedback focuses on form (grammatical errors) or content. In the process of writing, learners can develop the eight writing skills raised above, which are concerned with both form and content.

One following example activity is shown below to let students aware of the newspaper style. After students are asked to write a newspaper story, the model text is shown, whose topic is different but whose form is the same. They can learn the newspaper style or features by comparing the model text and their own. For instance, the main points are clear, a title should be concise and attractive and a substantial amount of abbreviations which tend to be used in newspaper. The reason for choosing the different topic is that if the topic is the same, students might think that there is an answer in the model text. This will prevent them from expanding their own ideas when they rewrite. The purpose of this activity is to learn structural features and writing skills from the model text and later reflect on what they have learned on their own writing in the process in order to revise their writing.

The surface grammar errors can be stored to be used in a different activity later, which were not thought to be important in this task.

5. Conclusion

In the case study, I analyzed the errors that my students made. The process of error analysis is similar to a teaching cycle, which begins with identifying, describing, explaining, evaluating and ends in preventing the error. In the cycle, students ideally develop their English; therefore, there is no ending. The task of this case study is free writing and main purposes are to encourage students to write fluently in order to get meaning across, and also to be aware of a newspaper style. Evaluation and feedback follow these purposes. On the whole, communication-based strategy errors are more serious than surface-errors such as misspellings as long as the communicative purposes are not compromised. As for feedback, avoiding the error by encouraging students to rewrite is preferable to correcting the error. It is expected for students to develop both form and content in the process of writing. Finally, one example exercise is intended to be used in the classroom. As I mentioned above, this procedure is a cycle. Therefore, if there is no improvement, we can reflect on the causes of the errors and employ other feedback.

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Appendix

1	DEAD MICHAEL
2	November 17th the time now: 9:30
3	Yesterday, Sir Michael Gray was dead in Flanders's study. <u>A</u> criminal was Nancy
4	Flack. She <u>is a</u> house keeper. <u>A</u> motive <u>is</u> Angela Everett. Angela Everett <u>is</u>
5	Michael's secretary Everett loved him. He loved her. But, Michael has <u>him</u> wife. Her
6	<u>ne is</u> Elizabeth Gray. Nancy loved Michael and Elizabeth. But she didn't like Everett.
7	So, she got <u>angly it</u> . So, she <u>tought</u> to kill her. But, she killed him. <u>Beause</u> , she
8	didn't kill cure away her. Her <u>methort</u> was, opened the freezer, <u>pull</u> the ice-tray and
9	WHAM. Everett <u>usgally</u> poured some whisky in glass for Michael. Nancy knew this.
10	Nancy prepared this <u>mehanism</u> very <u>carfully</u> for Everett. But, last night Everett didn't
11	<u>come study</u> . She was in the garden. Nancy didn't know <u>.</u> So, she killed him.....

Transcript 1 Low level

1	K'S FIRST CASE
2	<u>one</u> day a man was dead. He was murdered by <u>some one</u> . His name <u>is</u> Sir Michael
3	Gray. Who was <u>murdere</u> Michael? <u>A</u> woman <u>thought</u> <u>The</u> woman's name <u>is</u> Katrina
4	Kirdy. People called her 'K'. Then <u>She</u> <u>understood a</u> homicide. <u>It's</u> Mrs Nancy
5	Flack. Why did Nancy murder Sir Michael? She hated Michael's secretary, Miss
6	Angela Everett. Nancy didn't want Sir Michael to run away with Miss Everett. So she
7	murdered Sir Michael. How did Nancy murder Sir Michael? Nancy prepared <u>clever</u>
8	mechanism a month ago. She <u>has</u> prepared a long time for the night. Then Mrs Nancy
9	murdered Sir Michael. This <u>is</u> K's First Case.

Transcript 2 Medium level

1	THE RIGHTS OF THE MURDER CASE
2	- Katrina Kirby <u>solve this</u> case -
3	~What happened at <u>flanders</u> on <u>november</u> 17th~
4	That day, a murder case happened at <u>flanders</u> . Victim <u>is</u> Sir <u>Micheal</u> Gray(50).He was
5	<u>director</u> of <u>Cavell Industries</u> and very rich.The scene of the crime was his study and
6	<u>Micheal's</u> dead body was on the carpet. He was stabbed through the heart with a sharp
7	weapon.
8	~Who murdered Sir Michael Gray and why?~
9	<u>there</u> were five suspects on this case.Michael's wife,his secretary, his friend, <u>wife's</u>
10	brother and his housekeeper. These people had motives for the murder.Jealousy,money
11	and loyalty.Eventually <u>murder</u> was Gray's housekeeper, Mrs..Nancy Flack. She <u>have</u>
12	been with Gray's family for 40 years.So,she loved them.But,why did <u>her</u> murder Sir
13	Michael?Her motive was <u>Loyalty</u> to Michael's wife,Lady Elizabeth.Every day Michael
14	<u>was gotten letter</u> from <u>Michael's</u> secretary,Angela Everett.Nancy always read them.
15	Last week,she also read it. <u>Substance</u> of the letter was "You can leave at <u>woman</u> and we
16	can run away together."So she <u>was wicked</u> Everett,really she wanted to kill the woman
17	there.Then,she have prepared a long time for that day.But,she killed Sir Michael
18	<u>byaccident</u> .(because <u>the day</u> Michael was alone <u>in study</u> .)
19	~How did <u>K</u> solve the case?~
20	<u>She</u> wanted to find the answer to 3 <u>inportant</u> questions. 1.How did X murder Sir
21	Michael? 2Whowas X? 3Why did X murder Sir Michael? So K investigated the scene of
22	<u>murder</u> case and she <u>heard suspects's</u> stories etc.

Transcript 3 High level