

What do Mistakes Tell?

— An Analysis of the Mistakes in Students' Journals and Its Implication to Classroom Instruction

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和文要旨：鳥取環境大学では、IE (Intensive English) の一部として、学生は週二枚程度、英語でのジャーナルを書くことが要求されています。本論文は鳥取環境大学の学生を対象にし、彼らが英語の文書を書くときに、多く見られる誤った表現を列挙し、そして誤り、或は不適切な表現の理由を分析し、正しい書き方、表現方法と文章の構成についての指導法を示したものです。最後に、和製英語に対する正しい英語表現などを表で示しました。本論文で纏めた誤った表現は、殆ど身の回りを語るナレーションのジャーナルを対象にしています。

【キーワード】 ジャーナル、書く、間違い、分析、校正

Abstract : As an integral part of IE (Intensive English), all students are required to write English journals at an average two- piece-per-week rate in Tottori University of Environment Studies (TUES). This paper is a tentative attempt to categorize the kinds of mistakes and inappropriateness found in the journals that I have read in the last two and half years. Beginning with a definition of mistakes, this paper then unfolds by elaborating the possible reasons that lie underneath by referring to a good many literature work. Following this, students' mistakes are listed and their reasons are explored. Finally, its implication to classroom instruction is arrived at with a tentative categorization and correction of mistakes expressed in a chart. This paper is written using the English journals written by Japanese students in TUES, and most of the journals are found to be narration. Due to this fact, the mistakes and inappropriate expressions summarized here are confined to the genre of narration mostly.

【Keywords】 journal, writing, mistakes, analysis, correction

1. Introduction

The mention of mistakes usually has a bad ring. Students hate them when their work is crawling with red marks; the teachers also hate them because they show that the students are not able to perform well. And the worst, it usually takes the teacher too long to cross out the mistakes and then to correct them! However, that is not just what mistakes are worth. They mean more than some annoying functional failures. Mistakes can well lead to a better command of the language learnt. And this paper is a tentative attempt to show how mistakes can be valuable in ameliorating students' writing ability by offering valuable implication to classroom instruction.

2. Definition

Before any further elaboration of mistakes takes place, the definition of journals needs to be identified in the first place. Todd, (2001) used journals to communicate with the learners about any questions and uncertainties concerning language learning. However, the journals applied in this paper refer to the two-piece-in-a-week written work of the students about their daily life, friends, families, hobbies and the impressions about things that have happened. It is pretty much like a diary. And the main pedagogical expectation is that the students can produce comprehensible written work, thus making sense of what they want to say.

A. Mistakes as interlanguage

Although mistakes often irritate language teachers and may even deprive students of their confidence in language learning, they are not just rubbish. Selinker (1972,1992) has viewed mistakes in a whole new light. *Interlanguage* is a term Selinker applied to redefine the mistakes in the students' work, both in written and spoken form. By this, he meant that the mistakes found in the students' work can be viewed as developmental products, something that reveals to which stage the learning has proceeded. In view of this, mistakes may not be all bad; on the contrary, they could provide valuable perspectives on learning process.

B. The origin of the mistakes

A good variety of reasons could attribute to the generation of mistakes. This paper will try to look at the origins from three perspectives.

a) L1 interference

Viewing from the context of the students' journals, L1 inferences could be the first to blame. L1 interference, also known as "negative transfer" (Cook, 1989) refers to the learners' indiscriminate transfer of linguistic rules from their native language to the target language. That is to say, Japanese learners tend to construct their English writing using grammar that applies to Japanese. This usually takes the form of direct translation. A good example can be:

I think about public security in Japan..

By that, the student writer intends to mean: 日本の治安について検討したいと思います。Nonetheless, the English goes:

I would like to comment on public security in Japan.

Or, *I want to talk about public security in Japan.*

b) Learners' approximation system about the language

According to Nemser (in Corbett, 2000), the target language that student writers produce when struggling to deal with the varied demands of the writing task is an approximation to the supposed "standard" target language. It is meant that all language learners are trying to reach the most correct expression and their work could be viewed as approximation of the perfection.

Yesterday, I seed my friend at the station.

This is an often-occurring *approximation-system* mistake. The student seemed to have the English grammar knowledge of past tense and he put -d after the right verb. In this sense, the student was not just a passive learner, but a "competent" one who could manipulate the grammar rules and try to produce linguistic items according to it. The thing is there are exceptions to the formation of verbs in terms of past tense, which the student has failed to master.

c) Accidents

In contrast to the mistakes that are the results of lack of relative linguistic knowledge or the misperceptions of the knowledge, another kind is the result of "lack of processing ability", which occurs due to inability to process under difficult sets of operating conditions (Johnson, 1988). For example, the mistakes can be a slip of the pen when the students' writing can not catch up with his thinking. For instance, "I like play boring". "See you aging" (see you again), etc. We could only wish the intelligence level of the spelling-check function could be upgraded.

3. Categorizing the mistakes

As discussed in section 2, mistakes could provide insightful perspectives on the learning process of our student writers. Therefore, by analyzing and categorizing the writers' mistakes, we would be in a better position to understand the nature of the mistakes and the way they "fit" into individual writer's work (Bartholomae, in Corbett, etc, 2000,) and we would be able to know where to begin with our instruction on what the writers need to improve. It makes no sense, for example, to impose a lesson on conditional clause if the writers' problems are understood as in the construction of attributive clause. This paper will only look at the mistakes as a result of L1 interference and learners' approximation system that marks the stages on their route to mastery.

A. Syntactic mistakes

a) *After Golden Week, it returns from Osaka to Tottori.*

This is one of the often-found mistakes: the misuse of subject or mere lack of subject. The use of "it" is quite confusing. Supposedly, it comes under the direct influence of the Japanese

language, where subject --- in this case, I--- is often omitted. As English usually asks for a subject to begin with, our student writer then found his way out by using " it ". A similar example is:

...if it will continue global warming...

b) *I will talk about my best like three foods.*

Here we can see a lack of understanding between the use of adjective and attributive clause. The sentence is corrected when replaced with " *hree of my favorite food* ". This type of mistake occurs at a very high rate and it can be generalized over the majority of my students in TUES. And this is also an example of L1 interference.

c) *May Syndrome is very tired.*

Here, the mistake lies in the disagreement between the subject and the predicative. The correct version goes: *When you have May Syndrome, you often feel very tired.* In Japanese, you can make yourself understood by saying 五月病は疲れることでず。 However, it does not go this way in English. Similar examples are:

× *when I was primary school, I liked beans.*

× *Sushi is not like.*

× *Today is yamabu's party.*

d) *I like playing sports, but I watch sports too.*

The use of conjunction *but* is better to be replaced by *and*. Other confusing conjunctions may be: so that, because of, so as to, as a result, etc. For example:

× *I turn on the TV so that I am lonely.*

× *I turn on the TV in order to I want more information.*

B. Organizational mistakes

a) No paragraph division ¹⁾

The whole piece of writing is one big block, which makes it difficult for the readers to read effectively, such as to grasp the general ideas or to locate specific information.

b) Lack of a controlling idea

Students' journal writing is often carried away with the instantaneous thoughts of the writer so that the whole writing does not often follow the same focus as the title suggests. For example, in a piece of writing titled *My Room*, the student writer began rightly by talking about the furniture in his room. However, he suddenly switched into introducing the fitness equipments lying in one corner. Even when he ended his writing, he still expressed more appreciation in the varieties of different functions of the fitness equipments than in his room.

c) Insufficient supporting ideas

In a piece of writing titled *Cat*, the student writer could not make the word count as required. ~~Qli 786-9 reW n(889-9) reW nb9-878 dif.~~

- × *The mileage meter teach me how far the car has run.*
The mileage meter tells me how far the car has run.

If the above examples have shown the indiscriminate use among synonyms, the following one, then, tries to point out the improper choice of vocabulary in terms of levels of formality.

b) *Strawberry was possessed by grandma of my boyfriend.*

A better version may be: *My boyfriend's grandma had some strawberry.*

Or, *It was my boyfriend's grandma who owned the strawberry.*

D. Cultural misinterpretation

There are some other kinds of expressions that are not grammatically wrong, but they certainly fail to communicate what the writer has on his / her mind.

Example 1,

I often call a teacher's name.

I believe the writer intended to express the closeness in the relationship between him and the English teacher, but he incidentally said exactly the opposite --- *I often speak ill of my teacher.*

Example 2

... I pushed the wrong tooth and was bitten by the alligator! Hideki was so excited and he shouted: "You are the loser!"

Instead of writing "You lost", the student writer has made himself extremely offensive in English.

Example 3

... my mother is old.

To call somebody *old* is regarded as rude in English, although, in Japanese it may not be so. Supposing when this is read by an English speaker, the writer could well be interpreted as having dissatisfaction towards his mother, which may not be what the writer intended.

Examples like this could be further extended. They are not only

culturally inappropriate, but can also cause fatal misunderstanding.

Example 4

... we went to the Japanese pub after class. We drank alcohol.

Again, there were no grammatical mistakes involved, yet it does not sound natural. It can be seen as a result of L1 interference, where the Japanese equivalent goes: *お酒を飲みました*. However, to make it sound natural in English, it may as well be changed into: *...we had a few (alcoholic) drinks.*

A similar example goes (example 5):

Today, I think about good points about...

or,

Today, good points are felt.

In Japanese writing, when you begin to argue for something, you would write,

今日は、～～に付いて良いところを考えてみたいと思います。

However, the natural English goes:

I would like to consider about plus points.

Or, *First of all, some plus points are to be discussed.*

Expressing the same idea in Japanese and English has different ways of composing, although, grammar does not seem to get in the way in the above example sentences. The student writer of example 4 could make him/herself understood under the right context (not drinking the chemical substance for industrial use!) and the writer of example 5 may be able to proceed with his / her presentation in an international conference; however, their English does not conform to the externally imposed norms about language behavior, norms which, in pure survival terms, are frills (Johnson, 1988:94).

4. How to correct the mistakes

How do we deal with mistakes when they pop into our eyes? I sometimes could not refrain from correcting every mistake, leaving conspicuous red marks on students' journals. Usually, one piece of journal was then crawling with red corrections. However, I wondered if the students would ever read my corrections, or if they just simply threw them away without giving them a second look, feeling distressed all the same. "Too much red just means bad and that is the end of it."

(Pfefferle, 1999) It seems that too many red marks may, more often than not, scare away the students and even deprive them of their precious motivation towards writing. Another undesirable by-product is that practitioner teachers could have much of their time taken away, doing something that may not contribute to the linguistic development of the students while exhausting themselves (Chimonnbo, 1986).

So what is, then, a more efficient way to draw learners' awareness to mistakes without undermining their motivation? What I am doing is taking notes of the typical mistakes found in most of the journals and discussing them in the following class. Usually, I would put two sentences on the board and ask students to find any mistakes. They either work in pairs or on their own. I would usually provide some hints for them to start with. They could also refer to the dictionary, looking for similar example sentences. With the help of the dictionary, the students often click easily. After identifying the mistakes as a group, every student is asked to go through their own work and try to locate any similar mistakes in their own work.

A. Syntactic mistakes

For this group of mistakes, I would introduce relevant drills for my students to practice. In the case of attributive clause, I often begin by listing some mistaken samples with their corrected versions underneath. By having shown a couple of example corrections, the rules for attributive clause can be gradually generalized by the students themselves. Following that, I would give an explicit explanation concerning the construction of attributive clause. Finally, it is my students' turn to locate any attributive clause usages in their respective work. Those could be either mistaken or correct usages. For reinforcement practice, I often use relevant exercises that can be easily found in the market, such as Grammar Games (Rinvoluceri, 1984).

B. Organizational mistakes

With regard to this, an analysis of organizational factors might be useful. What I do is to get ready of some example paragraphs, indicating the organizational factors, such as topic sentence, supporting sentences, summarizing sentence. The example paragraphs could then be extended into short-sized articles, where the concepts of paragraph division as well as

thesis statement could be further introduced.

For some rhetorical patterns, such as listing, compare and contrast, exemplification, etc, I would weave those into the regular class discussion. For example, in the CAF²⁾ class, I would provide a listing pattern and ask the students to put in the factors they have considered when buying a car. When his/her turn comes, each student is supposed to fit the factors s/he finds into the organizational pattern and read out aloud. Two or three rounds in one class can hopefully leave some impression on their mind. After the classroom discussion, every student is asked to write a journal on that topic so as to recycle the rhetoric patterns in the form of writing.

An example would be:

First of all, I would like to consider about price.

Secondly, design is important to us.

Next, the parking charge is another factor to take into consideration.

Still, mileage is another factor to be considered.

Last but not least, we should not forget the insurance matter.

Other practice of rhetorical patterns can be done in a similar manner.

C. Inappropriate use of vocabulary

When writing a journal, my students often refer to their little Japanese-English (J-E) dictionary. For the same meaning, there could be a good many candidate English words to choose from, each carrying with it its level of formality and its own context. However, my students may just pick any one word and insert it into their journal context. The inappropriate use of *ashamed* and *embarrassed* is just one example. (See III-C)

To solve this problem, I would suggest the use of an English-English (E-E) dictionary with example sentences. After checking the J-E dictionary, the students are to bring all candidate words into an E-E dictionary, trying to locate the differences in terms of levels of formality and the different context to fit the word in. The easiest way is to look for example sentences that match the students' intended usage.

In this regard, modern electronic devices are very good

partners. Rather than bending your backs carrying big paperback dictionaries, electronic dictionaries are very handy and most of them (latest ones) offer automatic cross-references within several dictionaries installed. Another recommendable source is electronic dictionary installed in the students' PC, which can be immediately referred to while the students are writing journals on their PC.

D. Cultural misinterpretation

The mistakes that fall under this group may seem idiosyncratic in their own ways. Nonetheless, generally viewed, most of them are the result of direct translation from L1. They may not necessarily be grammatically wrong; however, if the students are not made to realize the different cultural representations, they may encounter serious cultural misunderstanding, such as example 1, 2 and 3. Accordingly, it is up to the practitioner teacher to collect those mistakes and explain the inappropriateness explicitly.

Compared with example 1, 2 and 3, example 4 and 5 may not seem as disastrous. But it does not mean that language teachers should overlook such mistakes, without helping learners to realize how native speakers would otherwise express the same idea. Based on correct perception of student writers' intended message, language teachers may reformulate the same meaning in a more natural way, modeling how the same idea could be expressed in a more native-like manner. Such is called reformulation by Johnson (1988). Compared with mere correction of grammatical mistakes (reconstruction), Johnson indicated that reformulation may provide help other than rudimentary factors of language manipulation. If possible, language teachers may reformulate the whole piece of students' writing, and set the new version in contrast to the original work, foregrounding the differences in between.

5. Conclusion

As the general aim of journal writing is to have the students produce comprehensible written work, the types of mistakes that relate to the construction of English writing and formation of sentences have been given top priority in this paper. The examples are confined to those in the journals of the students in TUES, over the time period from 2001 -2003. The varieties of mistakes to have been found in students journals may well exceed those mentioned above; however, by clarifying the above-mentioned ones, it is hoped that the students' written communicative ability could be ameliorated by a large margin.

Notes

- 1) This type of mistake could be attributed to the lack of proper knowledge about what is English writing, which may not fall into any of the three origins of the mistakes.
- 2) CAF is one lesson in the critical thinking and discussion class in TUES. C.A.F. stands for consider all factors, which asks for the students to consider all possible factors before they make any decisions, such as buying a car or choosing a career.

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(2005 年 1 月 26 日 受理)

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