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An Eye for Error:
Teaching English as a Second Language

A Directed Research Study

by

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Abstract

With organizations like U.S. English fighting for an English-only nation and the renewed cry for higher educational standards in general, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) speakers face greater challenges than ever. In order to help ESL students communicate correctly, educators must learn to recognize writing difficulties arising from a foreign first language and be able to address those errors in a manner that will not discourage already-hampered ESL writers.

An Eye for Error:
Teaching English as a Second Language

In Dade County, Florida, it's difficult to find a municipal clerk who speaks English. In fact, it is possible to live in Miami one's entire life, and a full life at that, and never have to speak a word of English. As a direct reaction to bilingual situations like the one in South Florida, organizations have developed with the sole purpose of protecting the mother tongue of the United States. California has taken the initiative declaring English to be the official language. Groups like the powerful U.S. English maintain that English is the sole unifying force of this melting-pot nation. The organization urges, among other things, "a written English-proficiency test for naturalization" (Carlson 29).

The steps that states like Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and California have taken to promote English as the official language may be the signs of a new era, an era that would prove to be very difficult for not only immigrants, but also for any United States resident for whom English is a second language. Higher-standard written proficiency tests, English-only ballots, transitional rather than long-term bilingual education programs (29)--all of these suggested "solutions" may discourage the prevalence of other languages. But a likely effect of such measures is the negative pressure they would put on all English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) speakers. The problem arises not just from the English-only movement. But this trend combined with the push for

higher educational standards throughout the United States will present a tremendous obstacle to ESL citizens. Not only will they be expected to exhibit a working knowledge of English, but they will be expected to perform at the same level as students raised in English-speaking homes and educated in English-speaking schools. That is, they must meet those standards if they wish to lead a successful life. It is not an impossible challenge, but it is a very difficult one, and one that ESL citizens will not be able to handle alone. English-as-a-Second-Language speakers have language problems unique to their situation. All educators, not special-education and ESL teachers exclusively, need to learn to recognize errors, especially in writing, that indicate an ESL problem. Then, and only then, will we be able to help ESL citizens succeed in a country that might soon be demanding a language standard higher than merely working knowledge.

Even English teachers revert occasionally to informal or even substandard usage, especially in conversation. College-level composition papers are riddled with misspellings and grammatical errors. But almost everyone makes the same kinds of mistakes: sentence fragments, comma splices, misplaced commas, etc. These are problems an English teacher expects and knows how to address because he understands the reasoning behind the mistakes. But ESL writers often make mistakes in syntax, vocabulary, and spelling that a teacher has never seen before. Often, there seems to be no plausible explanation for the error, and the teacher does not know how to correct the problem.

Errors can be explained by the native language.

However, errors in writing by ESL students can often be understood if the teacher is familiar with the writer's first language. The student whose writing appears in the following samples has spoken English fluently for four years. While many of the errors present are common even the writing of native English speakers, many others can be explained only in light of the writer's Spanish background.

Example 1: They did a lot of progress . . .

Explanation: The Spanish verb *hacer* is translated as either "to do" or "to make." The writer chose the wrong translation.

Example 2: Mesopotamia was the 1st well organize culture.

Mesopotamia, was the 1st culture that had a well develop writting sistem.

Explanation: The writer has probably not realized that the participial endings "-d" and "-ed" are equivalent to "-ado" and "-ido" in Spanish.

Example 3: This code of law, helped futures generations

Explanation: In Spanish, all adjectives are pluralized by the addition of an "s" if the noun they modify is plural.

Example 4: . . . to come up with universal Law's
(Romans), with constitutions.

Explanation: There are no possessive contractions in Spanish. To compensate, the writer may often use "'s" where it is not needed.

Example 5: Thanks to a writteng language, now we have written evidence of history; culture and tradition was able to pass on to next generation mo accurately than by verbal means; we have passed religion, phylosophy, everything from science to literature has being able thanks to a written language.

Explanation: Although several errors in this sample are unusual, the expression "has being able" is perhaps most indicative of ESL. This is a phonetic error. "Has been able" rolls off the Spanish tongue as "has being able."

Phonetic errors are extremely common in ESL writing. Some occur because the writer is sounding out words in their own accent. They often result from a writer struggling with the innumerable spelling-pronunciation idiosyncracies of the English language. For instance, this student used "rodes" for "roads" and "deids" for "deities." Another interesting phonetic error appears in the following sentence.

Example 6: He impose, He made Catholithism the officiall

religion.

The writer speaks castellano, or Castillian, Spanish. Of the hundreds of Spanish dialects, Castillian is the only one in which the "s"-like sounds of "c" and "z" are pronounced "th." Thus, errors in ESL writing are often singular to speakers of a particular dialect.

Another mistake in Example 6 is an example of a different class of frequent ESL errors, namely, the conjugation of verbs. English verbs are difficult to learn because of the seemingly countless irregularities in conjugation. Students of Spanish, French, and other languages can memorize the patterns for each tense and learn the few exceptions to the rules. English students, however, have to remember the pattern for each individual verb. "Sat" is the past tense of "sit"; "sat" is also used in all three perfect tenses. "Drank" is the past tense of "drink"; however, "drunk" is the form used in the perfect tenses. The past tense of "lie," meaning "to tell a falsehood," is "lied"; the perfect form is also "lied." When "lie" means "to rest," the perfect tenses use "lain." The past tense is "lay," which can also be the present form of the verb meaning "to put something down." English has only six verb tenses and, with the exception of the verb "be," two different conjugations according to person (singular and plural). Yet it is more confusing than Spanish, which has fourteen tenses and six different persons.

It should not be surprising, then, to find that ESL writers often do not conjugate verbs at all. They leave them in the

present, as in Example 6, or attempt to relate past action by placing past- or past-perfect-tense helping verbs in front of the present form.

Example 7: . . . that has last until today.

Example 8: . . . was embrace by two rivers . . .

Teachers should expect such errors in writing by a student who has only spoken English fluently for a few years. But unless these problems are addressed directly, they will most likely continue to occur in a person's writing even after that individual has spoken English for fifteen or twenty years.

Problems don't always disappear with time.

Example 9: Before getting into that lets just finish the final descriptive that being the door which had a ledge and was incline to permit the animals in.

Explanation: Spanish does not use contractions; apostrophes are often either left out or overused. A past-tense helping verb is used with a present-tense main verb (see Example 2).

Example 10: He first starts off by showing us the third level which we were on.

Explanation: This would be correct if it was in Spanish. It would not be a case of tense disagreement; the highlighted verb would be properly conjugated as

imperfect subjunctive. This Spanish tense, as well as the imperfect indicative and the preterite, is directly translated into English as the past tense (Kendris xxii-xxiv).

Example 11: There is also the bedrooms a beautiful
 kitchen and a cool breeze . . .

Explanation: This is a translation error similar to the one in Example 1. The Spanish word *hay* (pronounced "eye") means both "there is" and "there are." The problem here is more likely mistranslation than mistaken subject-verb agreement.

Example 12: Know after having read . . . ("now" is the
 intended word)

Explanation: A phonetic error

Example 13: . . . they are well design . . .

Explanation: This demonstrates the same problem with participles that appears in Example 2.

Example 14: When Iam angry, My tone of voice become
 outburst and unmercerful to those people Iam
 angry with.

Explanation: Again, native speakers of Spanish often have problems with contractions. This is also an

example of unconjugated verbs.

The writers of these samples are all bilingual. They speak both English and Spanish fluently, and have done so for the last fifteen years. Spanish is their first language; it was spoken at home. They learned English when they began school, and have been educated in English-speaking schools ever since. They generally make fewer mistakes than does the student who learned English only a few years ago, yet the kinds of errors occurring in fifteenth-year ESL writing are the same as those occurring in fourth-year ESL writing. They have never been addressed, probably because the teachers for whom they wrote did not understand why they were making those unusual mistakes.

Vocabulary is also a problem.

ESL students face writing challenges other than grammar. Vocabulary is, of course, the first obstacle any second-language learner must hurdle. First language influences vocabulary just as it influences grammar, and the problem does not disappear even when the student has mastered a large number of words. The Dutch word oog has basically the same range of meanings as the English word "eye": potato eye, human eye, eye of a needle, eye of a dice, etc. One would therefore suppose that Dutch students learning English would easily transfer the meanings of oog to "eye." However, a group of Dutch students studied by Eric Kellerman displayed a tendency to assume that the two words could not share the same meanings. They comprehended that the basic

meaning of "eye," i.e., a human eye, was the same. But infrequent uses of the word, e.g. a peacock's eye, and different meanings, e.g. a potato eye, were less frequently transferred. The more advanced the students, the more difficulty they had comprehending that the words were the same (Cook 12).

Another vocabulary difficulty ESL students encounter is cultural vocabulary. A Korean student in a basic writing class was assigned to arrange topics, subtopics, and supports as practice for writing organized compositions. Almost immediately, he encountered the expression "health spa," which he had never seen before and which was not in his Korean-English dictionary. Until the phrase was explained to him, he was unable to complete the task required. Second-language students, whether they are learning English, Spanish, or Swahili, are often given lists of words they will never use; they don't learn the words they will need. For instance, students studying Spanish are usually taught to say, "No comprendo" for "I don't understand." However, native Spanish speakers seldom, if ever, use the expression. It is a stilted equivalent of "I don't comprehend." Similarly, ESL students, especially those who are just learning English, tend to have an awkward or antiquated vocabulary. They often use words in their writing that do not mean exactly what they intend them to mean.

What should educators do about errors?

Should educators then bombard ESL students with yet more

direct grammatical instruction and current vocabulary lists? The effort might be viewed by the students as a personal attack on their abilities. Such implications must be stringently avoided. The student who "lacks confidence in himself in academic situations . . . fears that writing will not only expose but magnify his inadequacies" (Shaughnessy 85). ESL students are too often classified as "remedial" or even "special-ed" because of their below-average language skills, so their confidence in their writing skills is already low.

In addition, many remedial programs, like an Ohio state college's Developmental English course (Rose 209), teach that the most important thing about writing--the very essence of writing--is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful, or the generative struggle with ideas--not even word play (211).

The same mentality is the basis for the majority of basic writing courses, from high-school freshman English to College Composition. This concept of correctness is not wrong; proper grammar is essential to good, intelligent communication. But overstressing rules may intimidate ESL students to the point of total abstinence from writing.

We have a paradox. Teachers in Pennsylvania should be familiar with German; in New York, with Italian; in Minnesota, with Swedish; in California, with Chinese; and in Florida and the Southwest, with Spanish. The chances of identifying ESL students

and understanding their mistakes will then soar. But addressing their problems may destroy what faith in their writing they have left. According to Paulston and Bruder, writing is "physical evidence" of achievement by which a student can "measure his improvement" (204). Yet writing is personal, almost sacred to its author. To mark three-fourths of every sentence with red ink will not give any student, but especially an ESL student, a great sense of achievement. That is the paradox, the teaching tightrope upon which English educators are balancing. The answer is not, as U.S. English suggests, to decrease funding for bilingual and ESL programs in order to force residents to speak English (Carlson 29). Rather, the answer is time and tact--and of course, money. English teachers--indeed, all teachers--should be trained to recognize indicators of ESL difficulties and to correct them without inhibiting further writing.

What ESL students need is not as much more help as better help. In most colleges and universities, second-language students are placed in remedial English classes. These classes are targeted toward native speakers. In the rush to prepare students for College Composition, unusual ESL errors are merely marked wrong and never explained. It is not the professor's fault. He is juggling two or more very different groups of people, and there simply is not enough time to address each mistake the way it needs to be addressed.

ESL students should not be placed in remedial English classes. Separate ESL classes should be established in every

school, at every level. For instance, at Southern College, at least two sections of English 099 are taught each semester. One of those could be designated an ESL-only class; the other a native-speaker class. Some might call it discrimination, but it would be less frustrating for students than failing English and not knowing why. Even if the school could not find or afford a teacher trained in teaching English as a Second Language, separating the two groups would allow a teacher to address their different needs more effectively.

Southern College attracts students from all over the world. Unfortunately, some of them simply do not know enough English to survive in a college setting. The Korean student I tutored when I started this project was intelligent; there could no doubt about that. I only had to teach him a concept once, and weeks later he still could do it on his own. But because of his limited English, he was failing his classes. He couldn't follow fast-paced lectures; he didn't understand complicated textbook explanations; he couldn't satisfactorily complete written assignments. He needed an ESL program and Southern didn't have it. Southern College can do something about it, however. Even something as simple as a separate English 099 class is a tremendous leap in the right direction. It would be a great service to international students and to American ESL students whose problems have never been solved. High school is preparation for life; college is preparation for success. And to succeed in a society that may soon cease to tolerate ignorance of

English, ESL students need whatever assistance they can get.

Studies have shown that "errors are from mildly annoying to strongly offensive to native speakers" (Hammerly 83), and can therefore affect educational and career opportunities for ESL citizens. U.S. English and similar groups are striving to achieve their English-only goal. At the same time, plans like America 2000 are being implemented to raise the United States' educational standards. If educators do not learn how to address second-language problems, ESL students who are affected by the changing standards will have a difficult road ahead of them.

The writing samples in this paper were used with the full knowledge and consent of the authors. Their cooperation is greatly appreciated.

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