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Learning from Errors
—Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Hideo Oka

I. Introduction

We all make mistakes, not only when we speak a foreign language, but even when we speak our own language, and these mistakes are of two kinds. The first type of mistakes are 'slips' or 'lapses'. We sometimes make a false start and then rehearse it; we sometimes stutter; we sometimes use wrong words; etc. These mistakes are on the level of performance: that is to say, they are not the result of any deficiency in competence. They are not consistently made. When they are brought to our attention, we can readily correct them.[1] In contrast, the second type of mistakes, called "errors", arise from an imperfect competence in the language, and cause consistent mistakes. When we talk about error analysis, we are concerned with such mistakes.

II. Contrastive Analysis

Learners of a foreign language also make mistakes, but the mistakes in a foreign language are different in a couple of ways. For one thing, the learner makes many more mistakes than the native speaker; for another, many mistakes seem to show the influence of the learner's first language. The observation of this second feature gave rise to the structuralists' belief that such mistakes were attributable to the habits developed in the first language. The mistakes are thus regarded as evidence of interference, and at the same time

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* This paper is partly based on a speech under the title of "Recent Trends in Applied Linguistics and EFL: Communicative Competence and Error Analysis", delivered at the Nishinippon Chapter meeting of the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT), held in Fukuoka on February 24, 1980.

1) This kind of correction corresponds to the conscious strategy of the "monitor model" in language learning. As for the role of the monitoring strategy, Krashen (1981) states, "Some performers can raise the accuracy of their output a small, but significant degree by conscious Monitoring" (p. 107). See Stephen D. Krashen, "Effective Second Language Acquisition: Insights from Research", in James E. Alatis, *et al.* (eds.), *The Second Language Classroom: Directions for the 1980's.* OUP, 1981, pp. 95–109.

as sources of difficulty. For the learner of a foreign language, as Lado[2] puts it, "Those elements that are similar will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". In other words, similarities between the first and the second languages facilitate learning, whereas differences interfere with learning. It was assumed that, by comparing elements of the first language with their equivalents in the second, it would be possible to predict those areas in the second language where interference would occur and where the learner would find difficulty.[3]

According to this structuralists' view, we contrast the systems of two languages in order to predict learners' difficulties, and on the basis of such contrast, we organize teaching materials and prepare drills to minimize the learning burden. These ideas have been incorporated into many English textbooks in Japan, too, and more attention is paid to predictable "trouble spots". For example, more emphasis is given to the distinction between /l/ and /r/ in the form of minimal pairs, such as *light* vs. *right*. On the other hand, such contrasts as /i/–/i:/ are not so emphasized in the Japanese context, although this area becomes significant to the speakers of certain languages (e.g. Spanish) where the long vowel /i:/ is absent in the phonological system.

Interference takes various forms at different levels. When we try to contrast Japanese and English, phonology is not much of a problem because phonemes are limited to a comparatively small set. It is generally more difficult for the learner when particular phonemes are absent in the phonological system of the mother tongue, or when there are

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2) Robert Lado, *Linguistics across Cultures.* University of Michigan Press, 1957, p. 2. However, the whole question of transfer, positive or negative, does not seem as easy as it is claimed here. I would like to see how different languages, cognate or distant, interact with each other and give counter-evidence to this common belief, taken from the language development of a German and Japanese speaking child. At the age of 3½, when she started speaking English, she produced the following utterances (Oka, 1980, p. 13):

(1) **She want not into the garden.*

(2) **I can schon nicht with you in the toilet; I can schon alone.*

(1) is based on the sentence construction in German, as is shown by the word-order ('Sie will nicht in den Garten'). In (2), she replaced German equivalents for the English lexical items she did not yet know. As we see in these examples, it is interesting to note that interference came only from German, not from Japanese. She must have internalized the similarities between these two cognate languages, and fell back on her knowledge of German when necessity arose. These evidences seem to suggest that the similarities do not necessarily make learning easier; on the contrary, they tend to create more confusion in the learner. On the other hand, when the two languages are distant, the learner can learn the new language *tabula rasa,* so to speak. See Hideo Oka, "Language Development of a Japanese and German Speaking Child—With Special Emphasis on Complex Sentences", *Linguistic Science,* No. 15, 1980, pp. 1–29.

3) Cf. Ronald Waudhaugh, "The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis", in John H. Shumann and Nancy Stenson (eds.), *New Frontiers in Second Language Learning.* Newbury House, 1974, pp. 11–19. He makes a dinstinction between a strong and a weak version of contrastive analysis. The weak version tries to account for observed difficulties in second language learning, whereas the strong version attempts to predict those difficulties which the learner will have in learning a second language and to construct teaching materials to help him learn that language.

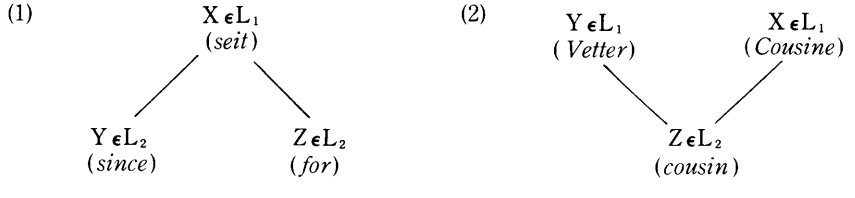
two or more equivalents in the target language for a single unit in the mother tongue, and consequently subclassification is required. Illustrating this point, certain consonants, such as /f, v, θ, ð/ are absent in Japanese, so that the Japanese learners tend to substitute the "closest" Japanese sounds for them —/h, b, s, z/ respectively. The vowel system in Japanese includes only five phonemes, while English has many more, i.e. 21 altogether. Consequently, a Japanese learner is required to subclassify the native system to fit the more "elaborate" system.

Grammar causes various problems. How can we treat articles or plural-morphemes, where there are no corresponding features in Japanese? Although the word-order in English corresponds to the roles performed by post-positions in Japanese (*wa, no, o,* etc.), we cannot explain all the syntactic constructions of English in terms of post-positions. The learner must acquire a totally new set of rules as they are where no useful contrast is possible. Even so, grammar is a closed system and can be described either interlingually or intralingually, whereas vocabulary and semantics form an open set. There is no end in describing comprehensively all the lexical items and their possible meanings.[4] In lexicon, it is worth mentioning that words are used to categorize the world at large, as is proposed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. To take a familiar example, *rice* in English has a variety of equivalents in Japanese. Because of its importance in the society, a subcategorization is made to distinguish according to its state: 'rice in the field', 'rice just harvested', 'raw rice', 'cooked rice', etc. Interference is likely to occur when the learner is required to subcategorize a native concept in the target language. As far as *rice* is concerned, then, an English speaker learning Japanese will have more difficulty than a Japanese learning English. On the other hand, the same principle applies to those instances when Japanese learners produce wrong expressions, such as **I have a promise* (<appointment) or **to burn meat* (<grill/roast). They do not realize that we cannot possibly eat "burnt meat"!

Contrastive analysis is usually limited to the foregoing three aspects of language, i.e., phonology, grammar, and lexicon. However, I would like to expand the notion to include something from a higher level, which might be called "cultural contrast", or contrast in the way of thinking. A native speaker of English would not be able to guess what to expect

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4) Cf. Jürgen Esser, "Contrastive Analysis at the Crossroads of Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching", *IRAL,* 18, 3, 1980, pp. 181–191. He illustrates various types of formal differences between English and German in relation to their reference(s). The following two types are of particular relevance to our present discussion: (1) convergence and (2) divergence (p. 186). Convergence refers to the situation where one element in L_1 is rendered by two elements in L_2, while divergence refers to the reverse situation.



when he is told, as a guest at a Japanese home, **There is nothing, but please come to the next room.* To his amazement, he would more often than not find a gorgeous dinner prepared there, despite his logical conclusion from the literal meaning of the utterance. How can we account for such an utterance in terms of contrastive analysis? The Japanese host did not literally mean what he said. It is not just a matter of grammar or vocabulary, but something higher—cultural.

In cultural contrast, it may be useful to introduce the idea of speech acts. We can analyze cultural patterns by comparing what sort of verbal expression is used to perform a certain act. What we are concerned with here is not the propositional act, which we conventionally call literal meaning and which can be interpreted in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but rather the social function of an utterance, or the "illocutionary act". Speech acts are performed in different ways, depending on the respective culture, and difficulties arise when there are no corresponding verbal expressions in the other language. A Japanese learner would feel uneasy addressing a superior in such an "abrupt" manner as is indicated by the use of the first name in American English. An illocutionary force, unless properly interpreted, could even cause political friction!

Thus, errors are not restricted to the formal aspects of language, but extend to the social aspects of language use. We notice social errors of appropriateness[5] even among advanced students, who rarely make grammatical errors. A typical example is violating the social code of politeness/formality according to the relative status and the degree of intimacy. A student, drilled too much in grammar and obsessed with the grammatical analysis of, say, the subjunctive mood, tends to ignore the social function which this item performs in the language used for communication. For example, *Would you mind...?* carries an illocutionary force of making a polite request, rather than merely asking a question, as is indicated by the syntactic pattern of the sentence. A conversion exercise of *If you did it for me, I should be very happy* into a predicative mood would make no sense.

III. Error Analysis

The most serious deficiency of contrastive analysis is that all the learner's errors cannot be explained or predicted in terms of contrast alone. It was discovered that only part of the errors learners make was attributable to the mother tongue, that learners do not make all the errors that contrastive analysis predicted they would, and that learners from diverse

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5) According to Corder (1974), errors of appropriateness, apart from a breach of the code, are classified into (1) referential, (2) register, (3) social, and (4) textual errors. (1) and (4) interfere with cognitive communication, while (2) and (3) are concerned with interpersonal relations. What is especially relevant to our present discussion is social errors: "Where he (=the speaker) selects forms which are inappropriate to his social relations with his hearer, as when a pupil greets his teacher: *Well, how are we to-day, old man?*" (p. 123). See S. Pit Corder, "Error Analysis", in J. P. B. Allen and S. Pit Corder, *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics Vol. 3, OUP, 1974, pp. 122–154.

language backgrounds tend to make similar errors in learning a particular target language. We are well aware, for instance, that our students often confuse words which look alike, such as *interesting–interested, ingenious–ingenuous,* etc. Such confusion, however, has nothing to do with the negative transfer of language habits developed in Japanese. We have also come to understand that mental complexity involved in decoding tends to create difficulty in listening comprehension, regardless of native language backgrounds.[6]

A recent approach to learner's errors first tries to recognize errors, then to describe them, and finally to explain why they are made. These three major stages characterize error analysis as a *posteriori* approach, which attempts to classify errors and account for their occurrence; contrastive analysis, on the other hand, can only assume *a priori,* or predictive approach.[7] However, we must remember that for educational purposes they are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary to each other. We need a device not only to analyze observed errors, but also to predict possible errors and prevent them from occurring.

According to error analysis, errors are attributable to various sources. "Interlingual" (i.e. interference) errors are only part of them. One of the major contributions of error analysis to our understanding of second language learning is its recognition of sources of errors that extend beyond interlingual errors. Besides interlingual errors, there are "intralingual" and developmental errors in learning a second language. Intralingual errors are based on the negative transfer of items within the target language, and derive from the complex system within the target language itself. It is interesting to observe that the ratio of *inter*lingual vs. *intra*lingual errors varies according to the learner's level of proficiency. Interlingual errors are predominant at the early stages of language learning. This is because the learner has no other means than to rely on his mother tongue. But as he progresses to a higher level of proficiency, interlingual errors decrease; on the other hand, intralingual

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6) See Hideo Oka, "Decoding Strategies in Listening Comprehension", *Linguistic Science,* No. 16, 1981, pp. 6–28. A comparative experiment between Japanese and Venezuelan learners of English, regarding listening comprehension, proved that certain errors were common to both language groups. The common errors related to logical relations (concession, in particular), the subjunctive mood and the comparative construction seemed to be caused by the conceptual complexity of these syntactic constructions: "errors are intertwined with the conceptual difficulty involved in processing certain grammatical constructions — and, to that extent difficulties are observable across learners from different language backgrounds" (p. 27).

7) Cf. Carl James, "The Exculpation of Contrastive Linguistics", in Gerhard Nickel (ed.), *Papers in Contrastive Linguistics.* CUP, 1971, pp. 53–68.

errors increase. He tends to overgeneralize or misapply the rules he is already familiar with.[8]

Developmental errors occur when a learner hypothesize false concepts or faulty rules. Intralingual and developmental errors are regarded as being of great significance, in that they reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage and illustrate his strategies of language learning. The learner's competence at a particular stage of learning is what is called "interlanguage".[9] Within this interlanguage theory the learner is looked upon not as a producer of malformed language with haphazard mistakes, but as a creative being who proceeds through systematic stages of learning or acquisition. The learner constructs for himself a series of hypotheses about the grammar of the target language, and consciously or unconsciously tests them out in formal/informal learning contexts. An important finding related to hypothesis testing is that language acquisition and language learning show remarkable similarities.[10] It has been observed that both an English-speaking child and a learner of English produce the same wrong past-tense form of **breaked* at a certain stage of acquisition/learning, based on generalization. Similarly, a Japanese child and a foreign learner of Japanese say **kireiku-nai* in negation, by analogy from the inflectional system of the "i-adjective" class. These examples show that the strategies of second language learning are similar to those of first language acquisition.

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8) See Barry P. Taylor, "The Use of Overgeneralization and Transfer Learning Strategies by Elementary and Intermediate Students of ESL", *LL*, 25, 1, 1975, pp. 73–107. "From the point of view of language learning, these results appear to indicate that learners of a second or foreign language begin relying on their ability to analogize, systematize, and regularize the target language data to which they are exposed immediately upon beginning to learn the new language. Because of their lack of familiarity with the new linguistic system, however, they also rely extensively on their native languages for support. With increased proficiency in the target language, they rely proportionately less frequently on their native language grammar, and rely more frequently on their ever-increasing knowledge of the target language, coping directly with it and overgeneralizing its rules". (p. 88)

9) Cf. Larry Selinker, "Interlanguage", in Jack C. Richards (ed.), *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition.* Longman, 1974, pp. 31–54.

10) See Rod Ellis, "The Origins of Interlanguage", *AL*, 3, 3, 1982, pp. 207–223. "Both baby talk and foreigner talk are characterized by such features as a reduced mean length of utterance, preference for parataxis over hypotaxis, the reduction of some inflections and the omission of function words and the frequent use of such feed back devices as tag questions, all of which can be thought of as 'simplifications'." (p. 209) Also see Barbara F. Freed, "Foreigner Talk, Baby Talk, Native Talk, *IJSL*, 28, 1981, pp. 19–39. "Both (= foreigner talk and baby talk) are characterized by frequent pauses, often at constituent boundaries, limited vocabulary and brevity. Repetition is a frequent discourse feature, and imitations of different types (restatements, repairs, expansions) may appear in either of these corpora". (p. 19)

IV. Sources of Error

According to Richards,[11] intralingual and developmental errors are classified into four categories: (1) overgeneralization, (2) ignorance of rule restrictions, (3) incomplete application of rules, and (4) false concepts hypothesized. Omission of the third person-present singular morpheme '-s' may be considered as overgeneralization, and is often the result of the learner's reducing his linguistic burden. Not a few students in my composition class wrote, to my amazement, **I was teached English...* This cannot be explained in terms of contrastive analysis. It is caused by overgeneralization, reducing the complexity of rules of past-participles in English. Students must have overgeneralized from the regular past-participle marker. Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his previous experience with other structures in the target language: e.g., **He can speaks, *Did he went,* etc.

The second source of errors, ignorance of rule restrictions, can be illustrated by a common error: **I made him to do it,* which ignores restrictions on the distribution of 'make'. Similarly, *he showed me the book* leads to **he explained me the book*; *we talked about it* leads to **we discussed about it.* Analogy plays an important part here, too. Learners fail to observe the restrictions of existing structures, that is, the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. However, the distinction of error types becomes more and more obscure when the third category is introduced. Incomplete application of rules refers to "the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterances".[12] Examples are given from the systematic difficulty in the use of the question and statement forms across background lauguages—eg. *What's he doing?* → **He opening the door,* but as it turns out it is not so easy to apply this category to other data. (Problems of classification will be discussed in the following chapter.)

Another type of errors, false concepts hypothesized, is different from the foregoing ones, in the sense that while they are intralingual errors which have to do with faulty rule learning at various levels, they typically represent developmental errors. The learner hypothesizes false concepts of rules, which eventually become fossilized, at a certain stage of learning. A typical example can be observed in a child's language acquisition, but the same applies to second language learning, as well. A child first picks up irregular verbs as they are said, like *broke* and *went,* but after a while he develops his own rule and consequently produces **breaked* and **goed.* These invented forms are based on regularities that the child extracts from the language he hears.

When developmental errors are claimed to be "sometimes due to poor gradation of

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11) Jack C. Richards, "A Noncontrastive Approach to Error Analysis", in John W. Oller, Jr. and Jack C. Richards (eds.), *Focus on the Learner: Pragmatic Perspectives for the Language Teacher.* Newbury House, 1973, pp. 96–113.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

teaching items",[13] the classification becomes confusing. In such a case, false concepts hypothesized cannot be legitimately regarded as the cause of errors, since they derive from deficiency in teaching. Teaching methods, combined with materials, lead the learner to make faulty hypotheses about the language. The difference in implicative meaning between *very* and *too* is often not clearly understood because *very* is usually introduced quite early, while *too* appears much later without any regard to the relative function of *very*. On the other hand, the common confusion of *since* and *for* with the present perfect tense is sometimes reinforced by presenting them in too sharp a contrast, followed by insufficient (or excessive) practice. As we see in these examples, the actual cause of errors is the context of teaching/learning. Faulty presentation of words or structures, when rotely memorized but not properly contextualized, leads the learner to confusion or simply "ignorance"![14]

It seems useful to expand this notion, i.e. the context of teaching/learning as a source of errors, to include cultural complexity. Cultural complexity, as I see it, is primarily concerned with discourse level, which cannot be easily analyzed by linguistic contrast per se, and deals with the way of thinking or the organization of thoughts. When a Japanese student begins a new paragraph introducing a major subject by saying, *By the way, . . .*, the source of error can be traced back to the seemingly equivalent Japanese expression ('tokorode') commonly used in such a context, and can therefore be treated as an interlingual error. But when connectives like *on the other hand* or *therefore* are misused, consequently creating inappropriate logical connections of sentences and paragraphs, no trace can be found in the learner's first language. These instances, which derive from the idiosyncratic thinking patterns of the English-speaking culture, are brought about by insufficient learning—not properly presented and/or not sufficiently drilled in the classroom. Proper presentation, accompanied by sufficient contextualized practice, would lead the learner to their appropriate use.

Another major source of learner's errors can be found in "communication strategies" employed by the learner to get a message across to a listener. A communication strategy is defined as "the conscious employment of verbal and nonverbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are for some reason not readily available to the learner at a point in communication".[15] Avoidance is a typical communication strategy. When the learner does not know or is not sure about a certain lexical/grammatical item, he replaces it with the "apparent" equivalent he knows. This often results in incorrect or

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13) *Ibid.*, p. 103

14) See Leonard Newmark and David A. Reibel, "Necessity and Sufficiency in Language Learning", in Mark Lester (ed.), *Readings in Applied Transformational Grammar.* Second Ed., Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970, pp. 220–244. Criticizing the structuralists' treatment of errors as interference, they assert, "The problem of "interference" viewed thus reduces to the problem of *ignorance*, and the solution to the problem is simply more and better training in the target language, rather than systematic drill at the points of contrast between the two languages in order to combat interference" (p. 239, Italics by the writer).

15) H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching.* Prentice-Hall, 1980, p. 179.

inappropriate use of the item in question. Sometimes part of the message the learner wants to convey may be abandoned due to the limitation of his encoding ability; in its extreme case, even an entire topic might be avoided!

We must not forget, however, that communication strategies have an advantage, as well. From the communicative point of view, they facilitate fluency, if not accuracy. When his formal means to express his intention is limited or not readily accessible, the learner must learn how to make use of these strategies for communication. Instead of attempting in vain to formulate his optimal message directly, he can adjust his message to his encoding ability. He can thus employ alternate means to convey his intended meaning, thereby expressing the "adjusted" meaning.[16]

V. Problems of Error Analysis

Despite all the valuable insights gained, difficulties arise once we attempt to locate errors. "Overt" errors are relatively easy to identify, because they are ungrammatical. But "covert" errors are grammatically well-formed, but not acceptable in a given context of communication.[17] There may be areas of disagreement even among native speakers as to whether a certain expression is acceptable. The native speakers' judgement may sway, depending on the context.[18] Interesting evidence can be found in the so-called "threshold of intelligibility", which varies according to the amount of contact a person has had with a particular language group. An English speaker living in Japan for some time clearly shows a higher threshold of intelligibility, in other words, understands "Japanese English" better.

The second area of difficulty in error analysis is how to describe errors. On a global

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16) See Elaine Tarone, "Communication Strategies, Foreigner Talk, and Repair in Interlanguage", *LL*, 30, 2, 1980, pp. 417–431. She illustrates a typology of communication strategies, as follows (p. 429):

Paraphrase	approximation
	word coinage
	circumlocution
Transfer	literal translation
	language switch
	appeal for assistance
	mime
Avoidance	topic avoidance
	message abandonment

17) Cf. S. Pit Corder, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

18) Cf. Randolph Quirk and Jan Svartvik, *Investigating Linguistic Acceptability.* Mouton, 1966. They present a typology of acceptability concerning grammatical usage: (1) established, (2) divided, (3) ill-established, (4) dubious, and (5) unacceptable. Some of the examples given are: (2) *Who / Whom did you see?; The old man chose his son a wife.* (4) *He isn't much loved; I regard him foolish.*

level, errors can be described as errors of addition, omission, substitution, and ordering.[19] But such categories are very generalized. Within each category, various levels of language are intermingled. The levels of language, i.e. phonology or orthography, lexicon, grammar, and discourse, provide an alternative way to describe errors. In actual descriptions these two categories ought to be combined. For example, if we are to investigate into the grammatical category of tense, then we exclusively classify errors of this area into the first four types.

It is useful for teaching purposes to distinguish global and local errors.[20] Global errors refer to those errors which involve deviance in the overall structure of a sentence, or which make the sentence incomprehensible or misleading. On the other hand, local errors are those errors which involve the structure of constituents in a sentence, and do not hinder understanding. But the distinction is not totally clear-cut, and besides, if a teacher wants to evaluate these two types of errors in tests, there arises a certain problem. You would not just count the number of errors, but instead, you would probably give varying weights to different types of errors. Obviously, from the communicative point of view, global errors are much more serious because fluency and content come before grammatical correctness. But how should we deal with such a "simple" error as missing the third person-present singular morpheme '-s'. Some teachers might well say that this is also very serious because it indicates the learner has not acquired such an elementary rule. The problem of determining error gravity[21] cannot be answered uniformly, unless we take into account what

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19) See H. Douglas Brown, *op. cit.* These categories are exemplified, as follows (pp. 169 – 179): "In English a *do* auxiliary might be added (Does can be sing?), a definite article omitted (I went to movie), an item substituted (I lost my road), or a word order confused (I to the store went)".

20) See Marina K. Burt and Carol Kiparsky, "Global and Local Mistakes", in John H. Schumann and Nancy Stenson (eds.), *New Frontiers in Second Language Learning.* Newbury House, 1974. "Most typical of global mistakes are those which confuse the relationship among clauses, such as:

1. use of connectors, expecially meaningful ones,
2. distinctions between co-ordinate and relative clause constructions,
3. parallel structure in reduced co-ordinate clauses,
4. tense continuity across clauses.

These are much more important to general sentence comprehensibility than any corrections within a single clause of the same (complex) sentence such as agreement, articles, noun phrase formation, etc." (p. 73)

21) See Stig Johansson, *Studies of Error Gravity.* Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1978. The proposed scheme of evaluation is based on comprehensibility and degree of irritation. The first principle in evaluating an error is the communicative effect of errors, i.e. whether the erroneous utterance is comprehensible or not. In addition to the communicative efficiency, "the message must get across swiftly and unambiguously and without undue demands upon the receiver" (p. 6). Also see David Palmer, "Expressing Error Gravity", *ELTJ,* 34, 2, 1980, pp. 93–96. He expresses a negative attitude toward the global–local dichotomy, saying that "'seriousness' is related to frequency and not to notions of degree of communicative difficulty or globality" (p. 94). In addition to frequency, the distribution of an error type amongst the sample of students is taken into account.

the purpose of testing is. If the test is designed to prove how much the pupils have learned about a certain rule of grammar, then the second view may be adopted; but if the test is to see how well they can describe, say, their college life, then the communicative content counts, rather than mere grammatical correctness. It should be noted that semantic errors tend to block communication to a higher degree than syntactic errors.

A further problem in error analysis is how to determine the source of errors. Why are certain errors made? What is the cause of the errors? To answer these questions, in some cases we have to look for an "inferred cause of error" and make a subjective judgement; in other cases, we find two or more contributary causes.[22]

The last problem points to a basic limitation of error analysis. Research data have to rely on what the learner produces, either in the spoken or written form of the language. In other words, data are restricted to production data without regard to comprehension data.[23] The collection of data based exclusively on production skills can hardly be a valid reflection of the learner's overall competence in the second language. Comprehension skills are also important in developing an understanding of the process of second language acquisition/learning. Another danger is that overemphasis of production data cannot account for the strategy of avoidance. A learner tends to avoid those lexical or structural items which he finds difficult or is not sure about, adjusting his expression to his encoding ability. Of course, this depends partly on the elicitation technique adopted in research, but more often than not, when eliciting, we are tapping the learner's competence (i.e. knowledge), which cannot be equated with performance, or the learner's actual use of a language for communication. We must, therefore, bear in mind that production errors alone are not an adequate measure of overall competence.

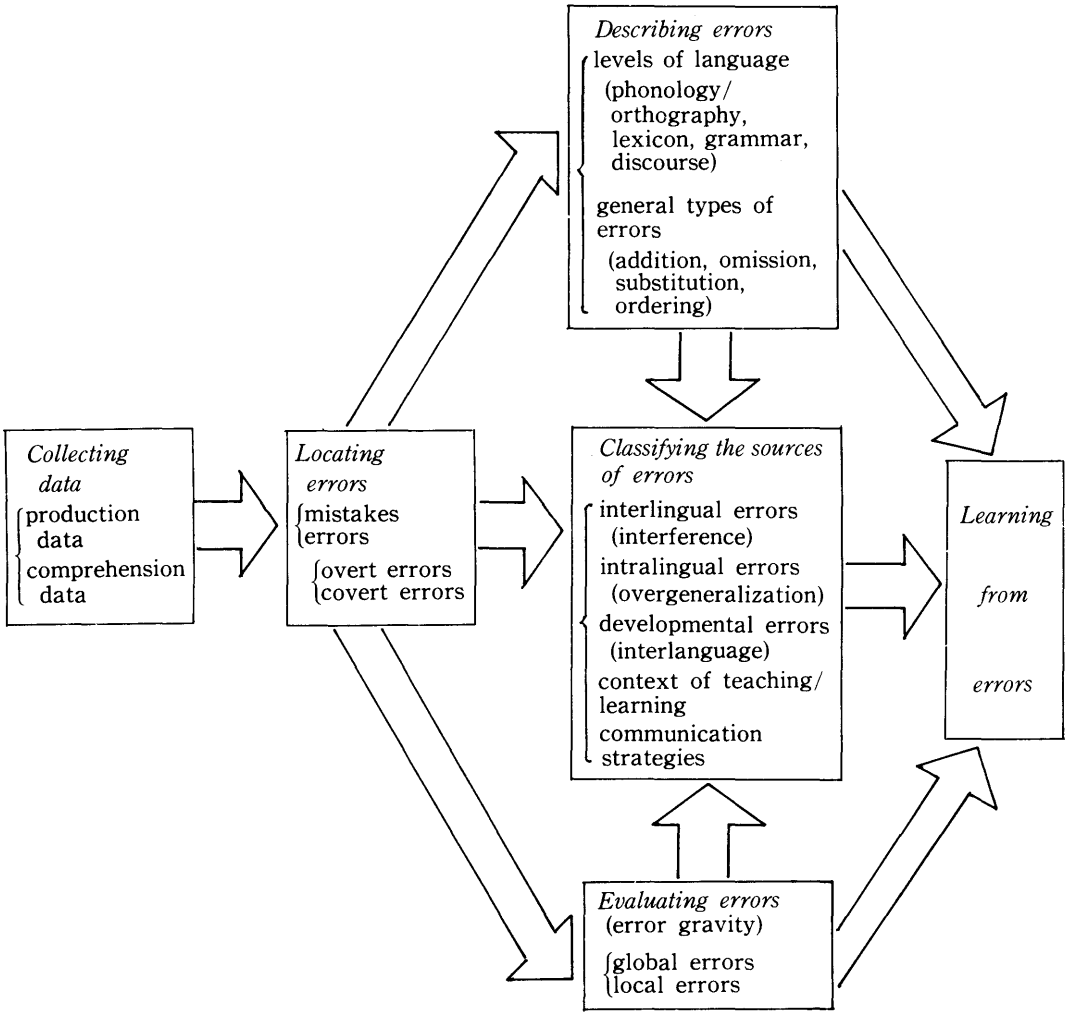
VI. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it will be useful to summarize the major points in the form of a diagram, as shown below. We must be aware of the significance of each item illustrated there. They are all important to make error analysis systematic as well as useful for our educational purposes. Assuming a positive attitude toward errors, errors are not to be frowned upon, but should rather be acknowledged as a contribution to our understanding of the process of second language learning. As we have gained a lot from learner's errors, though there still remain areas for further research, so we have to feed what we have learned back into our teaching tomorrow.

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22) Cf. Gerry Abbott, "Toward a More Rigorous Analysis of Foreign Language Errors", *IRAL*, 18, 2, 1980, pp. 121–134.

23) See H. Douglas Brown, *op. cit.* Under the heading of "Errors in error analysis", he warns us about this restricted nature of production data, as well as the danger of being preoccupied with finding errors: "We must beware of placing too much attention on errors, and not lose sight of the value of positive reinforcement of clear, free communication" (p. 166).



In the final stage of "learning from errors" we have to ask ourselves the following questions: Are teaching materials well organized and sequenced?; Are they properly presented in the classroom?; Are sufficient practice and drills provided?; Is all the language activity meaningful and contextualized? Taking all these problems into proper consideration will render error analysis truly meaningful and valuable.