Let's Not Do It At All:
Pre-empting Common Errors in EFL Classes Through
Pre-teaching and Incorporating Them into Your Syllabus

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1. Introduction

There is much in the existing literature on errors and error correction in the FLTL environment concerning error origins, their identification, collection, and categorization, and their treatment, i.e. the timing of correction, the benefits of and harm from correction, the efficacy of correction, and the like. Although there has been some investigation into factors such as increasing motivation and reduction of the affective filter in attempts to prevent errors (Qian, & Xiao 2010), there seems to be little if any investigation concerning the prevention of errors through preemptive instruction explicitly pertaining to them. Of course, it can be argued that the goal of effective teaching, and especially the use of approaches such as focus on form, is to prevent such errors. However, since errors universally continue to present themselves, endeavors to find other approaches in dealing with them seems to be a reasonable course of action. As one such attempt, this paper proposes institution of a collection and pre-teaching system for preventing errors, especially common errors that are ubiquitous to the types and levels of students a teacher regularly encounters. This system attempts to eradicate such errors before they occur through explicit instruction on them prior to lessons covering the subject matter from which they derive, and incorporation of such common error lessons into the class syllabus. The paper will discuss the creation

and use of such a system in a particular type of class, but the principles and mechanisms should be compatible with most FL instruction situations.

2. Definition of Error

There is a well-established differentiation between mistakes and errors (Corder 1967, Richards & Schmidt 2002) and it is an important and valid distinction. Also, there is an important ongoing debate about the treatment and seriousness of mistakes versus errors within the FLTL community. However, for the purposes of this paper, the more general definition of error is applied, meaning any inaccuracy deviating from the standard norms of English grammar, pronunciation, and usage, and thus lumping mistakes and errors together for the purposes of this discussion. It is, however, important that students know about this difference and that different focus on and treatment of mistakes and errors be taken into consideration when dealing with them. This was done for the classes that this paper discusses.

3. Rationale

As stated above, due to the consistent recurrence of errors, and thus the corresponding indication that error treatment as it is currently practiced "isn't working," a different approach seems to be required. And perhaps, a method that is more precisely targeted towards the specific errors of certain student populations is in order. Thus, collecting and focusing on actual errors regularly made by particular student populations, and attempting treatment of them in advance, would seem to be a rational and effective approach.

In addition, a preemptive approach such as this may mitigate other issues regarding the inefficacy of current treatment. One well-known problem, that current attempts at error correction often fail to resolve, is fossilization (Corder 1981). When error correction is undertaken after the fact, some factors that

lead to fossilization, such as repetition of the errors, are reproduced, inherently compounding the problem. This paper explores changing that dynamic by attempting to remedy errors before they occur, thus lessoning the possibility of advancing or reinforcing fossilization.

Another well-known concept in FLTL is that of "noticing." Schmidt (1990) stated that features of a language cannot be learned unless noticed, and many others have noted that focusing on language forms through explicit instruction can provide accuracy benefits for language learners. By instituting explicit instruction on errors in advance, that is, by focusing on preempting error production through direct identification and explanation, students may be more likely during such a process to "notice" the origins and causes of errors. They then may be more likely to understand and eliminate the errors than when they are pointed out in real time, as is the case with current treatment methods. Just as implicit instruction can facilitate noticing, perhaps so too can implicit instruction on errors.

Taking these factors into consideration, along with the overall need to address error correction, the following preemptive system was designed.

4. General Description

In this system, errors made by specific student populations for a particular class or level are gathered over time during typical class activities and assignments. Of course, lists of common errors compiled by other sources may also be consulted and included, but the main purpose is to accumulate a "database" of actual errors that are common to the student population being treated. This "data" is then combined, categorized as to type, difficulty, seriousness, frequency, etc., and is then organized and arranged into lessons to be presented. Since logic dictates that such instruction be conducted prior to the time an error is expected to occur, careful attention must be paid in arranging the order and sequencing of this

instruction, and its eventual inclusion in the class syllabus. After this collection and organization phase is completed, a variety of methods for presentation of and explicit instruction on this compilation of errors can be undertaken. Further, materials made for and notes taken by students on these lessons are utilized in assessment and study/review activities.

The learning situation for which the system was created is that of a 1st-year university-level English class focused on oral communication and taught using a CLT approach. The students are Japanese L1 speakers, and generally considered to be false beginners. The example system outlined here was conducted with students from the same L1 background, but as long as cultural and linguistic attributes are taken into consideration and addressed, and collected errors separated by such, this method should work for multi-L1 groups as well.

5. Collection

The first step in implementing a system for preemptive error correction (as mentioned above) is to collect common errors that arise directly from particular students in particular learning situations. Doing this will produce a repository of group-specific errors that will allow the teacher to target error prevention for the group more precisely. Also, it is necessary to gather a large body of examples over time and from a large enough sample of equivalent students to ensure that the errors are truly "common." By doing so, error correction will be more pertinent and useful.

It must be acknowledged in advance, however, that this method and source of data collection obviously precludes initial groups of students from benefitting from the system until enough data has been accumulated to implement it. However, this can be somewhat ameliorated by a seasoned teacher's repository of knowledge, i.e. she or he predicting what errors are likely to occur, and by using existing error lists (as previously mentioned), until an adequate number of

authentic, group-specific examples can be compiled.

There are various collection methods that can be used. They are as follows:

5.1 Recorded Classes/Activities

Perhaps the best and most accurate method of collection is to use audio or visually recorded classes or activities. Recording provides concrete examples with accessible documentation, and includes such factors as intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and the like, which assist in accurately assessing and understanding the error and its impact. These can also be used as teaching aids later on, when students are given explicit instruction on such errors.

5.2 Student-/Teacher-/Observer-generated Notes/Lists

Notation of errors can be conducted during class by the students, the teacher, or by an outside observer (or any combination of these). Later, lists of the errors can be compiled as a class activity, or by teachers/observers outside of class. These notations can be logged on paper, on the board, or by using a recording device such as an IC recorder. Care must be taken in noting the error accurately and the environment or situation in which it took place. In addition, the fact that students may judge some utterances as incorrect, though they actually may not be errors in certain contexts, must be taken into account.

5.3 Teacher/Student Error Journals

Error journals are an expansion or elaboration of the notes or lists above. They are written up after the fact, and provide more detail, by including comments, reflections or feelings about errors and their origins. Student input on such can be invaluable. For example, such input may show that in fact an incident was not an error but a mistake. Also, it provides insight into their knowledge about and understanding of errors and correct forms. These journals, like the above lists,

are useful as records of the errors, in addition to being useful as a reference for study and future research.

5.4 Collaboration with Colleagues

Collaboration with colleagues teaching the same types of students or same level of classes can be a very fruitful source for collecting error data, as well as expediting the process. Colleagues can serve as observers, can share collections of their own error data, and can provide insight and assistance in assessing, categorizing and explaining errors. In many cases, it is also extremely instructive to collaborate with colleagues that are native speakers of the students' L1, if available. Their insight can provide information that an L2-speaking teacher may not have access to or knowledge of, such as the origins and reasons for errors.

6. Catergorization/Organization/Integration

Once a sufficient body of errors has been collected it is necessary to organize them into useful and manageable categories, then determine a sequence for introducing them, then integrate them into a syllabus, and finally design and select treatment methods to use. In addition, attempts should be made to identify origins of errors, when possible, as this can help greatly with later development of treatment options.

Categorizing errors necessarily depends on the type of errors collected, which is in turn dependent upon the content of the class, type of students, and level. In any typical group a myriad of categories will arise. Some example categories are:

cultural	*semantic*	*local*	*performance*	*pragmatic*
linguistic	*phonological*	*global*	*competence*	*register*
grammatical	*lexical*	*L1 interference*	*syntactic*	*mistakes*

It is not within the scope of this paper to explain these error types or to give examples of all of them. This substantial list simply serves to show the wide

variety and extent of errors that can manifest themselves. Given such, it is clearly necessary to select and concentrate on error correction that will be most useful for a particular group, and which accomplishes the desired learning outcomes for a given class. Also, time considerations must be included as it is simply impossible to treat them all. Thus, selection is inherently an independent process in each teaching situation and must be guided by factors such as texts used, the syllabus, learning objectives, program goals, and students' needs. In addition, other factors must be carefully considered, such as the seriousness and frequency of the errors, as these aspects affect the inclusion, ranking, or exclusion of individual errors or error types.

The class on which the preemptive error correction system has been trial tested is of an oral communication type. Thus, the errors that most interfere with conveyance of meaning and success in communication were selected for treatment. In addition, those that were directly derived during activities that most aligned with topics from the functional-notional text and syllabus being used were chosen. Therefore, errors that were cultural, grammatical, lexical and phonological in nature were selected, although many others presented themselves.

After categorization and selection, the next step is sequencing. This is heavily dependent on the content and progression of a class, i.e. its syllabus, the materials used, and, the intended purpose of error correction. If these factors are closely examined and logically set out, it is fairly easy to sequence the errors to be covered.

Obviously, preemptive error correction must be performed prior to the introduction of the language forms, functions, or activities to be done in class. However, how much prior, as well as how often, can be flexible. It can be done in the class immediately prior, or in classes several times before, and it may be repeated, when necessary, or spread out over time, in order to take advantage of various learning styles. Such timing should be experimented with and then set based upon the characteristics of the particular learner group being treated. For

the class discussed in this paper, it was primarily done in the class immediately prior. Here is one example.

Normally, in the first class a self-introductory lesson is conducted, this activity was delayed till the second class meeting, and in the first class the concept of preemptive error correction was explained, and then the first of such lessons conducted. Common errors that previous students had made during the self-introductory activity were presented and then treated. Examples of such common errors are:

When I was a high school.   I don't have no pets.   I was excited my teacher.
I am boring in this class.   My old sister is 19.   I like all foods besides onion.
I have five families.   My dislike food is celery.   My hobby is sleeping.

The class proceeded thusly:

"In the next class we are going to learn how to properly introduce ourselves in English. Before we do so, we are going to look at some mistakes that students have made in the past when doing this⋯"

Then, various forms of instruction were used to perform correction of these errors. Examples of these forms of instruction are explained in a following section of this paper. As a last step, and after many trials, the preemptive lessons created to deal with particular and pertinent common errors should be incorporated into the class syllabus.

7. Considerations

As mentioned, much research has been conducted on error correction, and there is much debate on its implementation, validity, and efficacy. Although not mandatory, a good mastery of the literature concerning such will greatly assist an instructor wishing to attempt implementation of the system of error correction described in this paper. In addition, understanding as much as possible about the origins of errors, both cultural and linguistic, that a particular student population

makes will also greatly assist an instructor wishing to try out this system.

8. Presentation/Instruction

There are several options that can be employed concerning presentation of and instruction on the common errors that have been collected. These options can be selected based on the kind of error, i.e. the option that is best suited for a particular error or error type, or a combination of styles can be used for any given error(s). They are as follows:

8.1 Lecture

Explicit instruction can be done via a lecture-style format. Errors are introduced, explanations of the origins and reasons for the errors are given and discussed, and correct forms are presented. This helps students to better understand why these errors generally occur, and invokes "noticing" that should help prevent their reoccurrence.

> Example:
>
> *Today we are going to look at the error "Almost my friends are Japanese." This error comes from a translation mistake concerning the Japanese word "hotondo." The above sentence is grammatically incorrect, and really means your friends are not quite Japanese, as in "my friends are almost Japanese," or as in "I almost passed the test." (+ a demonstration is done in which the teacher tries to reach for something, but cannot quite reach it, saying, "I can almost reach the desk" to provide a visual clue as to what "almost Japanese" means.) Here are the correct ways to express the idea that the majority of your friends are Japanese : "Almost all of my friends are Japanese" and "Most of my friends are Japanese."*

8.2 Use of Recorded Materials

Audio and video recordings of actual errors being produced by equivalent student populations are some of the most effective and applicable resources that can be used due to their authenticity. Of course, students must be informed in advance that such materials may be used in the future for the purposes of instruction, and prior permission to use them must be obtained. Student cooperation on this matter has not been an issue.

Such materials can be played back for students, after which they are asked to work in pairs or groups to identify and correct the errors, if they can. Or, they can be provided with prompts and hints as to correct forms, or actual choices of correct forms to select from by the instructor, or the instructor may simply provide the actual corrections. This can be followed by discussion and explanation as in the lecture-style format.

8.3 Worksheets (one-way)

Worksheets that have sentences or dialogs with common errors in them can be given to students to work on to identify and correct errors, either individually or in pairs or groups.

Example (sentences):

Instructions: Look at the following sentences and find the errors. Line through the error(s), and then put the correct form(s) in the space provided.

1) I ~~played~~ skiing last week.   I went skiing last week./I skied last week.

2) I went to Rio. ~~There was hot.~~ I went to Rio. It was hot (there).

Example (dialog):

Instructions: With your partner, read aloud the following dialogs and find the errors. ~~Line through~~ the error(s), and then put the correct form(s) in the spaces provided.

Dialog 1

A: What ~~you did~~ last weekend?

A: What did you do last weekend?

B: I ~~played~~ with ~~my~~ friend.

B: I went out with a friend.

Dialog 2

A: Do you have ~~a sisters?~~

A: Do you have any sisters?

B: Yes, I have an ~~old~~ sister.

B: Yes, I have an older sister.

Side note: With dialogs, students' aural memory is often activated and allows for errors to be recognized that they might not otherwise pick up on with only written cues.

8.4 Worksheets (two-way)

As above, lists of sentences with errors can be provided, but in this case sentences with correct forms are also provided, and students must select the correct versions. As this method relies more on simple recognition of errors, it is an easier task for lower-level students, but it does not ensure that students can reproduce the correct forms on their own, as some of the other treatments do.

Example:

Instructions: Look at the following sentences and select which ones are correct. Mark the correct sentences with "C" and the incorrect sentences with "I" in the space provided.

I   1) I played skiing last week.

C   2) I went skiing last week.

C   3) I skied last week.

C   4) I went to Guam. It was hot there.

I   5) I went to Guam. There was hot.

8.5 Making Errors Real

The method of error correction known as "making the error real," that is, to allow the error to elicit an incorrect or confusing response, can be very instructive

as a preemptive measure. This method is normally done as a treatment at the time an error is made, but can be done in advance through prepared dialogs containing errors in which student-student pairs or groups, and student-student or student-teacher pairings with the class observing, act out an error being made and for which a confusing response ensues.

> Example (teacher-student with class observing):
>
> Prepared Dialog with Error
>
> *T: Do you have any sisters?*
>
> *S: Yes, I have one old sister.*
>
> *T: "You have an old sister? (teacher feigns being old bent over woman with cane)*
>
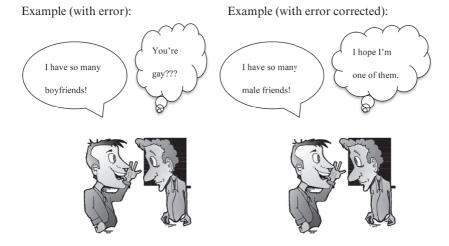> *T: Class, what error has been made here?*
>
> *C: He should have said "older."*

Such vignettes create a contextual environment in which the error can be recognized (noticed), explored, and discussed, and one from which the learning experience, along with the correct form, can be "mentally imprinted" to prevent further occurrences. It also allows for class participation, peer- and/or self-correction, as well as being active and entertaining.

8.6 Visual Representations

When possible, the preferred method for presentation of errors is through the use of visual cues that create a natural context and make errors as immediately recognizable as possible, just as if they had happened in a real-time environment. Photos, illustrations and comic strips suit this purpose perfectly. If a teacher has sufficient drawing talent, these can be done on the board; very basic drawings and even stick people are often adequate. Or, there is a myriad of clipart and stock photos, and even illustration software is available to assist in the creation of effective materials. Such illustrations should be displayed, and pairs or groups

asked to find and identify the errors. Then, correct forms, again with visuals, should be presented and explained. Also, errors that sometimes create culturally sensitive or difficult situations can be addressed in this non-threatening way.

Example (with error):   Example (with error corrected):

9. Follow Up

As will be stated in the conclusion, further follow up is needed to test the efficacy of this system. Currently, a "not for credit" common error test is conducted at the end of the term, as a self-evaluative component. (Other assessment forms are used that incorporate accuracy evaluation, so it is thought unnecessary to grade this one.)

Example: 1. X My car is red color.

2. O My car is red.

3. O The color of my car is red.

4. O I went to Bali two years ago.

5. X I've been to Bali two years ago

6. O I have been to Bali.

An option is to test whether students can produce/translate items and avoid errors.

Example: 1. 私の車は黄色です。　　My car is yellow.

In addition, students are required to keep a record or journal of the common errors covered in class, especially the ones particular to themselves or that were "revelations" to them. These notes or journals can be used during class as a reference, and for future reference and study. Students are also asked to write a reflective essay on the errors they most often had committed in the past, and which corrections were the most useful for them. Copies of both are retained by the teacher to serve as a resource for further data compilation.

10. Evaluation/Reactions

No quantitative long-term study of the efficacy of this system has yet been undertaken, but in general, students do well on the test mentioned above. However, it is not known for how long the effects of the preemptive lessons on common errors last or, if indeed, they are the reason for students' relatively high scores, nor is it known whether other outside factors could have affected these scores. Nor too has any formal qualitative study of students' reactions to and evaluation of this system been conducted. However, positive incidental remarks, both spoken and written (on assignments or class evaluations) have been noted. Students seem to enjoy and value the process and have explicitly stated such.

> Examples:
> - *"It is good way to learn about mistakes."*
> - *"The pictures and writings make it easy to remember errors."*
> - *"I enjoyed to learn about my mistakes in this way."*

11. Conclusions and Recommendations

As stated above, the system as described was generally well received by students and the method seems to have brought about positive results. However, it was but a preliminary implementation of an idea for a better system of error remediation. In order to test its veracity, it needs to be followed up by thorough

quantitative and qualitative research on its efficacy. Also, a long-term study should be conducted to understand the origins and to verify the commonality of the errors collected as data. Perhaps a qualitative investigation into the feelings of students concerning such a system should be done as well, for insights into their evaluation of its appropriateness and effectiveness would seem most useful. Most immediately needed is a more accurate assessment tool to evaluate the efficacy of the preemptive method used. However, to encourage learner responsibility and in deference to learner autonomy, it might be better to simply place the onus of error correction upon students, as many have argued, for after all, language accuracy is ultimately their responsibility. To this teacher, however, it seems kinder, more efficient, and more productive to try everything possible to assist language learners in such matters. This system is an attempt to do so.

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