TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELATIVE GRAVITY OF ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH

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Introduction

The teacher's task in assessing written work may be broken down into a sequence of five steps: identifying or recognising the existence of an error, interpreting where required the initended meaning (often difficult since students are rarely present during the assessment process), supplying a signal of some kind indicating the location and nature of the error, deciding how to penalise errors according to degree of seriousness and, finally, awarding an overall mark or grade. Since this process concerns teachers deeply and virtually every day of their professional lives, research into it may be of direct pedagogical value complementing, as it does, the more theoretical information available on the inter- and intra-lingual origins of error.

In this brief paper, I am concerned with steps four and five of the sequence, focussing on an experimental comparison of native and non-native English teachers' assessments of a representative sample of locally-produced errors in written English. I then go on to draw out the pedagogical implications of the findings, and to make practical suggestions for dealing with errors in written production.

Areas of Enquiry

Specifically, I was interested in enquiring into the following areas:

1. What exactly are the reactions of native-speaker and non-native teachers of English to the error types most frequently encountered in the written work of Hong Kong students?
2. Do the two groups appear to refer, with some consistency, to internal hierarchies in making judgements about the relative gravity of these errors?
3. By extension of 2, to what extent are these hierarchies similar or different for the two groups?
4. Does the non-native teacher have anything useful to gain from knowing how native-speaker teachers assess the various types of error?

Local Errors?

A brief word is in order about the description of the errors as 'local'. I want to make it clear that, in this context, 'local' simply means that the errors were taken from a locally-derived corpus of written work. That said, the error

types I have identified, and their relative frequencies, are similar to those presented by Bunton (1989). Bunton's samples are taken from the writing of Hong Kong students alone and do not correlate closely with those offered by Heaton and Turton (1987) in their international survey of common errors in English. It is possible to make a limited claim, therefore, that it is likely that local teachers of English will most frequently encounter the error types I present in this paper when assessing students' written work.

The Written Corpus

This consisted of 120 similarly-titled but unguided compositions produced by local Cantonese native-speaker students aged between sixteen and seventeen studying full-time at a local secondary-school. All students were following the same examination course and could be classified broadly as lower-intermediate in terms of international standards of proficiency in English. The data derived then from a relatively homogenous source.

The Errors

The overwhelming majority of errors located in the corpus fell into eight categories. Table 1 gives the error types and their approximate distributions.

Table 1

Categories	*Distribution Percentage of Total Errors*
1. Incorrect Tense Marking of Verb	19
2. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement	13
3. Incorrect Inclusion/Omission of Definite Article	12
4. Wrong Preposition	10
5. Incorrect Choice of Lexical Item	7
6. Pluralisation of Uncountable Nouns	5
7. Voice (False Passivisation)	3
8. Spelling	3

There were, of course, additional lexical and grammatical errors and a number of grammatically-sound but topic-prominent constructions in the writing of the lower proficiency students. Interestingly, errors attributable to direct transfer from Cantonese, such as locative adverbial subject (**There is very crowded in Mong Kok*) and double intra-sentential connectives (**Although he was rich, but he was not happy*) did not occur. This, I

presume, indicates that the students, as a body, had already passed through and beyond the interlanguage stage at which L2 production tends to be marked by a heavy element of more or less direct translation from L1, although manifestations of typological transfer were, as stated, clearly in evidence.

The Assessors

Practical constraints meant that there were only 20 assessors in each of the non-native teacher and native-speaker teacher groups. However, as subjects, the groups were relatively homogenous in composition. The native-speaker participants were all graduates with at least a specialist Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language. All had at least ten years relevant teaching experience and were employed locally at the time of taking part in the experiment. Twelve worked in tertiary institutions and eight in upper secondary schools. It is worth noting that fourteen of the assessors were British English speakers, four were American English speakers and two were Australian. Ideally, of course, a more balanced composition is desirable to avoid a particular variety of English dominating the judgements. Practical contraints also precluded the use of a third category of assessor; native-speaker teachers with relatively little exposure to 'Hong Kong English'. It would have been interesting to compare their tolerance levels with those of the Hong Kong-based native-speaker group.

The non-native group was composed of Cantonese native-speaker graduates with postgraduate qualifications in teaching English and, like the native-speaker group, all had at least ten years relevant teaching experience. Most had lived or studied abroad, and all were in posts offering some opportunity for exposure to, and interaction with, native-speaker of English.

Procedure

I produced a questionnaire containing twenty sentences (Appendix) with one error present in each sentence. In order to reflect, however crudely, the distribution of errors from the corpus, I presented ten sentences containing errors from the first three categories and ten sentences to represent categories four to eight. Following Sheorey's (1986) procedure, I did not use authentic (student-produced) sentences if these contained multiple errors. Instead, I stripped away the other errors and was fortunate in being able to retain meaning without the need for radical reformulation or plausible reconstruction.

The question of whether or not to expose assessors to supporting context above and below the sentences in question is an extremely difficult problem to resolve in a principled way, since context can, in some cases, clarify intended meaning. However, there is always the danger of introducing an element of indeterminacy to the assessment process. With this latter point in mind, I decided to comply with James's (1977) stricture and exclude context completely.

The sentences were presented in randomised order with covering instructions to the assessors. They were asked first to identify an error by underlining it or arrowing an omission, then indicate the seriousness of the error by utilising a 0–5 continuum scale on which 5 indicates an error so serious that it blocks comprehension or sets up serious ambiguity, 0 means that no error has been committed, while grades 2–4 represent intermediate degrees of gravity. Finally, assessors were asked to supply a comment to add a qualitative and illuminating dimension to the rather crude statistical instrument used. Assessors were presented with the following choice of comments (of course they could use their own if preferred): Unintelligible, Ambiguous, Jarring, Irritating, Odd, Amusing, Acceptable, and Negligible.

Results and Discussion of Results

A clear answer emerged to my first research question: the non-native teacher group marked significantly more harshly than the native-speakers over the whole range of errors presented. I arrived at this conclusion by simply calculating the overall total scores out of one hundred (20 error samples × 5 maximum possible penalty score) for both groups of assessors.

The non-native group marked within a narrow band 61–72; giving an overall penalty score range of 65. The native-speaker group scored between 37–66; a much wider band giving a range of 53.5. The difference of 11.5 between the two groups is statistically significant ($P<.01$ t-test). This finding was not at all surprising. Research by Richards (1971) Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) James, and Sheorey (op. cit.) has been remarkably consistent in identifying non-native teachers as the harshest assessors of error. It is interesting to speculate how this might change as teachers become more confident and competent in terms of their own proficiency. Of passing interest too is Hughes and Lascaratou's finding (op. cit.) that native-speaker laymen are the most lenient of all assessors, focussing on overall intelligibility rather than the accuracy of linguistic parts.

Internal Hierarchies of Error Gravity

My second question concerned the possibility of teachers referring to an internal hierarchy of error seriousness in their grading to sort out which errors matter most, which are rather less grave and so on. My findings do seem to bear out the existence of internal hierarchies. Verb-related errors were judged as most serious by both groups, although the mean penalty scores awarded to the categories of tense, agreement and voice by the native speakers were higher than those given by the non-native assessors. This confirms Richards's belief that native-speakers are particularly finely attuned to the grammatical operations of the verb phrase and react more negatively when its forms are violated than to any other error type. Table 2 displays mean scores and rankings for the two groups of assessors.

Table 2

Categories	*Native-Speaker Teachers* Mean	Rank	*Non-Native Speaker Teachers* Mean	Rank
Tense	3.52	2	3.52	3
Agreement	3.26	3	3.67	2
Definite Article	2.05	7	2.34	8
Preposition	2.32	6	2.68	6
Lexis	2.65	5	3.25*	4
Pluralisation	2.85	4	2.53	7
Voice	3.58	1	3.71	1
Spelling	1.75	8	2.98*	5

* Significant differences ($p<.01$ t-test)

Apart from penalising gross errors of verb form most heavily, the two groups also gave the same ranking for preposition errors and comparatively close rankings for those in the definite article category. However, results in the remaining three categories were of considerable interest. Despite the close rankings for the lexis category, the scores indicated significant differences between the groups, as did the mean scores in the spelling category. Pluralisation of uncountable nouns, while not registering significant differences, received very different rankings.

In the lexis category, my findings supported those of James rather than Hughes and Lascaratou and Sheorey, in that native-speaker teachers appeared to be more tolerant of lexical errors than the non-native group. This tolerance might well centre arround the fact that the two lexical errors on the questionnaire represent frequently-encountered confusions of usage (*rob* vs. *steal* and *refuse* vs *reject*). Resigned familiarity could be responsible for the high degree of leniency displayed here.

The results in the spelling category presented few surprises and are similar to Sheorey's findings. Despite their leniency, however, none of the native-speaker group felt that misspellings were acceptable. Most commented that, while these errors did not generate negative feelings, they could not be left untreated. This is an interesting reaction, especially since sentence five contains a particularly gross spelling error which led most of the non-native group to penalise it very harshly indeed.

It is perhaps even more surprising that the native-speaker group dealt so leniently with incorrect omissions and inclusions of the definite article. One would have expected the native-speakers to be particularly aware of violations to such a delicate system. One possible answer to this is that at sentence level the definite article does not usually bear a heavy burden of meaning. This is not, of course, the case at discourse level where it carries out an important role in referential cohesion. Interestingly however, it does seem that a wrongly included definite article is far more offensive to native

speakers than a wrongly omitted one; reactions to sentence four (inclusion) were much harsher than those to sentence twelve (omission).

Contrasting Native-Speaker and Non-Native Speaker Hierarchies

From this brief discussion of results, an answer emerges to my third question which relates to the need to identify similarities and differences in the internal hierarchies of error gravity of the two groups of assessors. The present study indicates that the hierarchies are substantially similar at the upper levels, but much less so in the middle range and at the lower levels.

But the main differences lie not so much in where the error categories are ranked on the hierarchies, but rather in the degrees of differentiation between the categories. The evidence indicates convincingly that native speakers differentiate far more than non-native speakers; the hierarchical nodes on the non-native scale are clustered closely together, while those on the native speaker scale are spaced much further apart.

Pedagogical Implications

Any implications drawn from research limited to relatively few error samples, small numbers of assessors and crude statistical analyses must necessarily be very tentative. However, my findings substantially match those of earlier researchers working with many more error samples and assessors; this association could be taken to add to the validity and reliability of the present findings.

At this point an additional note of warning needs to be sounded; native speaker reaction to error does not necessarily constitute a perfectly sound set of criteria for guiding the non-native teacher through the assessment process. There is evidence to suggest that native speaker teachers are overtolerant of errors in lexis, for example. Clearly, all teachers might beneficially spend more time focussing on items commonly confused in usage, and in helping students to distinguish between related members of particular word classes.

Downplaying such a rich area in English as lexical (and modal) nuance might limit the potential semantic range of learners by denying them the means to express the delicate meaning distinctions demanded by fluent English. Native-speaker judgements of the intelligence and attitude of a writer exhibiting a relatively low level of fossilisation in this area could well be unjustly adverse.

That said, perhaps the clearest and most beneficial way in which non-native teachers could be guided in the assessment process (an answer to the fourth and final question) is by reference to the intervals on the native-speaker teacher's internal scale of error gravity. In this way, non-native teachers might be encouraged to use the red pen in a more discriminating way by differentiating rather more between error types and the penalties consequently awarded.

Practical Suggestions

It follows from these observations that focussed marking of student work could be effective in obtaining better results. In return for students attending

in greater detail to errors identified as serious, teachers could indicate (say in green) less grave errors but deduct no, or fewer, marks than for the serious errors indicated in red. If this procedure defaces student work in two colours rather than one as before, then clearly it would be more sensible to indicate, in red, targeted serious errors only.

Above all, students will need to know which major form(s) the teacher is focussing on in a particular piece of written work so that they can self and/or peer correct their work purposefully. It might be sensible too for teachers to prevent an excessively narrow focus on formal accuracy by awarding one mark for overall quality of content and global intelligibility (including organisation) and a separate one for lexicogrammatical accuracy. The mark actually entered in the mark book could then be an averaged one. To encourage poorer individuals or classes, teachers might like to consider, as a general principle, giving content a greater weighting than accuracy.

Also of practical value is James's suggestion that the teacher supply full and clear plausible reconstructions of grave errors in broad, pre-ruled margins on the right of each page. This would allow students to focus on the repaired forms far more successfully than the use of necessarily cramped superscript or possibly ambiguous marking code systems.

Setting shorter writing tasks will be beneficial too in helping teachers and students to focus on important errors. The error-laden, full-length composition is naturally harder to deal with purposefully. Shorter pieces of work also lend themselves more easily to the multiple-drafting and editing processes. If a certain number of words has to be produced, teachers could set a number of short, related pieces giving the required total until the particular students are ready and able to control the L2 encodification and textualisation processes over lengthy stretches of written production.

The benefits obtainable then from focussed, differentiated-values assessment could be substantial. These, together with the other suggestions presented, should help to make the writing and assessing processes less frustrating and rather more rewarding for students and teachers.

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APPENDIX

SENTENCES USED ON THE RELATIVE GRAVITY OF ERROR QUESTIONNAIRE

1. He was caught the bus to work.
2. She waited in Swatow for her husband since 1972.
3. The waitresses at that cafe is very slow.
4. I think the Kowloon Park is the most attractive one in Hong Kong.
5. Althrought I am young, I am not stupid.
6. This factor had already been discussed in the last chapter, so I do not intend to raise it again.
7. If I was fitter, I would enjoy swimming.
8. Family conversation used to be important, but advent of personal computers changed all this radically.
9. My father emphasised on that point very strongly.
10. I arrived back safely at Kowloon station with all my luggages.
11. When I was not looking, he robbed my calculator from my desk.
12. Oil shares have recently declined following general market trend.
13. She rejected to accept my offer, so I left the shop.
14. Every day my father go to the same place to work.
15. Terrorists are difficult to defeat, since they are willing to die of their beliefs.
16. Have you ever visited Disney Land? I've gone there in 1985.
17. She is very excited, because tonight she will going to a party.
18. They were lived in that North Kowloon estate for many years.
19. People who live in Hong Kong has a tendency to work very hard.
20. My uncle aways brings many gift on his visits to Hong Kong.

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5

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