

Identifying and Analyzing Error Patterns in the L1 and from General Misuse or Over Generalization of Learning Strategies

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1.0 Introduction

This paper examines some written work from first-year junior college students in Japan by identifying and analyzing two error patterns - one originating in the L1, in this case Japanese, and the other deriving from general misuse or over generalization of learning strategies. Following the analysis, some teaching procedures are introduced to help students deal with the error pattern originating in the L1.

2.0 Review of the Literature

Although the purpose of this paper is to provide some teaching procedures to help students deal with an error originating in the L1, I would like to do so by taking caution for, as Brown (1994) states, language teachers can become so overly occupied with noticing errors that the correct expressions in the second language go unnoticed. That will not be my intent. The main focus here will be on grammatical errors, and namely what Brown (1994) calls 'local' errors, or rather, those errors which do not hinder communication, usually because they are of minor violation and allow the reader/listener to make an accurate guess as to what was intended to be communicated. Such errors are better understood, and thus can be more accurately detected and analyzed, by teachers who have a good understanding of the learners' native language, and even a familiarity with the language can be helpful in finding the source of the errors (Brown, 1994).

Over generalization, on the other hand, leads to errors that occur from incorrectly transferring previously learned second language material to a present language context (Brown,1994). Interestingly from the learners' perspective, Nunan (1995) points out in a study that error correction by the teacher is highly valued by almost all learners and that student self-discover of errors is given a low rating. This thinking seems to be especially prevalent in Asian countries where learners can be categorized, as Nunan (1995) writes, as 'authority-oriented', meaning that they prefer teachers to explain everything, like having their own textbook, write everything in a notebook, like to study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them. Rubin (1985) mentions that good learning strategies enable learners to deal with errors more effectively. Another interesting point to consider is made by Rutherford (1987) in that any successful learning comes only when it is meaningful to what has already been learned, or in other words, takes place in a familiar context or framework-an extension of the familiar to the unfamiliar, he adds. Learning strategies, as will be used later, can be defined as those mental processes which learners use to learn and use the target language (Nunan, 1995). Oxford (1990:8) contributes her definition of learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations. She also suggests that learning strategies have several features, most notably they contribute to the main goal of communicative competence, and they are not always observable. She goes on to mention six general types of strategies, listed below;

1. Memory strategies
2. Cognitive strategies
3. Compensation strategies
4. Meta-strategies
5. Affective strategies
6. Social strategies

Richards (1990) warns us that learners are often unskilled when it comes to

writing and that they tend to spend little time on planning. Rubin and Thompson (1982) suggest that good learners, on the other hand, are able to organize and create language information, make errors work, learn to make intelligent guesses, and learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform 'beyond their competence'. The teachers role in all of this is largely that of a supplier of feedback, including error correction, and approval of learners' production. Annett (1969) reminds us, however, that the degree to which such information aids the learners' progress is still unknown. Nevertheless, Richards and Lockhart (1994) offer us some valuable advice for our writing classes saying that students working in pairs can give each other suggestions for improvement in the form of feedback, including address content, organization, or clarity of expression all serving to provide information to help the student revise a piece of writing. The sections below will attempt to give the reader some insights on identifying some of the learning strategies student may be using in their errors and exactly how some of the strategies above can be incorporated into a lesson to correct such errors.

3.0 Identification and Analysis of Two Error Patterns

3.1 Error Patterns Originating in the L 1(Japanese): A Comparison of the Past and Prefect Tenses

We can use six different tenses to talk about the past in English. Whereas English has six tenses to talk about the past, Japanese has only three (See Figure 1). In English, the Japanese tenses are (1) the past indicative, (2) the past presumptive and (3) the gerund tense. The usage of gerunds in Japanese is more complex. Gerunds end with either 'te' or 'de' followed by 'iru' or 'itta'. Technically speaking, 'iru' is the present tense and 'itta' the past tense of a verb roughly comparable to the English verb 'to be'. However, used with a gerund, either can indicate a past action or event. Basically, the simple past and the past progressive tenses of English and the past indicative and the gerund + te iru/itta tenses of Japanese are rather similar in structure and usage and therefore offer

no apparent problems for Japanese learners, speakers and translators of English. The difficulties lie much more, I think, in using the four English perfect tenses that were mentioned above and in the following figure.

Figure 1. The Past Verb Tenses of English and their Japanese Equivalentents

<i>English Tense</i>	<i>Japanese Equivalent</i>
Simple past (I worked.)	Past indicative (Hatarakimashita.)
Past progressive (I was working.)	Gerund (Hatarakite iru/itta.)
Present perfect simple (I have worked.)	
Present perfect progressive (I have been working.)	
Past perfect simple (I had worked.)	
Past perfect progressive (I had been working.)	
Past presumptive (He must have worked.)	*Past presumptive [(Kare wa)Hatarakita daroo.]

*The past presumptive in Japanese is an informal tense mostly used in writing to make a presumption on whether someone has done something or not. The above example, then, could be roughly translated as '(He) must have worked'.

While four tenses are all clearly different structurally and in their meanings, in Japanese they can merely be translated by using either one of the two tenses cited above. Here is one for example:

I have been reading this book.

Watashi ga kono hon o yonde iru. ('de' instead of 'te')

Here, interestingly, this same Japanese could be translated into English to mean 'I am reading this book (now)'. The problems that exist with the perfect tenses can be essentially distinguished as: (a) Difficulties in conjugating verbs, especially irregular verbs and (b) Deciding what perfect tense is appropriate to

use according to the past time being spoken about. I believe that the latter poses more difficulty. Irregular verbs do exist in Japanese as well, so this does not present a unique problem. Therefore, I will focus on the second problem cited above since it is more of an unique problem. Japanese learners, speakers and translators of English often, for example, use the past perfect tense when only the simple past is should be used. Consider this example from one of my students;

Last summer I had gone to Australia and had stayed in Sidney for ten days.
(Mistake)

The reason for making this particular mistake, I think, is that many Japanese think that because the duration ('ten days') for the past actions ('had gone' and 'had stayed' or correctly 'went' and 'stayed') is stated that the past actions must be expressed with the relatively more complex perfect tense (or even with the past perfect progressive) rather than with just the simple past tense. Another common mistake made is when actions and situations which started in the past and have continued up to the present time need to be expressed. Let me give an example of a common mistake often made with the verb 'become' with its Japanese equivalent for comparison:

Japan became rich since the war.

Nihon wa sengo tomeru kuni ni narimashita.

(Literally 'Japan became a wealthy country after the war.')

Note that the past indicative 'narimashita' was used thus causing the mistake of using 'became', its English equivalent. Obviously, one should say 'Japan has become "rich" since the war' because Japan is "rich" now. One could say that the root cause of the mistakes given in this section is the fact that differences exist between the two languages in terms of expressing time, in this case past time.

In conclusion let me ask, What are the learning strategies that may be employed in the occurrences of such errors? I see them mostly as the cognitive strategies. It appears that the students are simply translating in a rather slip hop manner. In sections 4.1 – 4.4 I will give some suggestions on how to deal with

the errors in a lesson.

3.2 Error Pattern Deriving from General Misuse or Over generalization of Learning Strategies

A reoccurring error pattern that I have often detected in my students' writing is using there is/are as an adverb meaning 'in that place' and confusing it with the existential 'There is/are'. Frequently the errors stem from either general misuse or generalization. Contrast the two sentences below;

There are five people in my family. (Correct)

Mitsui Greenland is a fun place. There is a big jet coaster. (Incorrect)

Note: Mitsui Greenland is an amusement park. Jet coaster is Japanese English for what Americans would call a roller coaster.

You should come to Fukuoka. There are many interesting attractions.

There is a good play land. So you should have fun.

Fukuoka is famous for noodles. There are many good shops. You will enjoy!

I found this type of error pattern in many of the papers I collected for a writing assignment on local tourist sites. Students need some work here to be able to differentiate between the two structures (the adverbial There is/are and the existential There is/are) and learn to be able to use them properly and consistently.

4.0 Method: Teaching Procedures for Helping Students Deal with Error Patterns in the L 1: The Past and Perfect Tenses.

Following the assumptions I made about cognitive strategies in section 3.1, and the belief that my students fall into the category of 'authority-oriented' learners (Nunan, 1995), who prefer the teacher to explain things, like to have their own textbook, to write in their notebooks, to study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them, below I present some ways to incorporate such strategies to deal with the error patterns of concern. Cognitive

strategies include guessing intelligently (Richards and Lockhart, 1994), recognizing and using formulas and patterns, practicing naturalistically, using resources to receive and send messages, reasoning deductively, transferring, summarizing, highlighting (Brown, 1994), repetition, recombination, and elaboration (O'Malley, 1985).

4.1 Put the following sentences into the present perfect tense or past tense.

1. Jason (go) to Paris last year.
2. Jason (go) to Paris three times so far.
3. Lisa (live) in New York five years ago.
4. Pat (live) in New York for five years.
5. Lily (live) in New York since 1992 until now.

The purpose of this exercise is to get the student thinking about tenses as they relate to time expressions. By doing so, it is hoped that students will learn not only how to guess intelligently by conjugating the verbs in a formulation skills exercise, but also practice deductive reasoning skills through some repetitious warm-up. The highly controlled drill here is intended to set the stage for more naturalistic practice to follow later in the lesson.

4.2 Fill in the spaces with either the past tense or the perfect tense then construct a question to get such an answer from a classmate. The first one is done for you.

1. I have seen (see) the movie Tootsie recently on video.

What movie(s) have you seen on video recently?

2. I _____ (see) four movies so far this month.

_____?

3. It has been a month since I _____ (see) my best friend.

_____?

4. My parents _____ (live) in Canada for 10 years.

_____?

5. Julie _____ (visit) three shrines on New Year's Day.

_____?

This exercise takes the first one a step further in that, while it is still very controlled, it asks the student to formulate questions that can be answered somewhat freely by a classmate. Again, the stress of this exercise is to get the student more accustomed to using the tenses being presented here and at the same time initiating some conversation with a partner. It would also be useful to follow up this exercise with some more practice on asking questions about the past, specifically the recent past. This should allow the student to get more valuable practice in a more natural/less constrained setting. A note of caution: unless the tenses are clearly wrong or misused, I do not see it necessary to correct the student. For example, you could obviously allow either the past tense or the perfect tense in a question such as 'What did (have) you do (done) recently?'. (The same could be said of my examples above.) On the other hand, in other situations where the meaning and differences are clearer it may prove much more appropriate to make corrections. The emphasis in this exercise is not so much to draw any possible difference between the tenses as it is to show the students what the possibilities of the tenses are. Any naturalistic conversation that comes out of such an exercise should be encouraged by all means.

4.3 Read the story below and correct the errors.

Fred Anderson is from New Zealand. Now he lives in the United States. He have lived in the U.S. since 1985. He works for Kodak Co. How long has he work for Kodak? He works for Kodak for 12 years. Fred works as a salesman for Kodak. He is worked as a salesman for Kodak for the past

five years. Before that he has work as an accountant for the company. Fred loves to play tennis. He played tennis since he was a little boy. He even start playing tennis when he was five years old.

How about you? How long has you lived in your city? What languages you studied besides your own native language?

Here again, in making the corrections it is not completely necessary that the student use any one particular tense. What is more important here is that the student be aware of the mistakes and be able to correct them with a tense that is appropriate. In the process of making the corrections, it is my aim in this exercise to present more opportunities for the student to get more familiar with both the past and perfect tenses and their possible usages. The questions that follow the text are supplied as a gateway for practice and to allow the student to converse more freely and exchange experiences of the past. In doing so, it is hoped that the students use the tenses accurately and naturally. Teachers should encourage students to formulate their own questions by themselves as well.

4.4 First try to choose the correct answer. Then make your conversation with your own information.

Sales Clerk: You aren't from around here, are you?

Ricardo: No, I am from Chile.

Sales Clerk: How long have you been in Seattle?

Ricardo: I've been here since about last March.

Sales Clerk: Really! Your English is very good. How long have you studied English?

Ricardo: I've studied English for about three years.

Sales Clerk: I studied Japanese in high school but I can't speak it at all!

The aim here is no different than in the previous exercises except the presentation and task are different. Again I am aiming for greater familiarity with the tenses and further opportunity for communication. Students, most importantly in this exercise, should have and take the opportunity to pair up and exchange

experiences not only about the topic in the dialog above but even about their interests and hobbies.

4.5 Think about some of the things your classmate does or is doing now.

Then write five “How long...” questions to enquire about your classmate’s experiences. Example: How long have you studied English?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

This last exercise is intended to get the student to first construct questions to ask their classmates on their own, and then later perform a role play using some of the questions they have written. Let me give an example of exactly how this exercise might be carried out. First are some questions I have made followed by a possible role play.

1. How long have you been a student here?
2. How long have you studied English?
3. How long have you lived in this city?
4. How long have you had that coat?
5. How long have you had your part-time job?

A: Hi, my name is Jack. What’s yours?

B: Yorie.

A: It is nice to meet you, Yorie.

B: Nice too meet you too.

A: How long have you lived in this city?

B: Since last year.

A: I heard you talking about your part-time job. How long have you had your part-time job?

B: I started working there after I graduated from high school.

As I said repeatedly before, it is not imperative that the students use one particular tense over another. The purpose of this exercise is to get the students to ask questions about each others' experiences, specifically their experiences that lead up until the present. This exercise presents another chance for the students to elaborate on themselves and their experiences while summarizing and highlighting some of what they have learned and/or reviewed in this lesson. The key aim to this final exercise is natural conversation in which the students can use their resources to communicate with each other, that is, initiating conversation, conveying messages and responding to them. It may be useful to devote occasional lessons in the future to some review type exercises about speaking of the past. One very simple exercise that could also be used at the beginning of subsequent lessons is to go around the class and have students respond to the question - 'What's new?'. This will allow them not only to think about the past and require them to tell when such actions occurred, but also give them the opportunity for freer expression and essential language practice.

5.0 Conclusion

Knowing and recognizing learning strategies can be an excellent starting point for teachers to detect, analyze, and help students deal with certain error patterns. In this paper I have discussed Cognitive strategies. Perhaps other strategies could be included to deal with the problems at hand. Specifically, as stated in this paper, I believe that one primary area of concern and one of the major causes of mistakes when Japanese learners, speakers and translators of English are using English is the difficulty involved with the simple act of indicating exactly when past actions or events occurred. Usually Japanese students simply indicate (with the past indicative) the fact that the action or event happened in some past time without specifying exactly when. More often than not, students simply translate what they want to say in English from their L1 (Japanese). Whereas native English speakers must often express, while speaking amongst themselves, exactly when some past action or event occurred, Japanese

(in Japanese) do not. This is a major concern for language teachers here. It may be useful to try to instruct students not to merely memorize the conjugations of verb tenses or to simply translate all Japanese into English, but to look at this subject in another way, that is, to force themselves to think about past time in more exact terms since they will be expected to talk about actions and events that happen in the past much more clearly in English than they do in Japanese. Hopefully the lesson ideas in this paper can be of help. This is a topic and area of concern and one of which deserves even greater attention.

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