Errors in English: Description, Classification, Explanation and Remedy

Peter G. Sercombe
Dept. of English Language and Applied Linguistics
Universiti Brunei Darussalam,
Brunei Darussalam

1. Introduction

If one assumes that second or foreign language learners' errors (whether receptive or productive) constitute one of the language teacher's main challenges, then it would seem essential to give some attention to errors, to try and describe and explain them (cf. Lewis, 1981: 256, cited in James, 1998: 61). Certainly, one reason why errors are not seen as significant is because they have remained unwanted (Corder, 1974: 19).

Acceptance of errors as a normal part of language learning, and the consequent need to deal with them, then brings one to the formal study of idiosyncratic language production, or Error Analysis (EA), a procedure which is based on the analysis of learner language, or that part of it which is perceived as erroneous. EA is essentially a way of dealing with learner language rather than a theory of language learning (Cook, cited in James, 1998:

7). The purpose of EA is to describe and explain the differences between learners' grammar and the accepted grammar of a target language (TL). Generally speaking, EA serves three main purposes:

(a)   to find out the level of language proficiency the learner has reached,
(b)   to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning, and
(c)   to try and find out how people learn a language.

Since the 1970s (following Chomsky's criticisms of the behaviourist theory of language learning), cognitive theory ideas about the way foreign or second languages are learned has been in the ascendant. The analysis of errors has played an important role, providing evidence of common difficulties in the learning of particular second or foreign languages, the nature of the language learning process, and the order in which certain features of a target language are acquired or learned.

Currently, language learning is widely believed to proceed in a series of transitional stages as learners acquire more of a TL. At each stage learners are believed to control a second or foreign language system that is equivalent to neither their first language (L1), nor the second language (L2) they are learning. In the literature, the learner's target language system is most commonly referred to as an 'interlanguage' (IL) (although other terms exist, such as 'approximative system', 'idiosyncratic dialect' and 'transitional competence'). According to Selinker (cited in James, 1998: 43), an IL is, by definition, a non-native version of a language.

Of course, one needs to have some clear idea about what is meant by the TL, the model to be used as the benchmark. This relates to the debate about what is implied by, for example, 'good English', and the ongoing and wide-spread concern about standards in relation to both native and non-native speakers. Perhaps part of the problem is that English, in second or foreign language contexts, plays different (occasionally conflicting) roles. It can function as a language for international communication and, on the other hand, where there are a number of competing local languages, as either a lingua franca and/or as a marker of local or even national identity (James, 1998: 40; also cf. Ashcroft et al, 1989: 66-68). These different roles need not conflict if we accept Aitchison's (1995) point: she suggests that the argument about which form of a language is the correct one is really (an argument) about language

registers and when it is most appropriate to use a particular register, rather than what is a right or a wrong form. Since the most widely (meaning here, internationally) used variety of English is the standard variety, we are then, almost by default, bound to accept the norms of Standard English (StE), but only for certain domains of use, these being almost exclusively formal. Beyond or outside these formal domains, StE and its norms have less claim (or none at all) compared to indigenized or local varieties of English (cf. Sridhar and Sridhar, 1992).

Also relevant here is what is meant by error (cf. Lengo, 1995, on the 'comparative fallacy'). The idea of an utterance being erroneous is totally relative (cf. James, 1998. 8) in that a form of a language is only wrong when it is seen as deviating from the accepted TL form in a particular context.

My focus, in this paper, is idiosyncratic learner language, in particular written errors produced by learners from predominantly Malay (or Malay-type) language backgrounds. This article adopts what is now an orthodox approach for the analysis of learner idiosyncrasies (van Els et. al, 1984 and Corder,1981). This is done at the level of the sentence since there are, as has been suggested (James, 1998: 268), strong grounds for a bottom up approach starting with the most basic levels of error, such as spelling. Evidence has indicated (Harley, 1998) that attention to form is useful even with young learners, especially in dealing with L2 features that have already been identified as problematic and which have L1 equivalents.

This article then argues that errors which can be positively traced to interference from the mother tongue can be dealt with contrastively in a far more effective way than errors that have their source in the system of the language being learned, in this case English. The EA model used here is contextualized specifically through reference to authentic learner examples.

Finally, an attempt is also made to bring together a minimum set of variables for the classification and explanation of errors in tabular form, as practical ready reference for language teachers and teacher-trainers.

An important aim here is to promote language awareness, or what has been described as 'a learned ability to analyse one's own repertoires' (James, 1998: 260); in other words, the aim is to encourage overt awareness of forms being used in language production. The value of this is seen as part of a

growing trend in the training of language teachers which Wright has described as the 'shift from content to process in language teaching' (1991 63), where one moves from the position of 'user, to analyst to teacher' (ibid: 63).

2.   Rationale and Brief Outline of Contrastive and Error Analysis at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam

In the undergraduate BA Ed. TESL programme at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), a basic assumption of the course entitled 'Contrastive and Error Analysis' (CA&EA) is that making errors is normal and that errors are part of a process of developing declarative knowledge (cf. DeKeyser, 1998: 55). The point here is to see learner language in a positive light, even though (language) teachers are constantly concerned with trying to improve the quality of students' work, part of which includes minimising error production among their students.

The overall general purpose of the CA&EA course at the UBD is to increase trainee teachers' awareness of areas of potential difficulty in the learning of StE, and the ways in which both Malay and English might affect the process of learning English as a second or foreign language. The course provides a fairly detailed survey of both the theory and practice of CA&EA. A central part of this is a methodology for the description, explanation and treatment of learner language through the analysis of school students' oral and written work, and from which the error examples in this paper are taken.

3.   The Stages of Error Analysis

It is not the intention to oversimplify the relatively complex nature of EA, but rather to try and demonstrate its practical value. To begin with, the 5 main stages of EA, in its current paradigm (van Els et al, 1984; Corder, 1981), are outlined and supported by examples. The major consideration here is given to the explanation of errors, perhaps the most challenging of the 5 stages.

This is followed with a summary framework of current methodology in tabular form which attempts to include the necessary minimal set of variables to be applied in the consideration of an error. While the summary framework presented is original, it leans heavily on the work of other applied linguists (especially Corder, 1981, James, 1998; van Els et al, 1984).

Table 1   The stages of EA

1.	The **identification** of an error >	Is an utterance erroneous or not?
2.	The **description** of an error >	What kind of error is it?
3.	The **explanation** of an error >	What appears to have caused it?
4.	The **evaluation** of an error >	How serious is it?
5.	The **correction** of an error >	How is it to be dealt with?

3.1 The <u>Identification</u> of an Error > Is the Utterance Erroneous or Not?

The <u>first</u> stage is to **identify** errors, what James calls 'describing the learners' IL (that is their version of the TL) and the TL itself, followed by a comparison of the two, so as to locate mismatches' (1998: 5); in other words, can the utterance be understood and does it deviate from the accepted standard used by the teacher?

? Now Awang Bungsu is doing a business.

? He has been driving in his Hyundai since 1990.

? He has been to Saudi Arabia in 1985.

It is during the stages of identification, description and explanation (the first, second and third stages) that teachers from the same L1 background as their students should have a clear advantage over teachers who are monolingual in the target language. Due to their bilingualism, the former group of teachers have intimate knowledge and intuitions about both the L1 and the L2 in question.

3.2 The Description of an Error > What Kind of Error Is It?

The <u>second</u> stage is to **classify** or **describe** an error (which necessarily involves some kind of reconstruction to try and achieve what the learner intended to communicate): first, there is the distinction between **overt** (grammatically incorrect) and **covert** errors (the latter being grammatically well-formed but wrong in some other way).

overt (i.e. grammatically incorrect)

Yesterday I *go to the hospital. (not marked for the past tense)

The robbers didn't *saw a camera. (double marking of the past tense)

or

covert (i.e. 'syntactically' acceptable but incorrect in some other way)

The police *met one boy trapped in the fire. ('met' for found')

They *ran away in a white van. ('ran away' for'escaped')

The most common types of covert error are either vocabulary-related or pragmatic, that is they are too formal or informal in terms of register.

If an error is **overt** (i.e. an error of grammar), it can generally be classified into one (or a combination of) four types:

addition **Does can he sing?* (addition of operator 'does')

omission *I played football in * park.* (omission of article 'the')

word order *Do you know how old *is he?* (inverted order of 'is' and 'he') (Word order is generally less of a problem than other types of overt error).

substitution *I live *at Jalan Muara.* (incorrect use of preposition 'at' for 'on' or 'in') (Cf. Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982)

In terms of frequency, the most common types of grammar error are those of substitution, especially in relation to prepositions, articles and verb tenses. Generally speaking, in Brunei at least, it is not English vocabulary that is the problem but syntax, i.e. overt errors that involve the combination of words and phrases in the production of coherent sentences.

3.3 The Explanation of an Error > What Appears to Have Caused It?

The <u>third</u> stage is to **explain** how an error came about by trying to determine its (most likely) source; the purpose is to try and arrive at an understanding of how the learner relates to the linguistic system (in this case StE), although it is by no means straightforward to determine a single source for an error. The assignment of causes is fraught with difficulty and, as James (1998: 200) has pointed out, '[i]t is unusual to ascribe with confidence a given error to a single cause' One point we can be sure about, however, is the ultimate cause of all errors is a lack of declarative knowledge (Johnson, 1996, cited in James, 1998: 175). Presently, there are considered to be four major sources of error, or what James describes as 'diagnosis-based categories of error' (James, 1998: 178-179). These include the following:

(i) **interlingual transfer**, i.e. L1 interference, or negative transfer of a first language feature to the target language.

In that bank *have a hidden camera.

The Malay *'ada'* diverges in meaning to the English equivalents 'there is/are' and 'have' In contexts where 'there is/are' is required learners may sometimes produce 'have'

I *new got up from sleep.

The Malay *'baru'* has as its core meaning 'new', and this can appear as an equivalent for what would be 'just' in StE.

Other incorrect use of vocabulary can occur as a result of translation equivalence, often due to divergence from a single item in the L1 to a number of semantic equivalents in English, depending upon the linguistic environment:

Sam is bigger *from Ali.

The Malay equivalent for the comparative 'more + adjective + than' (or adjective + -er + than') is *'lebih + adjective + daripada'*. The most commonly occurring English equivalent of 'daripada' (or its root form, *'dari'*) is 'from', a

preposition of place, and learners can erroneously produce this in a linguistic environment where *'daripada'* equates with 'than'

I* cut the car.

The Malay (root verb) *'potong'* diverges in meaning to the English 'equivalents 'cut' and 'overtake' In a context where'overtake' is required learners may produce 'cut'.

My watch is *dead.

The Malay *'mati'* conveys the notion that something is no longer functioning. Its literal English equivalent is 'dead' (although there are certainly more sensitive ways of conveying this notion in Malay with reference to humans) and this more often applies to non-animates, such as electrical or mechanical equipment, as in the example above.

Can I *follow you? (where the intended meaning is 'get a lift with').

The Malay verb root *'ikut'* has the core meaning 'follow', in English, but this diverges to a number of semantic equivalents, one of which is 'get a lift with', leading to the possible production of 'follow', as in the example above.

Can I *send you in my car?

The Malay verb root *'hantar'* has the core meaning 'send' but, in a   manner similar to examples above, diverges to a number of semantically   equivalent but lexically different forms in English, one of which is 'give a lift', leading to the production of 'send', as in the example above.

I *take my son from school after work.

The Malay verb root *'ambil'* has the core meaning 'take' but, once again, diverges to a number of semantically equivalent but lexically different forms in English, one of which is 'collect', as would be required in StE in the example above.

It should be remembered that the benchmark here is StE, if either Malaysian English (ME) or Brunei English (BE) is being used as the

benchmark, then each of these utterances would be acceptable, as an example of indigenised (basilectal or mesolectal) English.

Another potentially influential factor is the way in which second or foreign language learners' pronunciation of English can have an effect on written work (phonology being the area of language where L1 transfer is most common). The following small sample reflects the way in which English utterances can be articulated among speakers from Austronesian language backgrounds, and the way they can influence written output if learners are inclined to write following their patterns of speech. This can be described as **subvocalisation** or **phonological transposition**:

(a) consonant cluster reduction, or splitting (sometimes called **vowel epenthesis**)

   *watched > *watch; clapp_ed > *clap, correc_t > *correk/(c), las_t>
   *las, stamp > *setem; film > *filem* (both these latter examples
   actually coincide with StM spelling)

(b) final stop deletion and final consonant deletion

   rela_x > *rila'; hol_d > *hole; play_s > *play

Stanfield (1986: 21) suggested 'some apparent mistakes made ... in omitting plural endings may in reality be due to pronunciation difficulties with final clusters containing, for example, [-s] and [-z]'

(c) devoicing of consonants

   b (bin) > p (*pin)
   d (din) > t (*tin)

(d) vowel conflation

   diarrhoea > *diary
   science > *sains

(e)   shortening of long vowels and diphthongs

     sheep > *ship; dream > *drim; take > *tek; soup > *sup; fairy > *ferry

(See Mossop, 1996 for a more comprehensive list)

If one sees the above kinds of error in writing, then one may attribute the cause to L1 pronunciation habits carried over into written work.

It has been argued that those TL errors or learning difficulties which derive from L1 interference can and should be dealt with in an explicit manner, since the L1 is a basis for comparison and contrast (cf. Bahiyah and Wijasuriya, 1998 and their explicit contrasts between StE and Standard Malay [StM] for further details). From experience, I would suggest that explicit contrastive instruction can draw attention to new English structures by inducing an interlingual comparison. As argued by Kupferberg and Olshtain (1996: 162), 'since contrastive input may facilitate the acquisition of grammatical rules as well as other L2 components, it should be incorporated into teaching programmes with other more communicative components'

(ii)   **Intralingual** or **developmental errors** (that is, those not directly attributable to the L1) most commonly occur as a result of overgeneralisation of a rule or pattern.

Areas of particular difficulty for learners of English grammar from an Austronesian language background are the appropriate use of verb tenses, prepositions and articles. (With reference to the English articles, 'a', 'an' and 'the', see Westney, 1994, cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998: 222, who has suggested 'articles are semantically complex because, although formally simple, the rules for their use are tied to both semantic and discoursal concerns that are too numerous for the learner to grasp easily').

Given that Malay is a member of the Austronesian language family and English is part of the Indo-European, it is no surprise that there are major typological differences (Svalberg and Fatimah, 1998: 32). One of the main differences is the occurrence of a feature in English and its absence in Malay, as is frequently the situation with verb tenses (ibid: 33). This is evidenced by the fact that the time of an event in Malay is inferred from the context of an

utterance or marked by specific lexical items, and Malay verbs do not change their form for tense, aspect, person or number. Among the verb tense difficulties that learners of StE (as an L2 or FL) may encounter are the following (ibid: 40):

- the obligatory nature of tense
- the lack of an unmarked verb group in an utterance
- the meanings and uses of aspect
- the finite/non-finite distinction
- the interaction between tense and aspect

Particularly, common errors related to the production of verb forms include the use of the root form of the English verb, regardless of tense or aspect:

*Killer Clint *want kill the sheriff.*

*In this classroom *be thirty-five student.*

The use of a time marker with the root form of the main verb form to indicate tense or aspect is also common:

I already *invite* my friend.

He *study* in form one this year.
I *forget* my book yesterday.

The use of '-ed' with irregular verbs occurs, but is less frequent:

*We *catched the fish in the river.*

*He *wented to Pulau Langkawi in his holiday.*

Verb tense errors are probably the most commonly occurring kinds of grammatical error in L2 and FL learners' written work (cf. Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982: 187) and are difficult to rectify through explicit grammatical instruction.

Regarding the use of prepositions, most errors are due to wrong selection of the preposition, rather than omission or addition:

*I was born *at Kampong Ayer.* (substitution of 'at' for 'in')

*He got *up the bus.* (substitution of 'up' for 'on')

*They got *down the bus.* (substitution of 'down' for 'off')

Errors that are intralingual (or developmental) in nature are certainly less easy to deal with than errors that are interlingual in origin, and perhaps cannot be effectively taught in an explicit manner, particularly with young learners. In much the same way, one cannot really correct the L1 production of a child. She/he will get the language right when cognitively ready to do so (cf. Hustijn cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998: 222).

(iii) **Context of learning**, whereby a learner picks up incorrect or misleading information about the TL from an external source, e.g. a reference book:

*He shaves *himself everyday.* (addition of 'himself')

*There is *much sugar in the jar.* (substitution of 'much' for 'a lot of')

*As I *have said earlier, we will be late.* (substitution of present perfect for past simple or the addition of 'have')

(iv) **Communication strategies**, whereby a learner uses alternative means for conveying an idea when the appropriate linguistic forms are not available. These might include (a) literal translations from the L1, and (b) switching languages (especially single lexical items) where the L2 item cannot be recalled:

(a) *I switched on the *matches.* (instead of 'light')

(b) *My father's car hit the *kerbau in the night.* (instead of 'buffalo')

One of the main difficulties in explaining errors is attributing the cause to just one source. More often than not there is more than one possible cause of error.

3.4 The Evaluation of An Error > How Serious Is It?

The fourth stage is the evaluation of errors:

(a) How grave (or serious) is an error? Is it global (i.e. incomprehensible) or local (i.e. a minor grammatical infringement)? If it is global it cannot be easily understood and reconstruction can be problematic.

* He said 'Will come to the longhouse'.

* He was unhappy because he had a beautiful stomach.

* There are rooms for improvement.

(b) Is it a mistake or an error (i.e. what is the pattern or frequency of infelicities)?

Are there frequent occurrences of the same kind of idiosyncrasy (i.e. error') or is there only a single occurrence among many correct versions of the same utterance (i.e. mistake), suggesting the learner can correct his or her deviation?

The main overall criteria for evaluation are intelligibility and frequency of occurrence.

McCretton and Rider (cited in James 1998: 229) suggest the following as a cline for estimating the gravity of errors following a number of categories.

<u>Most severe</u>   <u>Least severe</u>

lexis > spelling > negation > word order > prepositions > verb forms > concord

In the table below a summary of variables is given. It relates specifically to the second, third and fourth stages of error analysis. description, explanation and evaluation.

Table 2: Framework for the Application of EA

	[description] error types		[explanation] sources	[evaluation] gravity
covert/ overt	addition	appropriacy (register)	L1 interferenc (interlingual)	local/global
	omission	orthography (spelling)	L2 system (intralingual)	
	substitution	vocabulary	context of learning	mistake /error
	word order	morphology syntax	communication strategies (e.g. translation)	

The purpose of the framework is that it should be functional, yet also include the main variables which language teachers need to take account of in the consideration of errors. In trying to satisfy these two opposing requirements, it cannot hope to be comprehensive. For more comprehensive considerations, the reader is referred to other sources such as James (1998) or Dula and Burt (1982).

3.5 The Correction of An Error > How Is It To Be Dealt With?

The fifth (and final) stage is concerned with the **correction** of errors and **remedial work.** As James (1998: 235) suggests, '[O]ne of the purposes of doing Error Analysis is to identify the principles which should guide effective error correction (EC).' Constructing a method of correction that will benefit pupils will depend on a teacher's teaching priorities.

(a)   To correct or not? Correction relates back to the evaluation of errors and how important they are felt to be in relation to the focus of teaching. In addition, 'to correct or not?' can often be answered not by the language teacher but by administrators, inspectors or policy makers who may

define the scope of the language teacher's role in dealing with students' work.

(b) Which errors should be corrected? Not all errors are equally important. Five useful criteria for judging the importance of an error include the following: centrality to teaching focus; intelligibility; generality (i.e. it is common to many students); globality (it affects the whole sentence); social tolerability (often concerned with register); likelihood of success with correction.

(c) When should errors be corrected? Certainly, one of the challenges of language teaching is deciding when to ignore errors. It would appear to be affectively and cognitively beneficial to show some toleration towards learners' idiosyncracies. With oral work, it is obviously best not to interrupt the flow of utterances unless some aspect of pronunciation is itself the focus of practice. Quick feedback on written work is possible as a teacher circulates round a class, a time when attention to individuals can be given. There appears to be no decisive evidence as to when error correction is best conducted (Hendrickson 1983).

(d) Who should correct errors? It is by no means essential or advisable for teachers to always carry out error correction, especially when it comes to mistakes (as opposed to errors). This is an important distinction when considering who is to undertake correction.

(e) How should errors be corrected and exploited? When a teacher points out a mistake has been made he/she does not simultaneously give a correct version. An attempt to elicit a correct version should always precede giving a correct one (in the case of mistakes). These two steps are essential with regard to on-the-spot correction. A learner may well be able to repeat a correction once it is produced but may not know why it is correct or why what he/she wrote was incorrect. Teachers should check that pupils understand the 'rule'. Rules can be given in different ways. What is important is that the teacher's explanation should be framed in a way that his/her learners can understand: grammatical explanations need not be taboo and some learners appreciate them (especially adults); others may prefer to be told 'can is always followed by be, have, make, etc.' When applicable or relevant, the mother tongue is useful,

especially with a unilingual group of young learners. Diagrams may be drawn on the board particularly, for example, with constructions involving comparatives and superlatives. Teachers can also help their students to remember rules by giving them verbal or visual prompts, although few rules lend themselves to this kind of reinforcement. If an error occurs frequently, then a teacher needs to do more than just elicit a correction and check that learners have understood what is behind it. It is essential that pupils get practice. Oral practice of a structure should be both intensive (controlled practice focusing on accuracy) and extensive (free practice with the focus on producing lots of examples and encouraging fluency, perhaps in pairs or groups).

It is often best to present an error type common to a whole class as part of a normal lesson as though it were a new item rather than as something that has been taught and learnt unsuccessfully. It is also best to represent items in a functional context to demonstrate their communicative value rather than mechanically drilling structures, since meaningful communication is of paramount importance.

There does not appear to be any evidence that correction disturbs the learning process (cf. James 1998: 246) and so it is important to think of ways in which errors can be exploited for teaching purposes. At the same time, it is also important to think about the kinds of target language difficulties that students will encounter during practice since these can be reduced through preteaching and revision. Below is a brief table of suggestions for ways of dealing with error in the classroom context.

Table 3. A summary of ways of dealing with errors

Oral	Written
Students correct themselves where posibble	
Consider errors on classroom board using a cloze procedure; some area, advantages are: a) students have time to think b) it becomes a problem-solving exercise c) the whole class can focus on an item d) correct parts of an utterance are also shown	Blank completion or cloze exercises, focusing on one kind of problem e.g., register, vocabulary or grammar
Creating a context for meaningful practice	Multiple choice exercises
The use of meaningful drills	Matching words, sentences or ideas
	The use of antonyms or synonyms
	The use of anagrams
	Brainstorming as a class or in groups
	Reordering parts of a sentence (grammar-oriented) or text (discourse-oriented)
	Using parallel structures e.g., 'The man plays' > 'The men play'
	Transformation e.g., present > past; male > female
	Rewriting

4. Concluding Notes

The main purpose of this paper has been to raise awareness about L2 or FL errors by representing a commonly prescribed methodology for classifying, describing, explaining and dealing with them, with specific reference to data from a Southeast Asian context.

Certainly, language teachers need to take some account of language learners' errors in order to minimise their production. If they are to be dealt with, then a satisfactory means for dealing with them is required.

The proposition here is that once the language teacher has analysed an error, then informed decisions can be made as how best to exploit it (or not) for students' benefit.

If the aim of a task is student accuracy, then there should be adequate preparation before the task is set, in which case there should not be too much follow-up correction for a teacher. If there are many errors in students' work one should perhaps ask what went wrong at the preparation stage unless, of course, grammatical accuracy was not significant for the task.

There are good reasons, as mentioned in section 3.3, for dealing explicitly with L1 interference errors in terms of L1 and L2 contrasts while, it has been briefly argued here, intralingual errors are developmental in nature and are less easy to remedy outside of a communicative teaching approach.

It is hoped that this article might provide further impetus for dealing constructively with idiosyncratic learner language, and encourage teachers to think further about the kinds of errors made by their students, their possible causes and ways with which they can be dealt.

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