Чугунова Н.В., Гричулевич А.В.
Chugunova N.V., Grichulevich A.V.

РАБОТА НАД ГРАММАТИЧЕСКИМИ ОШИБКАМИ

HOW TO DEAL WITH GRAMMAR ERRORS

Summary. We have looked at the types and causes of error and at strategies teachers can enlist in dealing with grammar.

Аннотация. Рассматривается стратегия преподавателя в борьбе с за «чистую» без ошибок грамматику.

Language learners make mistakes. This seems to happen regardless of the teacher's skill and perseverance. It seems to be an inevitable part of learning a language. Most teachers believe that to ignore these mistakes might put at risk the learner's linguistic development. Current research tends to support this view. Not to ignore mistakes, however, often means having to make a number of on-the-spot decisions. These can be summed up in the form of the 'in-flight' questions a teacher might ask when faced with a students possible error:

- Is there an error here?
- What kind of error is it?
- What caused it?
- Does it matter?
- What should I do about it?

Here, for example, is a written text produced by a Spanish-speaking student:

The Sunday night past, the doorbell rangs, I opened the door and I had a big surprise, my brother was stopping in the door. He was changing a lot of. He was having a long hair but him looking was very interesting. Now, he's twenty five years, and he's lower. We speaked all night and we remembered a lot of thinks. At last when I went to the bed was the four o'clock.

While it is clear that the text is non-standard (by native-speaker standards) it is not always an easy task to identify the individual errors themselves. Take for example, *I had a big surprise.* At first sight there seems to be nothing wrong with this. It is a grammatically well-formed sentence - that is, the words are in the right order, the tense is correct, and the subject and verb agree. Moreover, the meaning is clear and unambiguous. But would a native speaker ever say it? According to corpus evidence (that is, databases of spoken and written texts) something can be a big surprise, a person can bein for a big surprise, you can have a big surprise for someone, but instances of I had a big surprise simply do not exist. Should we conclude, therefore, that it is wrong? The answer is yes, if we imagine a scale of 'wrongness' ranging from 'completely wrong' to 'this is OK, but a native speaker would never say it'. However, no corpus is big enough to include all possible sentences and, at the same time, new ways of saying things are being constantly invented. This is a case, therefore, when the teacher has to use considerable discretion.

Once an error has been identified, the next step is to classify it. Learners may make mistakes at the level of individual words, in the way they put sentences together, or at the level of whole texts. At the word level, learners make mistakes either because they have chosen the wrong word for the meaning they want to express (My brother was stopping in the door instead of standing), or they have chosen the wrong form of the word (lower instead of lawyer, thinks instead of things). These are lexical errors. Lexical errors also include mistakes in the way words are combined: the Sunday night past instead of last Sunday night. Grammar errors, on the other hand, cover such things as mistakes in verb form and tense (the doorbellrangs, we speaked), and in sentence structure: was the four o'clock, where the subject of the clause (it) has been left out. There is also a category of errors called discourse errors which relate to the way sentences are organised and linked in order to make whole texts. For example, in the student extract above at last suggests that what follows is the solution to a problem: eventually would have been better in this context.

To sum up, then, the following categories of errors have been identified:
- lexical errors
- grammar errors
- discourse errors

and, in the case of spoken language:
- pronunciation errors

It is not always the case that errors fall neatly into the above categories, and there is often

considerable overlap between these categories.

Identifying the cause of an error can be equally problematic. Speakers of Spanish may recognise, in the above text, the influence of the writer's first language (his LI) on his second language (his L2). For example, the lack of the indefinite article in *he's lower* (for *he's a lawyer*) suggests that the learner has borrowed the Spanish construction *(es abogado)* in which the indefinite article *(un)* is not used. Such instances of Ll influence on L2 production are examples of **transfer.** They do not necessarily result in errors - there is such a thing as **positive transfer.** *He's lower* is an example of **negative transfer** or what was once called Ll **interference.**

The case of *rangs,* however, cannot be accounted for by reference to the learner's L1 Nor can *speaked.* Both errors derive from over-applying (or **overgeneralising)** an L2 rule. In the case of *rangs,* the learner has overgeneralised the third person *-s* rule in the present *(he rings)* and applied it to the past. In the case of *speakedhe* has overgeneralised the past tense *-ed*ending. Such errors seem to be influenced not by factors external to the second language such as the learner's first language but by the nature of the second language itself. They suggest that the learner is working according to L2 rules and this is evidence that a process of hypothesis formation and testing is underway. In fact, these **developmental errors** are not dissimilar to the kinds of errors children make when they are learning their mother tongue:

He go to sleep.
Are dogs can wiggle their tails?
Daddy broked it.

These two kinds of errors - transfer and developmental - account for the bulk of the errors learners make. Such errors can range from the fairly hit-and-miss *{him looking was very interesting)* to errors that seem to show evidence of a rule being fairly systematically (but not yet accurately) applied. Thus: *my brother was stopping, he was changing, he was having a long hair.* These are all examples of a verb form (past continuous) being overused, but in a systematic way. It is as if the learner had formed a rule to the effect that, 'when talking about past states - as opposed to events - use *was + -ing.*

It is probably these **systematic errors,** rather than the random ones, that respond best to correction. Correction can provide the feedback the learner needs to help confirm or reject a hypothesis, or to tighten the application of a rule that is being applied fairly loosely. Of course, it is not always clear whether an error is the product of random processes, or the product of a developing but inexact system. Nor is it always clear how inexact this system is. For example, it may be the case that the learner knows the right rule but, in the heat of the moment, has failed to apply it. One way of testing this is to see whether the learner can **self-correct:** could the writer of the text above change *speaked* to *spoke,* for example, if told that *speaked* was wrong? If so, this suggests that the rule is both systematic and correctly formulated in the learner's mind, but that it hasn't yet become automatic.

The next issue to address is the question of priorities. Which errors really matter, and which don't? This is obviously rather subjective: some errors are likely to distract or even irritate the reader or listener while others go largely unnoticed. For example, speakers of languages in which nouns are distinguished by gender (e.g. *un banane, unepomme)* frequently say they are irritated by gender mistakes such as *une banane,* A fairer, but still fairly subjective, criterion might be the one of **intelligibility:** to what extent does the error interfere with, or distort, the speaker's (or writer's) message? In the text above it is difficult, even impossible, to recover the meaning of *lower* (for *lawyer)* from the context. On the other hand *the doorbell rangs* is fairly unproblematic. It may cause a momentary hiccup in communication, but it is not severe enough to threaten it.

It should be apparent by now that there are many complex decisions that teachers have to make when monitoring learner production. It is not surprising that the way they respond to error tends to be more often intuitive than consciously considered. But before addressing the question as to how to respond, it may pay to look briefly at teachers' and students' attitudes to error and correction.

Few people like being wrong, and yet there seems to be no way of learning a language without being wrong a lot of the time. Not many people like being corrected either, yet to leave mistakes uncorrected flies in the face of the intuitions and expectations of teachers and students alike. This accounts for some of the problems associated with error and correction.

Attitudes to error run deep and lie at the heart of teachers' intuitions about language learning. Many people still believe that errors are contagious, and that learners are at risk of catching the errors other learners make. It is often this fear of error infection that underlies many students' dislike of pair and group work. On the other hand, many teachers believe that to correct errors is a form of interference, especially in fluency activities. Some teachers go further, and argue that correction of any sort creates a judgmental – and therefore stressful – classroom atmosphere, and should be avoided altogether.

These different attitudes find an echo in the shifts of thinking that have taken place amongst

researchers and materials writers. Recent thinking sees errors as being evidence of developmental processes rather than the result of bad habit formation. This sea change in attitudes is well captured in the introductions to ELT coursebooks. Here is a selection:

'The student should be trained to learn by making as few mistakes as possible ... He must be trained to adopt correct learning habits right from the start.' (from *First Things First* by L. Alexander)

'Getting things wrong is only good practice in getting things wrong.' (from *Success with English, Teachers Handbook 1* by Barnett et al)

'Provided students communicate effectively, they should not be given a
sense of failure because they make mistakes.' _
(from *The Cambridge English Course, 1, Teachers Book* by Swan and
Walter)

'Don't expect learners to go straight from ignorance to knowledge. Learning takes time and is not achieved in one go. Be prepared to accept partial learning as an important stage on the way to full learning.' (from *Project English 2, Teachers Book* by Hutchinson)

'Making mistakes is an important and positive part of learning language. Only by experimenting with the language and receiving feedback can students begin to work out how the language works.' (from *Blueprint Intermediate, Teachers Book* by Abbs and Freebairn)

Certainly, current methodology is much more tolerant of error. But the tide may be turning yet again. Studies of learners whose language development has **fossilised** - that is, it has stopped at a point well short of the target -suggest that lack of **negative feedback** may have been a factor. Negative feedback is simply **indicating** *No, you* can't say that when a learner makes an error. Positive feedback, on the other hand, is when learners are told when they are right. If the only messages learners get are positive, it may be the case that there is no incentive to restructure their mental grammar. The restructuring mechanisms close down. Hence it is now generally accepted that a **focus on form** (not just on meaning) is necessary in order to guard against fossilisation. A focus on form includes giving learners clear messages about their errors.

What options has the teacher got when faced with a student's error? Let's imagine that, in the course of a classroom activity, a student has been describing a persons appearance and said:

He has a long hair. Here are some possible responses that the teacher might consider:

1. This is clearly negative feedback, but it offers the student no clue as to what was wrong. The teacher may be assuming that the student has simply made a slip under pressure, and that this does not therefore represent a lack of knowledge of the rule. The learner should therefore be able to self-correct. There are, of course, other ways of signalling that a mistake has been made without having to say No. A facial expression, shake of the head etc, might work just as well. Some teachers try to soften the negative force of no by, for example, making a mmmm noise to indicate: Well, that's not entirely correct but thanks anyway. Unfortunately, this may leave the student wondering Have I made a mistake or haven't /?

2. He has long hair. This a correction in the strictest sense of the word. The teacher simply repairs the student's utterance - perhaps m the interest of maintaining the flow of the talk, but at the same time, reminding the learner not to focus only on meaning at the expense of form,

3. No article. The teacher's move is directed at pinpointing the kind of error the student has made in order to prompt self-correction, or, if that fails, peer-correction - when learners correct each other. This is where metalanguage (the use of grammatical terminology) comes in handy: words like article, preposition, verb, tense etc. provide an economical means of giving feedback - assuming, of course, that students are already familiar with these terms.

4. No. Anyone? An unambiguous feedback signal plus an invitation for peer-correction. By excluding the option of self-correction, however, the teacher risks humiliating the original student: perhaps the teacher knows the student well enough to rule out self-correction for this error.

5. He has ...?Xn other words, the teacher is replaying the student's utter ance" up to the point where the error occurred, with a view to isolating
the error as a clue for self-correction. This technique can be reinforced by finger-coding, where the teacher marks out each word on her fingers, indicating with her fingers the part of the phrase or sentence that needs repair.

6. He has a long hair? Another common teacher strategy Is to echo the mistake but with a quizzical intonation. This is perhaps less threatening than saying No, but often learners fail to interpret this is an invitation to self-correct, and think that the teacher is simply questioning the truth of what they have just said. They might then respond Yes, he has a very long hair. Down to here.

7. I'm sorry, I didn't understand. Variations on this response include Sorry? He what? Excuse me? etc. These are known as clarification requests and, of course, occur frequently in real conversation. As a

correction device they signal to the student that the meaning of their message is unclear, suggesting that it may have been distorted due to some problem of form. It is therefore a more friendly way of signalling a mistake. Research suggests that when learners re-cast their message after receiving a clarification request, it usually tends to improve, despite their not having been told explicitly that a mistake has been made, much less what kind of mistake it was. This suggests that the policy of 'acting a bit thick' (on the part of the teacher) might have positive dividends in terms of self-correction.

8.   Just one? Like this? [draws bald man with one long hair] Ha ha ... The teacher has pretended to interpret the student's utterance literally, in order to show the student the unintended effect of the error, on the principle that, once the student appreciates the difference between he has long hair and he has a long hair he will be less likely to make the same mistake again. This is possible only with those mistakes which do make a difference in meaning – such as he's lower in the text we started with. There is, of course, the danger of humiliating the student, but, if handled sensitively, this kind of feedback can be extremely effective.

9.   A long hair is just one single hair, like you find in your soup. For the hair on your head you wouldn't use an article: He has long hair. The teacher uses the error to make an impromptu teaching point. This is an example of reactive teaching, where instruction is in response to students' errors rather than trying to pre-empt them. Of course, if the teacher were to do this at every mistake, the classes would not only become very teacher-centred, but the students might become reluctant to open their mouths.

Oh, he has long hair, has he? This technique (sometimes called reformulation) is an example of covert feedback, disguised as a conversational aside. The hope is, that the student will take the veiled correction on board but will not be inhibited from continuing the flow of talk. Typically, this is the way parents seem to correct their children – by offering an expanded version of the child's utterance:

10. child: Teddy hat.

mother: Yes, Teddy's got a hat on, hasn't he?

Some theorists argue that these expansions and reformulations help provide a temporary scaffold for the child's developing language competence. The problem is that learners may simply not recognise the intention nor notice the difference between their utterance and the teacher's reformulation.

11. Good. Strange as this seems, it is in fact a very common way that teachers provide feedback on student production, especially in activities where the focus is more on meaning than on form. For example, it is not difficult to imagine a sequence like this:

teacher: What does Mick Jagger look like?

student: He has a long hair.

teacher: Good. Anything else?

student: He has a big lips.

teacher: Good.

etc.

The intention behind good (or any of its alternatives, such as OK) is to acknowledge the students' contribution, irrespective of either its accuracy or even of its meaning. But, if construed as positive feedback, it may lull learners into a false sense of security, and, worse, initiate the process of fossilisation.

12. Teacher says nothing but writes down error for future reference. The intention here is to postpone the feedback so as not to disrupt the flow of talk, but to deal with errors later. Perhaps the students are working in groups and the teacher has chanced on the error while monitoring. A correction in this context might be inappropriate. Nevertheless, there are some grounds to believe that the most effective feedback is that which occurs in what are called real operating conditions, that is, when the learner is using language communicatively. For example, a trainee driver is more likely to notice the correction when it is most relevant - while driving - than after the event, in a list of points being ticked off by the driving instructor. The trick, it seems, is to intervene without interfering.

To sum up, then: learners' errors offer the teacher a rich source of data with which to monitor learning. At the same time, learners need feedback on their production. This suggests that teachers should deal with at least some of the errors that arise. To do this, they have a wide range of feedback options available. The choice of feedback strategy will depend on such factors as:

− The type of error: Does it have a major effect on communication? Is it one that the learner could probably self-repair?

− The type of activity: Is the focus of the activity more on form or on meaning? If the latter, it is probably best to correct without interfering too much with the flow of communication.

− The type of learner: Will the learner be discouraged or humiliatde by correction? Alternatively, will the learner feel short-changed if there is no correction?