To Correct or Not to Correct -
Usual and Unusual Errors among Telugu Speakers of English

S. Jayasrinivasa Rao, Ph.D.

Abstract

It is inevitable that learners make mistakes in the process of second language learning. However, what is questioned by English teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. Not all mistakes are the same: some are too deeply ingrained to be corrected, others get corrected with ease. Teachers have come to realize that the mistakes learners make in the process of constructing a new system of language need to be analyzed carefully.

In this respect, this article aims to classify errors committed by Telugu speakers of English so that these help us diagnose the learning problems at any stage of development. The errors can be categorized as omission, addition, selection and ordering errors in the domain of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Some errors are largely global and hinder communication while others are local which do not prevent the message from being understood because of a minimal violation in a segment of a sentence.

In this article, I also try to categorize errors according to their psycholinguistic sources of error, whether they stem from a first language transfer (*interlingual*) or from an inconsistent rule in the target language (*intralingual*). A close analysis of errors will thus help us (i) identify strategies learners use in learning English, (ii) identify sources of learner errors, and (iii) think of appropriate ways and activities to aid learning.

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Teaching Engineering Graduates: My Experience

I have been teaching in Aurora's Scientific and Technological Institute since August 2004. Before joining the teaching stream, I worked as an editor for close to two and a half years and before that I was at CIEFL (now known as **The EFL University**), Hyderabad, completing my various research degrees. It was after I joined this college that I came into contact with the 'real world,' so to say. English is one of the subjects that is 'taught' in the first year B.Tech. course of the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU), Hyderabad. It is a 'subject' that is grudgingly 'learnt' by the students; a subject that is to be somehow tackled and passed.

The arrival of liberalization and globalization in India has resulted in unprecedented changes in how people work and how work is done. It was realized that the existence of a large pool of English knowing/speaking population in India was one of the factors that had resulted in India becoming the world's back office. Suddenly, English was in the limelight. MNCs and corporate houses insisted that fresh graduates had their English in its proper place. Learning 'communication skills' and 'soft skills' became the 'in' thing. JNTU then decided to revamp its English syllabus and included a 'lab' subject called 'English Language Communication Skills' in the first year of B. Tech. This included learning the sounds of English, stress, intonation, and 'communication skills' like group discussion, interview skills, presentation skills, telephonic conversation, information transfer, role play, prepared/unplanned speech, JAM sessions, etc. All these were supposed to equip engineering students with skills that would help them sail through the campus placement tests and interviews and sustain them through their professional life as software engineers (in most cases) or technical experts. The teaching of these skills presupposes the fact that the engineering students are able to read, speak, and write English, whether correctly or not.

I was in a dilemma. My training and research in 'cultural studies' at CIEFL made me realize that 'correct' is a loaded and relative term. As a teacher of English, I had to make sure that my students learnt English – to speak, write and read 'correctly.' I decided to honour my professional duties and went about my job in as diligent a manner as possible. It was and continues to be a tough task – to make students understand that they have to learn to speak, write, and read English in an 'acceptable' manner.

During this period, my ears picked up many variations and multiple usages of English as it was spoken by my students and colleagues. It was an unconscious exercise and I randomly jotted down the many departures, appearances, coinages, influences, etc., in their English. And I would try and correct these in my students' speech and writing after informing them why a particular phrase or sentence would be termed 'unacceptable.' Some of my colleagues too bore the brunt of my 'corrections.' But old habits die hard. The difficult part was when I realized that this 'speech' gets endorsed from similar usage in popular culture, especially films, advertisement hoardings, etc.; and from the speech of senior and experienced colleagues.

Pedagogical Implications of Error Analysis

I was a reluctant ELT student, even for the brief while that I had to 'endure' the subject and whatever was taught enthusiastically and learnt unwillingly, was soon carefully and successfully forgotten. So, in a sense, I hadn't learnt how to 'do ELT,' and therefore, I would

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mostly be looking at this 'English' that I encountered, continue to live with, and most amusingly, slowly becoming part of, from a perspective which doesn't have any fixed theoretical location. I could bring in some ELT or Applied Linguistics concepts to explain (mostly to myself) a particular aspect of this exercise; and I could also lean back to gain some support from my readings in Post-Colonial literature/theory, Cultural Studies, among other things.

Most of the English teachers that I have encountered have a very negative attitude towards error and do not tolerate even a single one in their students' writing or speech. All errors should be and are instantly corrected, with little thought about the students' feelings or the need to communicate. Errors are corrected in red; as many as teachers can find. This is a rather futile exercise! Although teachers think they have been working hard enough trying to stamp the errors out of their students' repertoire, spending much time and energy on error correction, their efforts rarely bear fruit and surprisingly the students also do not feel they have benefited from this exercise. On the contrary, students feel upset and demoralized.

What is therefore required of the teachers is a deeper understanding of errors, their causes and their severity in communication. As language teachers, we need to be armed with some theoretical understanding of errors and be aware of what we are doing in the classroom. The questions we need to ask are:

- What do we learn from student errors?
- What kinds of errors should be corrected?
- Do all errors need to be corrected?
- When and how should we correct errors?

What do we learn from student errors?

Interlingual Errors

From the classification of errors that follows, we know now that all errors are not transfer errors, though such errors form a major part of the learner's speech. The transfer errors in technical parlance are called **interlingual errors** and are signs that the learner is internalizing and is investigating the system of the new language. They occur at different levels, though most reflections of such errors are in the domain of phonology and syntax. For instance, pronouncing the sound /ʒ/ as /dʒ/ or /z/ as in *measure* is an evidence of a feature of English which is absent in the mother tongue and therefore substituted with a known sound in the language. In the domain of syntax, word order poses a major problem, for instance, *'why he came?'* which is a direct translation from *enduku vochchadu* (Telugu) or *kyon aaya* (Hindi).

At the morphology, reduplicated forms are used in English for emphasis, like, big-big, heavy-heavy, etc. Rather than treating them as bad irreversible habits, teachers need to know that many of these errors are community-based and do not seem to pose a major problem in communication, as long as they are speaking to people within the community. A purist would say, an error is after all an error, and errors should have no place in the student's tongue. Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) that the entire enterprise of BPO is trying to find solutions for, is the most difficult to overcome. This is because perception of the sound has to precede articulation. In most situations students do not hear the difference and in such

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cases no attempt to remove MTI would work. It is almost like teaching somebody, who has absolutely no sense of rhythm to play the drums. Also, to bring it back to our discussion of what we know of errors, we need to mention here that rather than wasting precious class-time on accent neutralization, a lot could be done to improve students' speaking and writing skills, skills that would be required in their future careers.

Intralingual Errors

We also now know that some errors are universal, and reflect learners' attempts to make the task of learning and using English simpler. Such **intralingual errors** are common in the speech of second language learners, irrespective of their mother tongue. Most of these errors result from a faulty or incomplete learning of a target language rule, and when a fairly consistent rule in the language is applied to a new word or construction. In Type II errors, we present many such intralingual errors. For instance, in the use of words like *conveniency* and *intelligency*, what we find is the wrong use of the noun-making suffix '*y*,' which is applicable to a whole set of words like *efficiency, democracy, diplomacy, contingency,* etc. What these intralingual errors show us is that learners know the noun making morpheme, and what they *do not know* is *when it cannot be applied*.

Code Switching

The third kind of error is when a target form is used in a first language structure or vice versa. One of the major contentions against **code switching** as legitimate language phenomena is that it is only those people who have a weak knowledge of a language who code switch. A good user of a language knows how to keep the two languages apart. Research in code switching has shown that it is good users who code switch, because what is necessary for a person to code switch is to know what part of speech, the code switched element or the construction belongs to, and then embed it in another language in the same space reserved for that construction in a sentence. Code switching is largely discoursal and fulfils a certain specific communicative function, and need not be treated as errors.

Error Classification

Presented below is a classification of 'errors' or 'departures' that I had heard, encountered, and collected during my continuing stint as a teacher.   This three-way classification is on the basis of the source of error:

(I have transcribed words and phrases from the Telugu language into English and I have indicated this with an uppercase T within brackets (T) after the word/phrase; similarly, in some places, I have also transcribed words/phrases from Hindi into English and have indicated this with an uppercase H within brackets (H) after the word/phrase.)

Type I: Interlingual errors where the language used is a direct translation of the Telugu phrases or grammar. In second language learners this LI transfer is seen quite often. These errors have a tendency to get fossilized, if adequate corrective feedback or good language exposure is not available.

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L 1 influence

1. *Morphology influence*
    - **Wanta** (from '*kaavalaa*'(T); *aa* – a question marker in L1 which is overgeneralized)

2. *Reduplication*
    - **Small-small** (from *chinna-chinna* (T)); **big-big** (from *pedda-pedda* (T)); **difficult-difficult**; **heavy-heavy**

3. *Grammar*
    - **Angry on me** (for '*angry with me;*' from '*naa meeda kopanga unnadu*(T)*,*' *mere pe gussa hai* (H); **meeda** and **pe** meaning **on** in T & H respectively) – phrase level error
    - **What you want is near me** (for '*with me;*' from '*naa deggara vundi* (T)*,*' *mere paas hai* (H); **deggara** and **paas** meaning **near** in T & H respectively)
    - **Why because** (from '*endukante*' (T), '*kyon ki*' (H))
    - **Now only** (from '*ippude*' (T)*, 'abhi*' (H))
    - **I am agree** (from *mein raazi hoon* (H)) – verb/adjective confusion
    - **He can able to** (treating 'can' as a modal only ignoring the meaning – capacity, so a repetition of info) (from *vaadu cheyyagaladu* (T)*; woh kar sakta hai* (H))
    - **Come 8.30, 9.00 like that** (translation into English of a typical usage in Indian languages referring to a non-fixed time frame) (from *enimidinnara, tommidiki atla raa* (T); *saade aath, nau aise aao* (H))

Type II: Intralingual errors are those which have nothing to do with overgeneralization from an LI form, but are those which are developmental and arise from an irregular pattern in the L2 (English). In English, we have ample evidence for a consistent/regular rule not applying to certain segments of the language. In such cases, learners identify the productive regular rule quickly and early and use it with any unfamiliar or new word they come across. The rule in effect is over-generalized.

L2 irregular rule

1. *Lexical errors*
    - **Backside** (to mean 'behind' or 'back of'; used widely across the country oblivious to the actual meaning of the word – e.g., write on the *backside* of this sheet)
    - **Glamorous** (for being stylish or dressing in a 'modern' 'sophisticated' manner – partial knowledge of the word)
    - **Posh** (for 'rich and/or luxurious' – partial knowledge of the word)
    - **Serious** (for 'quiet and/or strict' – partial knowledge of the word – The teacher is somewhat *serious* today)
    - **Say/tell**; **fall/drop** (*I will say you later*; transitive/intransitive equivalents)

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2. *Phonological*
   - **hurry-burry** (reduplication; like helter-skelter)

3. *Grammar errors*
   - **Did not came** (irregular morph)
   - **Proudy** (overgeneralization of '–y' – adverb marker)
   - **Hurted** ('*I hurted*' instead of '*I am hurt*' – over-generalized '–ed' marker)
   - **Faculties** (for 'faculty members'; plural of 'faculty,' which is widely used as a term to mean 'lecturer' in a college) (over-generalized –ies plural marker)
   - **Commenting** (for 'passing comments'; in sentences like 'He is commenting on me') (over-generalized –ing form)
   - **He is *feeling*** (for 'he is feeling bad'; this looks all right in Telugu when it is said '*vaadu 'feel' avuthunaadu*') (adjective drop; gives rise to tricky situations if not understood in context in sentences like – '*please don't feel*')
   - **Feeses** (plural for 'fees'(!); over-generalized '–es' marker)
   - **Wantedly** (for 'deliberately', 'on purpose'; from Telugu '*kaavalani*' [*kaavali*=want]) (over-generalized '–ly' marker)
   - **Conveniency**; **intelligency** (over-generalised '–y' marker)
   - **I scared** (for *got scared/was scared*) – detransitivitzing error
   - **Why are you afraiding?** (for *why are you scared/frightened [of approaching someone])*
   - **I don't have that much dare** (for *I don't have that much courage*)
   - **They will catch me** (from *nannu pattukuntaaru* (T); they will hold me responsible)

Type III: **code switching errors,** are those where an L1 word is embedded in the L2, most often consciously, for emphasis and effect, and are accepted by the L2 community in the region.

1. *Code switching errors*
   - **Self dabba** (colloquial phrase for 'blowing one's own trumpet' or in this case '*tin* drum' – would have been 'created' for use in Telugu, but is extensively used while speaking English too)
   - **'Keep' signature** (to sign; from '*sandakam pettali*' – pettu= keep/put)
   - **'Keep' leave** (to apply for leave; from '*selavu pettali*' – pettu = keep/put)
   - **Show put up** (colloquial phrase for 'putting on a show,' 'outward show')
   - **Mind absent** (for 'absent mindedness')
   - **Waste fellow** (for 'good for nothing')
   - **Jump** (for 'to elope,' 'to leave without informing anyone' – the boy and girl *jumped* without telling anyone)
   - **Over-action** (for 'to do something with unnecessary exaggeration' – the senior actor indulged in some *over-action* at the airport when he learnt that his flight was cancelled [taken from a Telugu news website report in English about a senior actor])

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What kinds of errors *should be* corrected?

Learners, as we have mentioned earlier, are usually classified as 'global' and 'local' (Burt & Kiparsky, 1974), where the global errors are those which hinder communication, and local errors affect a single element in a sentence, and do not create problems in understanding the message. Since no teacher has time to deal with all the errors of all students, a hierarchy should be established for the correction of errors on the basis of the nature and the significance of errors.

In such a hierarchy, priority should be given to errors that affect communication and affect understanding. If a teacher is able to classify errors as global and local, half the teaching burden would be reduced, and the teacher would have less error correction on hand. For instance, pluralization errors of the following type do not need to be corrected since the message is clear (* refers to an ungrammatical sentence, and the error is highlighted in bold. The correct sentence is given below.)

> (1)   a. *He gave me many useful **advices.**
>   b. He gave me many pieces of useful advice.

Errors in pluralization and articles are less damaging than wrong use of tenses, word order, placement of appropriate connectors, and morphological errors in terms of the comprehensibility of the sentence. Here are some errors which hinder communication.

> (2)   a. *I was **obligated** to do the work.
>   b. I was obliged to do the work.

In sentence (2a) the word obliged is replaced a back formed verb 'obligated' from the noun 'obligation.' This is a morphology driven error. In example (3a), we find the wrong use of a verb 'confuse' which is wrongly used in an intransitive construction. As a result, this sentence could be seen to mean 'the boy confused somebody' rather than 'he got confused.'

> (3)   a. *The text was difficult. The boy **confused**.
>   b. The text was difficult. The boy got confused.

As teachers of English, it is therefore important that we prioritize the correction of global errors in order to develop the students' communication skills.

When and how should we correct errors?

One of the questions language acquisition researchers have debated about is when and how errors should be corrected.

Let us address 'when' first. It is now a commonplace understanding that in oral tasks, student mistakes during a fluent speech should not be corrected. Usually, the student gets a feedback about the error instantly in form of a giggle from the other students or a frown from the teacher. In most cases, that is sufficient feedback for the student to go back and revise what s/he has said. In other cases, it is important that we do not interrupt the line of thought and let the student complete what s/he has to say before trying to make him/her notice the mistakes.

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It is also true, that any teacher, who corrects students often and interrupts them, makes them over-conscious and this hampers their flow of thought. The overcorrection on the part of the teacher has two consequences. One extreme is that learners over-emphasize the importance of grammar, so that the only thing they notice is the isolated sentences but not the whole unit of discourse; and the other extreme is that they focus too much on their ideas and leave the task of correcting errors to the teacher (Raimes, 1987).

Nevertheless, whatever the results might be, the feedback from teachers always relates to the negative aspects of language: 'Inaccurate!' 'Misleading!' or 'Inappropriate!'

Let us move on to the 'how' part of the question now. It is accepted now that student errors should not be corrected directly. Students should be told that they have made an error and be allowed to figure out the error they have made. One thing that we know from information processing models of language learning is that the more deeply and closely an item is looked at, the better are the chances of its becoming part of long term memory.

Let me explain this in a simpler way.

We have always told our students that 'understanding' is a better form of learning than 'memorizing.' Why? This is because, a deeper processing of information and a repeated endeavour to 'figure out' a problem leads to the item to be stored better in the brain. What also gets stored is the procedure or strategy that was followed. In language learning, when this theory is applied, it translates as the learners figuring out on their own what is wrong, and how it can be corrected. Pointing to the learner, the zone of error is enough as a stimulus to trigger thought processes. Teachers' overwriting of student errors is of no use.

We also know from research now that content correction is better than form correction, unless the lesson is on the teaching of grammatical form. Students expect feedback on their speech and writing but teachers often manage to confuse them with arbitrary corrections, over-emphasis on accuracy and pointing out hordes of spelling, punctuation, and article errors. What would be useful is to give feedback on the content, than the form. Teaching is not only about imparting skills but also inculcating right attitudes about speaking and writing. Correction and feedback should not create a lack of motivation and/or interest in writing.

A Sort of Conclusion

From what I have seen, the outlook of the teachers of technical subjects towards English is amusing, to say the least. They believe that English is not necessary for teaching technical subjects. Though this is true when we think of countries like Russia or Germany or China, where the medium of instruction is not English, we cannot escape English in India, be it for Technical Education or for any other modern formal professional education.

In the initial days of joining this college, I was intrigued by the fact that most of the teachers of technical subjects 'taught' in English, but would switch over to Telugu while speaking to students or clarifying their doubts in class and interacting with them outside. I wondered how they 'taught' in English. It was much later that I realized that the 'teaching' part came directly from the textbooks of the respective subjects and was therefore in English and any 'independent' 'outside' explanation was in Telugu. It was as if the 'textbook' was being transmitted.

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This phenomenon resulted in some interesting 'views' that most of the teachers of technical subjects held. One was that teachers of technical subjects need not be 'good' in English; they need only that much English to be able to teach in the class, and this English need not be grammatically correct. This view gets unconsciously transmitted to the students and most of them tend to follow this view.

Therefore, more than making the students 'learn,' the English teacher has to make them 'unlearn' the 'English' that they unconsciously imbibe from what they hear in most of their other classes. An out of the box idea would be to conduct brief workshops for all the faculty members of the college and make them aware that they too are partners in this process of making students 'industry ready' (if not for any other reason!) and that 'correct' English will only add polish and style to their teaching skills, and a skill worth investing some time and energy in.

The words, phrases, and sentences that I jotted down were not part of any research nor were the people who uttered them, my students and colleagues, respondents in any way. I don't know who spoke what and when. So, the structure of this exercise is loose. Many English teachers in India would have encountered the deviations and variations that I have given here in some manner in their languages and would have more examples. And many more would encounter these for the first time here. The intention here is to give some kind of structure to analyse these errors and to try and see if some kind of 'out of the way' solution can be devised to make students understand that these are errors. An expanded and collaborative version can also serve as a kind of reference for students and teachers. This is an open ended project.

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