ERROR IDENTIFICATION BY KOREAN TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

This article reports on a study involving a group of Korean teachers of English working in Taegu, South Korea. The aim of the study was to see how well this group could identify and explain errors in a series of language examples that reflect concerns with spoken English. Following a review of ways in which language learner errors have been treated in the ELT literature, the research methodology and the results are discussed, and the implications for teacher education and development are considered.

Approaches to learner errors

The errors of language learners were once viewed as a sign of not having adequately acquired a linguistic item. This outlook owed a great deal to structuralist views of language and behaviourist views of human learning, with the belief being prevalent that language teachers had to take great care to help learners avoid errors in their language production. Thus, in teaching/learning methods like Audiolingualism (cf. Richards and Rogers 1986) teachers and learners engaged in intensive practice featuring mimicry, repetition, language drills, and overmastery of language items. However, these foundations fell into disrepute as linguists began to look at learners' language errors in a new way. Researchers began to suggest that learners' errors are, in fact, very important, providing insight into how far a learner has progressed in acquiring a language, and showing how much more the learner needs to learn.

The subsequent research into understanding the errors of language learners can be classified into three broad categories. First, there was theoretical work in reaction to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which attempts to predict the errors in L2 that learners of various L1 backgrounds will make (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 52–55). Through this work (e.g. Corder 1967, Richards 1971, Corder 1971, Selinker 1972), the theoretical frameworks of Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Interlanguage (IL) were established. Work in these areas continues to this day, with the publication of major texts such as James 1980 and

1998, works on CA including Faghih 1997 and Garrigues 2000, and EA studies including Lott 1983, Ghadessy 1985, Kharma 1987 and Butler 1990.

The second main area of research is based on what happens in the classroom. On one side, there is a considerable body of work that looks at what teachers and learners actually do in the classroom when language errors occur (cf. Chaudron 1988, Allwright and Bailey 1991). On the other side, a number of studies have looked at what type of teacher intervention is most effective in counteracting errors, thereby aiding second language acquisition (SLA) for learners. A sizeable body of work in Canada (e.g. Harley et. al. 1990, White et. al. 1991, Spada and Lightbown 1993, Lyster 1998) has established the importance of teacher intervention and *appropriate* corrective feedback in counteracting learner error. The third body of work consists of error gravity studies (e.g. James 1977, Hughes and Lascaratou 1982, Shorey 1986, McCretton and Rider 1993, Delamere 1996), where various language errors are ranked according to how serious the errors are perceived to be.

There has been some work in the error gravity studies on how non-native speaker teachers of English judge errors for their seriousness. However, no study has been published that examines whether non-native speaker teachers of English can correctly identify what is or is not erroneous, or explain why something is erroneous. In Korea this is particularly important in view of the fact that the government is in the process of adopting an 'English through English' programme (Soh 2000), in which English becomes both the subject and the medium of instruction in public schools. Given this situation, a study of how Korean teachers of English analyze examples of spoken English for errors, and of how they would treat similar language production by their students, can provide important insights.

The Study

For this study it was decided to select a series of language examples, and then interview a group of Korean teachers of English, who would analyse the examples for errors. A number of sources were used: common errors that occurred in mid-term exams of the author's English Conversation classes in 1999 and 2000, personal experience, adaptation from other sources, and an example written for the study. Although the examples were written, it was always emphasized in the interviews that spoken English was the focus of the study.

The examples (see Appendix) were organised according to Willis' (1993) categories of grammar. These categories are 'structure' (clause subordination and word order), 'orientation' (how various morphemes orient listeners to what people are talking about), 'class' (what class of word a given word is), and 'collocation' (words that appear together). In particular, the aspect of colligation, or collocation into grammatical patterns (Hunston et. al. 1997, Carter 1998), was carefully included. It was decided to strike a balance between errors of conformity (Willis, D. 1996) and errors that affect meaning or communication. Three examples were error-free and served as distractors. Many of the examples also reflected aspects of spoken English grammar (McCarthy and Carter 1995, Carter 1998), which raised an interesting research question: Would the participants identify these features as errors? In other words, would the participants show evidence of working to written rather than to spoken norms of language?

The participants were twenty-one Korean teachers of English who worked in middle and high schools in the city of Taegu. They were interviewed in English during November–December 2000. In the interviews, they were asked four questions:

1.) Do you see an error in this example?
2.) If 'yes', where is the error?
3.) If a student asked you, 'Is it OK to say this?', what would you tell them?
4.) If you answered 'yes' to question 1, and you heard a student saying something like this in class, would you deal with the error right away, deal with the error at another time, or not deal with the error?

After three interviews, it was decided to change the third question to the following, 'If a student asked you, 'Why should I change it from (the form found in the language example) to (the form supplied by the teacher participant), what would you tell them?'. This was done to ensure that the participants gave clear explanations for any errors they located. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and checked for how the questions for each example were answered. After the answers were isolated, they were classified, tallied, and put into tables.

The Results

Where were errors seen?

As Table 1 shows, examples 1–4, 6, 10, and 11 were identified by at least 90% of participants as having at least one error. Five of these examples (examples 2–4, 6, and 10) were identified as relating to concerns of conformity. In addition, three of the four examples relating to the grammar of structure (examples 6, 10, and 11) and two of the four examples relating to the grammar of orientation (examples 1 and 4) are here. Examples 8, 9, and 13 were identified by about three-quarters of participants as containing at least one error, while the remaining examples (examples 5, 7, 12, and 14) were identified as such by around two-thirds of the participants. These include four of the six examples dealing with collocation/colligation (examples 5, 7, 8, and 9). It appears as though participants found it easier to identify an error, rightly or wrongly, when the example in question related to issues like language conformity or the grammar of structure.

	YES	NO	UNSURE
Ex. #1	20 (95.2)	1 (4.8)	0
Ex. #2	19 (90.5)	2 (9.5)	0
Ex. #3	20 (95.2)	1 (4.8)	0
Ex. #4	20 (95.2)	1 (4.8)	0
Ex. #5	10 (47.6)	9 (42.9)	2 (9.5)
Ex. #6	19 (90.5)	2 (9.5)	0
Ex. #7	13 (61.9)	7 (33.3)	1 (4.8)
Ex. #8	15 (71.4)	6 (28.6)	0
Ex. #9	16 (76.2)	4 (19.0)	1(4.8)
Ex. #10	19 (90.5)	2 (9.5)	0
Ex. #11	20 (95.2)	1 (4.8)	0
Ex. #12	13 (61.9)	7 (33.3)	1 (4.8)
Ex. #13	16 (76.2)	5 (23.8)	0
Ex. #14	13 (61.9)	6 (28.6)	2 (9.5)

Table 1: Answers to Question 1 (‘Do you see an error in this example?’), sorted by example (percentages in parentheses).

How often were errors identified in concurrence with the researcher?

Table 2 shows how often the error identifications of the participants concurred with the researcher’s assessment of error in the language examples. As can be seen, only example 6 was so identified by almost all participants. The next group of examples is examples 2, 10, and 11, in which concurrence occurred at least 70% of the time. Three of these examples (examples 6, 10, and 11) are related to the grammar of

structure. After that, examples 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 have a rate of concurrence between 50% and 70%. Three examples from this group – examples 5, 7, and 8 – deal with the grammar of collocation or colligation. The remaining examples (examples 1, 2, 9, and 12–14) all have a rate of concurrence below 50%. Overall, just under half of the error identifications participants made were ones that the researcher concurred with.

	YES	NO
#1	1 (4.2)	23 (95.8)
#2	18 (75.0)	6 (25.0)
#3	20 (62.5)	12 (37.5)
#4	13 (50.0)	13 (50.0)
#5	12 (57.1)	9 (42.9)
#6	19 (90.5)	2 (9.5)
#7	11 (50.0)	11 (50.0)
#8	15 (68.2)	7 (31.8)
#9	5 (15.2)	26 (84.8)
#10	21 (75.0)	7 (25.0)
#11	19 (73.1)	7 (26.9)
#12	3 (13.6)	19 (86.4)
#13	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)
#14	6 (22.2)	21 (77.8)
Totals	172 (49.1)	178 (50.9)

Table 2: Error identifications concurring with reseracher's assessment, sorted by example (percentages in parentheses)

What types of explanation were predominant?

Table 3 shows the types of explanation that were used for each example. While not all error identifications were explained, the table still shows what types of explanation were used most often. Rule-based explanations (i.e., appealing to some rule of grammar) were most predominant, used just over half of the time. The next most frequent type of explanation was meaning-based (i.e., that the use of a certain lexical item conveyed the wrong meaning), used about one-sixth of the time. A number of other explanation types were used infrequently. About one-fifth of total explanations were ones where there was no explanation given. In these cases, the participants said that a change in output was necessary (Direct to Change), or pointed out where the error was (Highlight Error), or said they didn't know (Unsure).

CODE FOR RESPONSE CATEGORIES: RB – Rule-based; MB – Meaning-based; FB – Frequency-based; FAB – Fact-based; LB – Lexically-based; NSN – Appeal to Native-speaker Norms; CB – Culturally-based; AD – Appeal to Dictionary; DC – Direct to Change; HE – Highlight Error; U – Unsure; NEO – No Explanation Offered; EX TOT – Example Totals; EXP TOT – Explanation Totals (note: some percentage totals are greater than 100% due to the rounding off of figures).

	RB	MB	FB	FAB	LB	NSN	CB	AD	DC	HE	U	NEO	EX TOT
Ex. 1	14 (70.0)	1 (5.0)							2 (10.0)	2 (10.0)		1 (5.0)	20 (100)
Ex. 2	1 (5.3)	9 (47.4)	1 (5.3)		2 (10.5)	1 (5.3)		1 (5.3)	3 (15.8)		1 (5.3)		19 (100.2)
Ex. 3	17 (81.0)								4 (19.0)				21 (100)
Ex. 4	11 (52.4)	9 (42.9)							1 (4.8)				21 (100.1)
Ex. 5	2 (18.2)	3 (27.3)			1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)			3 (27.3)			1 (9.1)	11 (100.1)
Ex. 6	17 (89.5)									1 (5.3)		1 (5.3)	19 (100.1)
Ex. 7	3 (20.0)	2 (13.3)	1 (6.7)		1 (6.7)	1 (6.7)			3 (20.0)	1 (6.7)	2 (13.3)	1 (6.7)	15 (100.1)
Ex. 8	2 (13.3)	8 (53.3)					1 (6.7)		3 (20.0)	1 (6.7)			15 (100)
Ex. 9	6 (33.3)	3 (16.7)				1 (5.6)			5 (27.8)	2 (11.1)	1 (5.6)		18 (100.1)
Ex. 10	15 (78.9)			1 (5.3)	1 (5.3)						1 (5.3)	1 (5.3)	19 (100.1)
Ex. 11	14 (73.7)	1 (5.3)							2 (10.5)		1 (5.3)	1 (5.3)	19 (100.1)
Ex. 12	3 (20.0)	1 (6.7)		7 (46.7)			1 (6.7)		3 (20.0)				15 (100.1)
Ex. 13	14 (82.4)	1 (5.9)							1 (5.9)		1 (5.9)		17 (100.1)
Ex. 14	5 (38.5)	3 (23.1)	1 (7.7)						1 (7.7)	1 (7.7)	2 (15.4)		13 (100.1)
EXP TOT	125 (51.7)	41 (16.9)	3 (1.2)	8 (3.3)	5 (2.1)	4 (1.7)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)	30 (12.4)	8 (3.3)	9 (3.7)	6 (2.5)	242 (100)

Table 5: Explanations given by participants (percentages in parentheses)

Looking at the explanations in detail

Looking at the examples, there were a number of explanations that were usually done well by participants. For instance, in example 10, the most effective explanations came from the 12 participants who were able to refer to the structure of a prepositional phrase or a subordinate clause following the word 'after'. In fact, five participants were able to explain two types of correction, which widens the choices learners have in how they wish to express themselves. For example:

> Mm…well, 'after' can be used in two ways… It can be used as a preposition – in this case you should, uh, say like this: 'What did you do after graduation – graduation from high school?'… Or, uh, it can, 'after', is kind of used as a conjunction, so in that case you should add subject 'I' – uh, 'you'. *(Interview 14, Example 10)*

Eight of the participants who used meaning-based explanations in example 8 could explain why the verb 'is' should not be used with noun phrases like 'short, brown hair' with clarity, and occasionally with humour, as this participant did:

> Uh, 'she is' – 'she', 'she', 'she is', 'she is short brown hair' is something like – she is not a human being, she's kind of a wig, something like this… So she, she should *have* – 'short brown hair'. *(Interview 9, Example 8)*

Nine participants who named 'wrong article' as an error in example 13 could also give very clear explanations about why 'an' should be used with 'email', usually based on the 'first mention – subsequent mention' principle, as in this case:

> OK, uh, 'the' and 'a' has different usage. 'A' refers to something that you didn't mention, but 'the' refers to something that you mentioned earlier. *(Interview 21, Example 13)*

However, it also became clear that identifying an error successfully did not guarantee a clear or accurate explanation. For instance, example 6 contains the question, 'Do you know what is it?' Almost all participants (19 out of 21) correctly identified the error and corrected it to 'Do you know what *it is?*' However, only a little more than one-third of those who identified the error (7 out of 19) could give an accurate explanation, usually referring to the terms 'indirect question' or 'embedded question'. The rest struggled to express themselves, with much hesitation, self-correction, and usage of unclear terminology, as in the following cases:

> If you use this question… OK, order is, 'What it' – 'What is it', is right, but – um – if you use this sentence in one sentence as a object… the order should be 'what it is'. *(Interview 1, Example 6)*

> Mm…the question is, when the question comes at the end of a verb, it should be – it should be, uh, what-subject-verb. *(Interview 2, Example 6)*

> Mm…according to my grammatical knowledge, I – I think, uh, if we, when we combine two, uh – two different types of sentence, like common sentence with the – question, type – and we must change the order of words in the question… Uh…the 'wh-' clause…uh, subject, verb. *(Interview 13, Example 6)*

In example 2, another clear majority of participants (18 out of 21) picked up on the missing preposition in the expression 'believe God', and corrected it to 'believe *in* God'. However, only two explanations dealt with the pattern 'believe in (NOUN)'.

Most of the other explanations attempted to establish a difference in meaning between ‘believe’ and ‘believe in’. The result was that an unclear utterance was explained with an unclear distinction, as in this case:

> Uh, I will tell the difference between ‘believe’ and ‘believe in’… ‘believe’ means ‘I believe her words’, like that, and ‘believe in’ means ‘the existence of God’, like that. *(Interview 5, Example 2)*

One group of explanations that were always clear, accurate, and insightful were the ‘lexically-based’ explanations. The explanations in this group appealed to a lexical view of language – that is, to how words combine to make meaning, and took into account the patterns (or colligations) that words often make. For example, the following explanation alluded to the verbal pattern ‘believe in (NOUN)’:

> Uh, for example, I think the, uh, ‘believe’, uh, ‘believe in’, after ‘believe in’, uh, uh… For example, ‘believe in God’, uh, ‘believe in – uh, truth’, etc., ‘believe in God’, ‘believe in – uh’…A sentence like this ‘believe in, believe in that he loves you’, that’s not correct. *(Interview 19, Example 2)*

One participant gave a very perceptive explanation of the verbs that collocate with meal nouns in modern American English with reference to example 5:

> When, when we explain – uh, when we say we, we are eating something, we can use ‘have’ instead of ‘eat’, but not, not ‘take’… Just in case of eating some pills or medicine, we use ‘take’, but we, usually we don’t use ‘take’ about lunch. *(Interview 13, Example 5)*

One participant, while dealing with example 10, said that she encouraged her students to memorise patterns:

> Because, uh… ‘after’ is very, special word, to speaking, so we can – we can use this word very, uh, careful…So, uh, they can’t uh – they have to, memory, remember using the words – ‘after’ plus ‘ing’. *(Interview 18, Example 10).*

Another participant, in dealing with example 7, gave an explanation quite reminiscent of John Sinclair’s idiom principle (cf. Sinclair 1990):

> Uh, I’d tell them, there are some expressions you should memorize…This one, is one of them. *(Interview 21, Example 7)*

Discussion of findings

Overall, the participants had mixed success in identifying errors in the language examples selected for this study. Participants successfully identified errors of structure most often, while they had mixed success with errors of class and collocation/colligation, and had even less success with errors of orientation. In fact, if one looks at the overall picture, fewer than half of all the errors identified by participants were judged to concur with the researcher's assessment of the examples (Table 1). Moreover, the types of explanations offered, along with the problems found in them (hesitation, repetition, self-correction, unclear terminology), indicates that the participants had mixed success, at best, in explaining errors that they could identify.

Although this group of participants is not a statistically valid sample, some may still see these findings as being somewhat disturbing. Teachers may be unnecessarily identifying errors in students' language production, or may not be able to give adequate explanations to their students in English. If the government of South Korea wishes to successfully implement an 'English through English' programme in its public school system, it may want to consider implementing some specific teacher development programmes as well.

For example, evidence from many examples shows that the most effective explanations were not ones that appealed to rules or meaning, but to patterns. These lexically based explanations hint at a direction in which language teaching in South Korea should perhaps go. It is uncertain whether school students would understand subtle differences in meaning, such as the difference between 'believe' and 'believe in'. However, they may find it easier to understand patterns. They could be introduced as idioms, such as 'believe in God', or 'after graduating'. Then, after seeing other similar language examples, they could deduce patterns like 'verb, preposition, noun phrase', or 'preposition, gerund'. This is consistent with the consciousness raising approach to grammar advocated by scholars like Rutherford (1987) and the task-based approach to language teaching put forward by J. Willis (1996).

In addition, the trouble some participants had in explaining certain errors indicates that at least part of the teacher development process might be devoted to practice in giving explanations in English. There are two good reasons for doing this. First, it gives teachers a chance to practice their English, something they nearly

always want to do. Second, by articulating why something is incorrect, teachers can clarify in their own minds how English works. This practice could help teachers to be better prepared to work in the 'English through English' programme now being implemented in South Korea.

This study is best seen as a pilot study. If it were to be repeated with a similar group of subjects, the interviewer would need to interview very carefully, so that as many errors as possible were explained. It might be helpful, as well, to include examples that were indisputably correct. It would be interesting to compare the abilities of non-native speaker teachers with native speaker teachers. Having the examples in spoken form on tape, as opposed to in written form, might test participants' ability to discern errors in spoken speech more directly. Delamere's (1996) study suggests another research question: 'Would it make a difference to teachers' ability to identify spoken errors if the error is spoken by a Korean or a native speaker of English?' These and other issues could be explored through further studies in this area.

Conclusion

For the 'English through English' programme to work in South Korea, teachers are needed who understand how English works, and who can help students achieve the understanding appropriate to their level of ability. This study indicates that, in terms of error recognition and explanation at least, these characteristics may be lacking in some teachers. Therefore, work should be done in the area of teacher development. First, English teachers should be introduced to the ideas of patterns (colligations), and to how they can use consciousness-raising techniques to help students uncover them. Second, teachers should have regular practice in explaining language errors in English, so that they can get used to using the language needed to explain them. Future studies can pinpoint the exact areas of language or error explanation that teachers have the most trouble with, so that teacher development programmes can concentrate on these areas. Regardless of how the areas of concern pinpointed by this study are addressed in teacher development programmes, they need to be addressed in some way. Otherwise, teachers will not be able to adequately perform duties that they will need to perform, from time to time, in their classrooms.

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Appendix The Language Examples

Example #1 **(an invitation)**
A: Can you come to our party on Saturday?
B: I'm sorry. I'm in Toronto then.
Error: none.
Grammar aspect: Orientation – the present simple 'I'm' is used with a future time expression to talk about a future event that is certain to happen in the speaker's mind.

Example #2 **(getting to know someone)**
A: Do you have a religion?
B: Yes, I'm a Christian. I really believe God.
Error: missing preposition ('believe *in* God').
Grammar aspect: colligation. A colleague indicated a concern that A's question would be inappropriate under Western cultural norms (Caddie Hinke, personal communication 2000). However, no participant named this as a concern during the interviews.

Example #3 **(getting to know someone)**
A: Do you have any hobbies?
B: My hobbies are swim and watch movies.
Error: use of basic verbs as subject complements when gerunds are required ('*swimming* and *watching* movies'.
Grammar aspect: class

Example #4 **(meeting after a long time)**
A: What have you been doing?
B: I've gone to the movies last week.
Error: combination of present perfect 'I've gone' specific time referent 'last week'. Two corrections are possible – 'I *went* to the movies last week' or 'I've been to the movies *(recently)*'.
Grammar aspect: orientation – the relationship between the verb tense and a time adverbial.

Example #5 **(asking about another person)**
A: Where does she take lunch?
B: She goes to the student cafeteria
Error: could be 'take lunch', although 'take lunch is an expression appropriate in some Asian Englishes.
Grammar aspect: collocation.

Example #6 **(talking about past activities)**

A: I learned about 'snake chicken' last summer. Do you know what is it?
B: No, I don't. What is it?
Error: unnecessary subject-verb inversion in A's question ('Do you know what *it is?*') Grammar aspect: structure – structure of indirect questions

Example #7 **(getting to know someone)**
A: Do you like your major?
B: Not really. It's very difficult to me.
Error: incorrect preposition ('difficult *for* me').
Grammar aspect: colligation – the difficulty is experienced directly by B, so a different pattern is needed.

Example #8 **(a friend asks for a favour)**
A: Could you do me a favour?
B: Sure. What is it?
A: My cousin is coming to the office tomorrow at two, but I'm going to be in a meeting. Could you meet her for me?

B: OK. What does she look like?
A: She's tall and she's short brown hair.
Error: wrong verb in B's answer to 'What does she look like?' 'She *has* short brown hair'
Grammar aspect: class. A descriptor (noun or adjective) used with the verb 'be' is a complement to the subject, describing the total identity of a person. Descriptors used with the verb 'have' describe some part of a person's identity, like hair colour and hairstyle.

Example #9 **(in the health club, one person is talking to another about a particular exercise)**
A: What kind of exercise is that?
B: They're ab crunches – for your stomach muscles. You should try them.
A: I don't know – looks difficult to me.
Error: none
Grammar point: colligation. 'Difficult to me' is appropriate here because 'B' is talking about a potential difficulty in doing the exercise – it something 'B' experiences directly.

Example #10 **(talking about one's life)**
A: What did you do after graduated from high school?
B: I decided to do my military service.
Error: two possible identifications – missing subject ('after *you* graduated'), or past tense verb should be changed to gerund ('after *graduating*').
Grammar aspect: Structure – subordinate clause.

Example #11 **(people are talking about rules they don't like)**
A: What kind of rule do you hate?
B: I don't like rule is 'No smoking in school buildings'.
Error: The clause 'I don't like', modifying 'rule' is pre-positioned. English does not allow for this. One can create a noun phrase with 'rule' as its head (e.g. 'I don't like the rule '_____'', or 'I don't like a rule like '_____''), or post-position the clause 'I don't like', to make it a relative clause modifying 'rule' (e.g. 'A rule (that) I don't like is '_____''). One could also just quote the rule, for immediate communicative effect.
Grammar aspect: structure

Example #12 **(someone is talking about what he did last weekend; he is single)**
A: Well, my sister got married last month, and so on Sunday, all my family went to my mother-in-law's house.
Error: incorrect modifier of '*mother*-in-law's' ('*her* mother-in-law's house' or '*my sister's* mother-in-law's' house).
Grammar aspect: orientation.

Example #13 **(a student is talking to a teacher)**
S: Teacher! Teacher! I got the email from the United States!
T: Uh, I didn't know you were expecting one.
S: Well, I went to the Internet Chat Center, and I left my message, and a student in America answered me!
T: Oh, so you got a reply – good for you!
Error: incorrect article in S's first speaking turn ('*an* email')
Grammar aspect: orientation – first/subsequent mention principle for article use

Example #14 **(someone is talking to a co-worker about a trip taken on the weekend)**
A: I went to Mt. Sobaek Park on Sunday, and I got to see the fall colours in the trees.
B: Yes, the colours there are very nice in the fall.
A: Yes, nice trip, that was.
Error: none
Grammar aspect: structure – the aspects of spoken English in A's rejoinder, such as the use of ellipsis and a tail, give the effect of an alternative word order ('nice trip, that was').