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A Self-Instructional Module on
The Uses of Error Analysis
- based on a paper delivered by
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The Uses of Error Analysis
(Oliver Seet)

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
1980
In this module, a system of analysing errors in written English made by pupils in English-medium secondary schools is described. It shows how a simple system of classification and notation might be used by any English teacher to diagnose his/her pupils' errors and how such an analysis might be employed in constructing an error profile and in drawing up a realistic and useful remedial syllabus for a particular class. This system might even be used in upper primary classes.

OBJECTIVES

After reading this article and completing the study questions, you should be able to:

a) Explain how to set about doing an error analysis of your pupils' written English.

b) Classify your pupils' errors into the six main categories of errors and employ the notation system described.

c) Interpret and use the data obtained through this notation system and prepare an error profile.

CORE INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Read the article and write the answers to the self-evaluation questions. Do not look at the feedback (our suggested correct answer) until you have completed writing your answer. Then check your answers with the feedback. Note that feedback answers are only some suggested answers. The answers you give may be equally good, but judge this for yourself.

2. When you have completed the module, work out the Post-Module Practicum by yourself viz. apply the system of classifying errors to Sample A. You will then bring your work to the lecture room where you will compare your analysis with those of your peers.

The lecturer on the course will provide you with his analysis of the script.
There are three ways of looking at errors: one can shed tears of frustration over them, one can laugh in amusement or one can look at them clinically.

Thousands of teachers have, I am sure, laboured over errors in grammar expression and vocabulary with ennui and a growing sense of desperation and frustration; there comes a stage when they view any piece of written work handed in with repugnance and dread. A better approach is to take a light-hearted attitude towards them. Indeed I have friends who search for the gems with a view to publication at some uncertain date in the future. Humour certainly helps one to preserve one's sanity; the former attitude leads often to depression or a nervous breakdown.

There is, however, another approach to errors that, in my opinion, is much more constructive and rewarding: this is to consider all errors as indicators of the language competence of the learner or as symptoms of the misconceptions held by the learner of the language code. A distinction should be made at this point between mistakes made by a native speaker and those made by a learner. Pit Corder, 1973 points out that "we all make mistakes when we are speaking our mother-tongue. They often cause a certain amount of merriment .... The important thing is that we know how to correct them; we can recognize our own mistakes for what they are. This is not usually the case with mistakes made by the learner. Not only does he not always recognize his mistakes, but when his attention is drawn to them he often cannot correct them; he may even commit another error in trying to do so." There are those mistakes that might be described as slips of the tongue or slips of the pen that are the result of haste, carelessness, lapses of memory, fatigue, etc and those that are breaches of the code (or errors) that are products of wrong hypotheses held by the learner.

In this paper I shall be considering only the types of errors made by learners in our English-medium secondary schools in their written compositions. I have no intention of turning this paper into a research paper replete with impressive statistics. I shall be speaking from the viewpoint of the practising secondary school teacher who at this point in time, has no official syllabus to follow except an antiquated and anachronistic one and who has a textbook to follow that does not seem to meet the needs of his pupils. With no proper chart and compass to steer his course and no suitable resource materials, he has to plot his course by starlight - an ancient but nevertheless time-tested method. I believe that the system I shall be describing can be used quite readily by any trained English
teacher who has not had the benefit of attending a course on Linguistics. Using this system of error analysis, the teacher will be able to work out a remedial syllabus which is based on the actual needs of the class; he will have at his command the instructional materials that will be of greatest benefit to his pupils.

A remedial syllabus is particularly relevant and useful for average or poor learners but it is something that only a class teacher using the technique of error analysis can draw up. Such a syllabus cannot be usefully generalized for the whole standard in the school or for all Singapore schools since it is based on the errors of a particular group. Hence the teacher is an indispensable unit in such a programme.

Pit Corder, 1974 uses the term "transitional dialect or idiolect" to describe the instability in the characteristics of a learner's language. "A learner of a language is progressively changing his language performance to bring it more into line with that of the native speaker. (The learner's language differs) in many crucial aspects from it and perhaps (has) some characteristics of his mother tongue. It would possibly be simpler and more regular, in the sense of being describable by fewer rules, and probably impoverished." Error analysis is a means of monitoring the stages of these progressive approximations to the target language and a syllabus based on error analysis is thus peremptory for effectively dealing with learners' problems in language.

In order to forestall any possible confusion, let me at this stage further delimit my topic. The system of error analysis I shall be describing is not intended as (i) a marking scheme or (ii) a system for marking regular compositions which are to be returned to pupils for correction. The system is perhaps too complex for the average pupil to master. Nor am I, in this paper, describing how errors are to be dealt with. That is the subject for another paper. I shall consider error analysis as a diagnostic tool to be used by the teacher at various stages in a course to obtain data that is useful in planning a syllabus or obtaining materials for use with the class.
SELF EVALUATION (PART 1)

1. What is the difference between an error and a mistake?

2. What are the functions of error analysis?
FEEDBACK (PART 1)

1. A mistake is the result of carelessness, haste, a lapse of memory, fatigue, etc while an error or a breach of the language code is a symptom or an indication of a wrong hypothesis held by the learner.

2. Your answer should point out:
   
   a) That error analysis is a means of monitoring the stages of a learner's progressive approximation to the target language. Hence it is a diagnostic tool.

   b) Error analysis is also the best means a teacher can use to draw up a realistic remedial syllabus for his class.

   c) The data or actual errors obtained from such an analysis can be used for preparing suitable instructional materials for remedial teaching.
In order to make an error analysis, it is necessary, first of all, to obtain samples of compositions written by the group. The teacher could ask the class to write a short composition of about 150 words on a set topic. (Pupils should not be given alternative topics.) In writing the composition, care should be taken that all pupils be given the same amount of time. They should write on ruled paper leaving a wide margin on the left hand side of the script. Ideally, the teacher should ask pupils to write 4 short compositions with different themes — narrative, expository, descriptive, and argumentative and analyse their performances in each. Where only one theme is set it is possible for learners to carefully circumvent certain grammatical forms, expressions and words of which he is uncertain but if a wide variety of themes is set, the learner will have to utilize a wider language repertoire. The samples collected can then be subjected to analysis using the system that I shall describe.

I distinguish six basic classes of errors, viz.

1. Graphological
2. Morphological
3. Structural Word
4. Sentence Pattern
5. Expression
6. Lexical

1. The first class of errors I describe as Graphological, a term used by M.A.K. Halliday, et al, 1964 to refer to "Orthography (Spelling), punctuation and anything else that is concerned with showing how a language uses its graphic resources to carry its grammatical and lexical patterns". In this category I include 3 types of errors:

1A: SPELLING
e.g. (a) It was the second annualversery celebration
     (b) Their performance was so good that the audience cracked
         their hands for quite a long time
     (c) ... our drug problem will varnish .....
1B: PUNCTUATION MARK

e.g. (a) Sex education should not and must not be given too freely, rather there should be an appropriate time and place for it.
(b) This I fully agree with; Pupils should not be caned in public.
(c) The orientation week, began on 10 January 1977.

1C: UPPER AND LOWER CASE

e.g. (a) On Speech day, the director of education gave a speech to our school.
(b) As I was walking through change alley ......

2. The second class of errors embraces 7 categories. Morphology includes "the internal form of words - such matters as inflection for case, number or gender, tense forms, agreement, certain kinds of derivation and so on."

(D.A. Wilkins, 1972)
The categories are as follows:

2A. AGREEMENT BETWEEN SUBJECT AND VERB

   e.g. (a) Schools in Singapore is emphasizing the importance of the second language.
   (b) He don't like fishing ......
   (c) He always go there ......

2B. TENSE

   e.g. (a) Fortunately, the form teacher stopped the fight in time or the class will be chaotic.
   (b) On a few occasions, the late comers are being caught by the Principal.
   (c) The pupils and teachers were keen to share with us what they have learnt during their trip.

2C. VERB FORM

   e.g. (a) She told the students that they must recognized the importance of educating the young effectively.
   (b) Honestly, I think her mother should have had prepared her for it.
   (c) Did it help to built a bridge of friendship between the new students and their seniors?
2D. NOUN FORM

e.g. (a) With regards to her conclusion .......
(b) Many parents send their children to kindergarten classes
(c) The school bought a lot of equipments ....
(d) ........ means of acquire ........

2E. ADJECTIVE FORM

e.g. (a) The panic-stricken teacher .........
(b) There was not sufficient information
(c) They felt very secured because their parents were around outside the classroom.

2F. ADVERB FORM

e.g. (a) Suddenly, he walked into the room.
(b) He always goes there punctually at 4.00 p.m.
(c) He climbed the hill slow.

2G. POSSESSIVE CASE

e.g. (a) Their mother's tongue is Chinese.
(b) He told Mary brother the sad news.
(c) I'd like to say something about Singapore's English.

3. The third class of errors are errors in the use of structural words. A structural or function word has been defined as "a word which does not carry a full lexical meaning, but rather a grammatical or functional significance e.g. words like the, for, since, to, etc. which are used to indicate relationship or function of other words as opposed to content words (lexis, or lexical item) which have lexical meaning e.g. paper, stool, telephone, etc. (They) are usually uninflected in form". (R.R.K. Hartmann and F.C. Stork, 1972) These structural words have particular significance in English because in any normal utterance, they constitute a high proportion of the total number of words although there are only a small number of them in the language. These 'heavy duty' words (A.S. Hornby, 1959) often constitute the skeleton or structure of the sentence; if omitted altogether kind of English produced approaches what is called pidgin English. The following are the main categories of structural words. An ancillary system of symbols is used with this class of errors, viz.
(i) + indicates that a redundant structural word has been used,
(ii) - that a structural word has been omitted, and
(iii) x that a wrong structural word has been used.

3A. PREPOSITION

e.g. (a) 3A + Those who apply for a place should sit for a test, especially for those who want to be ......
(b) 3A - Guidelines were not given as how the subject matter should be taught.
(c) 3A x I refer to your article on the Sunday Times.

3B. PREPOSITION ADVERB

e.g. (a) 3B+ There were about sixty members comprising of both old and new students.
(b) 3B- Unfortunately most parents try to brush or avoid this topic.
(c) 3Bx The day went about smoothly.

3C. DETERMINER

e.g. (a) 3C+ They were students from the Nanyang University.
(b) 3C- Among the highlights of the programme were games, sing-a-long session and a solo.
(c) 3Cx I find this article rather useful because these information can be easily obtained from ......

3D. PRONOUN

e.g. (a) 3D+ Hassan himself he spoke to the principal.
(b) 3D- Chee Keong's leg was run over by the motor-cycle and was rushed to the hospital.
(c) 3Dx A scooterist tried to squeeze among the waiting cars. It collided with a Mercedes.

3E. INDEFINITE SUBSTITUTE WORD

e.g. (a) 3E+ All and everyone here knows that ......
(b) 3E- The ones who know the subject already or think they know, will find, boring.
(c) 3Ex All these only goes to show that the new students have been apathetic.
3F. INTENSIFIER
   e.g. (a) 3F+ He was quite very ill.
        (b) 3F- He liked much to go.
        (c) 3Fx John was feeling so sad.

3G. INTERROGATIVE
   e.g. (a) 3G+ What and which boys did not bring their football jerseys?
        (b) 3G- He asked, 'Is your mother?'
        (c) 3Gx Where is the capital of Indonesia?

4. Errors in sentence patterns constitute the next basic class. These include:

4A. INCOMPLETE SENTENCE
   e.g. (a) Since the hawkers' stalls are meant for anybody.
        (b) When the sun rises.
        (c) If television programmes can be divided into these kinds of programmes satisfying different requirements.

4B. WRONG WORD ORDER
   e.g. (a) He saw a blue big car.
        (b) Could you please tell me where is the science lab?

4C. UNRELATED SENTENCE SEGMENT
   e.g. (a) (As many factories have been built) the women like the men help the country progress.
        (b) (Not knowing what electronic music was before) I recall having heard this form of music.

4D. ILL-FORMED SENTENCE/NO RECOGNIZABLE SENTENCE PATTERN
   e.g. (a) It was only after reading its definition was I enlightened on the subject.
        (b) It is really entertain and refresh ourselves.
        (c) Anyway, we have tried our best is still trying.

4E. WRONG CO-ORDINATOR
   e.g. (a) Either John and his sister can go.
        (b) He cannot do it and his sister can.
4F. WRONG SUBORDINATOR

e.g. (a) She comes from a family what have never done well academically.
  (b) For he was late for work *yesterday*, he apologised to his supervisor.

5. Possibly the most difficult class of errors to deal with are errors in expression. In the act of giving an idea verbal realisation, the following types of errors are common:

5A. UNIDIOMATIC

e.g (a) At a meal, you have to prevent the scratching of the plate by the knife.
  (b) Take the amount you can finish and don't over taking.
  (c) The audience gave their big hands to support them.

5B. WRONG STYLISTIC REGISTER

e.g. (a) I have three *offspring*: the eldest is in Secondary 3.
  (b) He said that some crooks broke into his house last night.
  (c) The trouble with Janet is that she likes to bluff and moreover, she is a dum dum.
  (d) Most honoured sir ......

5C. FROLIXITY

e.g. (a) I have been instructed by the Principal to make enquiries with a view to obtaining information as to whether ....
  (b) Dear Sir,
      I have the pleasure of informing you that I would like to tell you about some suggestions that I have .........

5D. MEANINGLESS

e.g. (a) This come to that, that you can always read the newspaper which parents try to get their lost daughters.
  (b) If the changing role in our society, more portion of women will work out form the kitchen.
6. The final class of errors are lexical in nature. They include the following categories.

6x WRONG WORD
   e.g. (a) Leave all skeletons on your plate or table and not on the floor after eating.
       (b) The programme is fond by many Singaporeans.
       (c) I would like to bring out an incident which proves otherwise.
       (d) The introduction of sex education in school might help to solve the curiosity of pupils to some extent.

6+ REDUNDANT WORD(S)
   e.g. (a) Although it is short and brief, it is able to convey the intended message.
       (b) The present state of condition of the school .......
       (c) The writer has given the readers a good insight into the mind of a child.

6- MISSING WORD(S)
   e.g. (a) The pupils returned to class and lesson continued but the fire-drill was the topic of the day.
       (b) The second orientation was held at the school where ......
       (c) So we prolonged as best we could.

In using the system to analyse errors on individual scripts the teachers will underline the errors on each ruled line and identify these errors in sequence against the left-hand margin of the page thus:

2C/2D/2A I am quite agree with Kok Keong. Nowadays, the young has proper education facility. They are being lived in an advance and modern society .........
2E/2D/2C I must, however, said that we is now live in a more affluent society .........
2C/2A/2C Nowadays, the young was more fortunate .........
Where multiple errors occur in the use of a particular grammatical or grammatical-lexical item, the item is encircled and the types of error made indicated within the circle. Two examples are given above. In the first - 'we is now live' - the student has made an error in concord of number and verb form and in the second - 'Nowaday the young was' - an error in concord of number and tense.

While initially the system appears to be difficult to use, facility comes with practice. It is possible, of course, to further refine the system and include sub-categories to each of the categories with each class of errors. But this would make the system too unwieldy. Once the errors have been collected under the various categories, they could perhaps be subjected to further analysis using other ancillary systems (which time does not permit me to describe here).

The advantages of this system are as follows:

1) The teacher is able to tell by glancing at the margin the density and scatter of errors over a stretch of 150-200 words.

2) He can identify precisely the type of errors made, the frequency of occurrence of these errors and their proportion in relationship to the total number of errors.

3) He can do this for each pupil as well as for the whole class: thus he can work out an individual as well as a class profile. The form attached to this paper provides an easy method of recording the errors. The number of times an error is made by each pupil is recorded within each of the cells. The sum of the numbers recorded within each cell in the horizontal axis will show the total number of errors made by each pupil while the sum in each vertical axis will indicate the number of errors made in each category. From the profile of errors made by the class as a whole, it becomes easy for the teacher to work out a remedial syllabus. He will know which parts of the language code require greatest attention in the class. It also becomes possible when dealing with individual pupils to identify errors which are idiosyncratic and to give personalized remedial work.
4) It also simplifies the task of locating and collecting errors. If one were looking, for example, for redundant uses of prepositions, one would look through the pile of compositions for the symbol $\exists A$. The teacher could then copy the error on a sheet of paper and thus compile a list of $\exists A \leftarrow$ errors made by pupils. These actual errors could serve as instructional materials for the grammar lessons.

5) Making another profile based on written work set at the end of a course, it is possible to find out whether pupils have improved in their use of the language code. There should, theoretically, be a reduction in the number of errors made - particularly in the parts of the code that the teacher paid attention to.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that this system that I have described is still tentative and subject to extensive tryout. I have modified the system a number of times as a result of tryouts conducted both by myself and my students at I.E. and I expect that further modifications need to be made. The system, of course, is not comprehensive but I believe that it accounts for a large proportion of errors made by our pupils. Probably it requires further expansion to include categories of errors I have not encountered but I shall be grateful to receive any constructive suggestions that might be offered.
SELF-EVALUATION (PART II)

1) Why is it better for the teacher to obtain his data from 4 short compositions (each of about 150 words in length) with different themes?

2) Complete the following statements:

(a) Graphological errors are errors in __________, __________ and __________.

(b) Morphological errors are errors in __________ and include the following 7 categories: __________, __________, __________, __________, __________, __________, __________.

(c) Structural words include the following categories:
   i. __________
   ii. __________
   iii. __________
   iv. __________
   v. __________
   vi. __________
   vii. __________
(d) Errors in sentence patterns include:
   i.
   ii.
   iii.
   iv.
   v.
   vi.

(e) Errors in expression include:
   i.
   ii.
   iii.
   iv.

(f) The three types of errors in the use of lexis are:
   i.
   ii.
   iii.

3) In the notation system, an underlined word/phrase indicates an ___________. An encircled word/phrase indicates a ___________.

4) What are the advantages of this system?
FEEDBACK (PART II)

1) The reason why 4 short essays with different themes (narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative) should be set for the purpose of error analysis is that pupils will then have to employ a wider range of their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and expression i.e. a wider language repertoire. Merely looking at one short composition is an inadequate measure since this provides a restricted perspective of a student's problems in language.

2) (a) Spelling, the use of punctuation marks and the use of upper and lower case.
(b) The internal form of words
   - agreement between subject and verb tense
   - verb form
   - noun form
   - adjective form
   - adverb form
   - possessive case

(c) i. Preposition
    ii. Preposition Adverb
    iii. Determiner
    iv. Pronoun
    v. Indefinite substitute word
    vi. Intensifier
    vii. Interrogative

(d) i. Incomplete sentence
    ii. Wrong word order
    iii. Unrelated sentence segments
    iv. Ill-formed sentences
    v. Wrong co-ordinators
    vi. Wrong subordinators

(e) i. Unidiomatic expressions
    ii. Wrong stylistic register
    iii. Prolixity
    iv. Meaningless statements
(f) i. Choosing the wrong word
   ii. Using redundant words
   iii. Omitting necessary words

3) an error
   multiple error

4) Your answer should include the following points:

(a) It enables the teacher to tell at a glance the density and scatter of errors in a sample of written discourse.

(b) It allows easy identification of types of errors for reference purposes.

(c) It allows the teacher to construct error profiles for individual pupils as well as for the whole class using a matrix. This enables the teacher to work out a meaningful remedial syllabus.

(d) It serves as a materials resource for remedial lessons.
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TRYING OUT THE SYSTEM OF ERROR ANALYSIS

The following are samples of compositions done by sec. 1 pupils. Please use the system described in the paper on the USES OF ERROR ANALYSIS to analyse the errors made in the compositions.

SAMPLE A

The Most Unforgettable Day In My Life

I woke up quite early in the morning of 12th. of February. It was a very quite and peaceful morning but I thought it could turned out to be lazy day for me because my two monkeys of brothers have went out to hiking. Nobody of my family could imagined that it turned out to be a day of frustration and excitement.

The first indent of the day happen just when we were had the lunch. We heard a ring and the front door open. My two brothers have returned home and one of them have a injured arm with a blood-stained shirt. My mother instantaneously fainted for she has a weak heart and cannot bear the sight of blood. After a moment of hesitation and discussion, my sister hurry next door to fetch our neighbour and I immediately telephone my father office. After ten minutes, an ambulance have came and took our mother to hospital with our neighbour to accompanied and helped her. A nurse stayed behind to bandaged my mother arm. My father then returned home and insist to know what have happened. After telling him, he immediately left for hospital but he give us instructions of what to do if he does not returned tongith. That night, I have to cooked dinner and of course I made a mess of it. We have then to be contented with a piece of bread and butter each. That night we waited for a telephone call from my father who did not telephoned until eleven o'Clock.

We were told that my mother is conscious again and is much alright, and we all give a sign of relieve. We went to bed tired and a bit hungry but so happy to hear that my mother is alright. That is the day which most unforgettable in my life with a lot of incidents each one happening after another.
LIM BO SENG

A man who help to resist the Japanese when they invade and occupy Malaysia and Singapore. His name is Lim Bo Seng.

Lim Bo Seng was borned in China. But came to Singapore when he is sixteen. Studied at Raffles Institution and later in University of Hong Kong. When his father dead he return to Singapore to look after the family business. He then became a well-known businessman. He was very interest in which is happened around him but take an active part in public affair.

When war came to Malaysia, Lim Bo Seng at once work hard to get local men and women to volunteer to help defended Singapore against the Japanese. By doing this he make himself a enemy of Japanese. So when it came clear to all that Singapore is about to fall. He and a few of his friend escape in a small samplan. Then a warship take them to Calcutta in India. There Bo Seng meet wo English officers and togehter they pan to help the British return to Malaya and drove the Japanese away. Lim Bo Seng part was to train the people in the Jungles of Malaysia.

Some months pass. Bo Seng had kept busy organising and plan with resistance fighters for the day when they can helped the return British forces drive the Japanese out. Part of his job is to collect information about the Japanese and the activity. These informations were hid in cigarette packs and tube of toothpaste. His agents will then pass them to other agents waiting in submarines off coast.

One day Bo Seng decide to leave the Jungles and moved to viallage and town in Ipoh. So that he may be able to get more informations. He change his name and pretend to be a uncle of a secret agent. The secret agent who live in the town. At first he was save but one day someone betray him. He was immediately arrest and put at the prison in Ipoh. The Japanese torture him to force him to betray his friend but he would never give anyone away. He dead in prison because of ill-treatment and was buried outside the prison walls.

When the war finished. The British came back to Malaya, his family bring his remains home to Singapore, return him near MacRitchie Reservoir, A memorial for him on the Esplanade today.
Appendix 1: A SYSTEM OF ERROR ANALYSIS

1. GRAPHOLOGICAL
   - A. Spelling
   - B. Punctuation mark
   - C. Upper/lower case

2. MORPHOLOGICAL
   - A. Agreement between subject and verb
   - B. Tense
   - C. Verb form
   - D. Noun form
   - E. Adjective form
   - F. Adverb form
   - G. Possessive case

3. STRUCTURAL WORD
   - A. Preposition
   - B. Preposition adverb
   - C. Determiner (x Wrong)
   - D. Pronoun (+ Redundant)
   - E. Indefinite substitute word (- Missing)
   - F. Intensifier
   - G. Interrogative

4. SENTENCE PATTERN
   - A. Incomplete sentence
   - B. Wrong word order
   - C. Unrelated sentence segment
   - D. Ill-formed sentence/No recognizable sentence pattern
   - E. Wrong co-ordinator
   - F. Wrong subordinator

5. EXPRESSION
   - A. Unidiomatic
   - B. Wrong stylistic register
   - C. Prolixity
   - D. Meaningless

6. LEXICAL
   - x Wrong word
   - + Redundant word (s)
   - - Missing word (s)