

Error Tolerance in Communicative Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses factors influencing error acceptability (e.g., teaching goals, linguistic variations) and analyzes errors across linguistic dimensions. It discusses error analysis in English teaching, covering identification, categorization, explanation, correction, and summarization. Strategies like balancing fluency with accuracy and minimal intervention are emphasized. The paper highlights the importance of balancing communicative intent with grammatical accuracy, adopting the principle of minimal intervention, and differentiating between errors and mistakes. In the context of educational reforms and growing English proficiency among young learners, the study underscores that error analysis aims not to eliminate all errors but to reduce them while prioritizing fluency, as communicative competence with minor errors is more valuable than error-free but halting speech.

KEYWORDS

Communicative; Error; Correction; Teaching; Tolerance

1 Introduction

In many non-English speaking countries, English language education continues to follow traditional ESL (English as a Second Language) paradigms that prioritize formal language knowledge acquisition. This conventional approach establishes vocabulary memorization and grammatical accuracy as the fundamental pillars of instruction, frequently dominating the entire curriculum. Under this system, educators place excessive emphasis on "standard English" norms, demanding strict adherence to grammatical rules and lexical precision from learners. However, this accuracy-focused pedagogical model reveals significant shortcomings in practice. While it may produce students capable of achieving impressive scores on standardized assessments, it fails to develop functional language abilities. The overemphasis on linguistic form comes at the expense of communicative competence, resulting in learners who may know the rules of English but cannot effectively use the language in real-world interactions. This disconnect between classroom learning and practical application ultimately renders much of the instruction ineffective.

The emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies has provided an effective countermeasure to these limitations. CLT fundamentally reorients language instruction by placing authentic communication at the center of the learning process. Rather than treating language as an abstract system of rules to be mastered. But the effectiveness of CLT has not fully materialized among some student groups, primarily due to their anticipation and fear of expressing errors. For extroverted students, such psychological pressures are relatively easy to overcome, and multiple errors do not easily reduce their willingness to communicate. For introverted students, however, even a single expressive error can cause intense frustration, leading them to withdraw and become passive observers in classroom interactions. This phenomenon reveals the inherent contradiction in traditional error correction models: immediate public correction may transform errors into "punitive" events, not only amplifying students' anxiety but also creating a "warning effect" for potential speakers, exacerbating their avoidance of expression.

From the perspective of teaching strategy optimization, teachers' handling of students' expressive errors must follow the principle of dynamic balance between "accuracy" and "fluency." First, instead of prioritizing error correction, teachers should use inclusive feedback to reinforce students' positive attempts—for example, focusing on the reasonable content or progress in their speeches and using positive reinforcement to enhance their confidence in language use. Second, differential treatment should be applied according to error types: for incidental errors that do not affect communicative intent (such as verbal slips), delayed correction or implicit guidance (e.g., paraphrasing the correct expression) can be used; for systematic grammatical errors, targeted explanations are more appropriate in non-public settings to avoid damaging students' self-esteem through public criticism. Additionally, building an "error-tolerant" classroom culture is crucial—by explicitly acknowledging that "errors are a normal stage of language development" and demonstrating the correctable nature of errors through teachers' own learning experiences, students' sense of shame about making mistakes can be reduced. Low-pressure interaction forms such as group collaboration and situational simulations can provide gradual expression platforms for introverted students, gradually alleviating their psychological barriers. Thus, the handling of students' expressive errors in college English teaching essentially involves a value choice regarding language education goals. Within the CLT framework, error correction should serve the core objective of "stimulating active participation." Through scientific feedback mechanisms and psychological support systems, a good interaction can be

achieved between protecting learning motivation and improving linguistic accuracy, ultimately realizing the teaching goal of "promoting acquisition through communication."

2 Error Handling in College English Teaching from a Psycholinguistic Perspective

In tertiary-level English language instruction, learner errors in oral and written expression represent a universal and natural phenomenon with deep psycholinguistic foundations. Neuroscience research has identified two crucial cortical regions governing language processing: Broca's area, which facilitates speech production and syntactic processing, and Wernicke's area, responsible for semantic comprehension and language interpretation. Seminal neuroimaging research conducted by Hirsch (1997) illuminated fundamental differences in bilingual brain organization. The study compared two cohorts of bilingual subjects: - Early bilinguals (Language acquisition initiated in childhood) - Late bilinguals (Language learning commenced in adulthood) Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology during narrative recall tasks, researchers observed that while both groups demonstrated comparable activation patterns in Wernicke's area across languages, significant divergence occurred in Broca's area utilization. Early bilinguals employed identical neural substrates for both languages, whereas late bilinguals activated distinct cortical regions for their second language. These findings support several critical conclusions about language learning:

(1) The brain exhibits maximal neuroadaptive capacity during early childhood, enabling simultaneous acquisition of multiple linguistic systems through natural exposure.

(2) Post-adolescent language learning requires establishing alternative neural circuits, explaining the cognitive effort characteristic of adult L2 acquisition.

(3) Adult language learning constitutes an active construction process rather than passive absorption, inevitably generating transitional errors as new pathways develop.

The research reveals the neurobiological basis of adult L2 learning: language production relies on new neural pathways independent of the native language, making errors an inevitable byproduct of this reconstruction process. College English teaching must therefore adopt an "error-tolerant participation-promoting, usage-driven correction" model within the CLT framework, protecting learning motivation while optimizing feedback mechanisms to achieve parallel development of linguistic accuracy and communicative competence. This approach not only upholds educational equity but also adheres to the laws of language learning.

In this way, college English teaching in non-English speaking countries must face two realities: most students do not grow up in bilingual families, with English education typically starting late and college English teaching targets adult learners with diverse personalities and different-leveled English proficiencies. It is the responsibility of every college English teacher to cultivate and protect the enthusiasm and classroom participation of introverted students and those with weaker foundations. In CLT classrooms, tolerance for certain expressive errors can better embody the spirit of educational equity than immediate correction.

Indeed, English teaching should focus on cultivating students' ability to understand the divergent thinking and expression patterns between languages, prioritizing "language acquisition" over "language learning." The core of English instruction lies in fostering language habits rather than logical or academic analysis, encouraging students to think and express themselves actively in English. For expressive errors, teachers can employ post-hoc error analysis procedures for correction.

When addressing errors, teachers must first analyze their types and causes. Chomsky distinguishes two types of language competence: competence (native-like intuitive mastery of language rules and thought patterns) and performance (the ability to translate linguistic knowledge into communicative intent). Errors arising from flawed competence are classified as "errors" (systematic errors requiring targeted analysis), while those from temporary performance lapses (e.g., slips of the tongue) are "mistakes" (incidental errors).

Contemporary scholarship in applied linguistics has established a comprehensive framework for addressing learner errors, comprising five cyclically connected phases that inform pedagogical decision-making. Initially, educators engage in error detection, where they systematically pinpoint deviations from target language norms while considering contextual appropriateness and learner intent. This leads to error taxonomy development, wherein mistakes are systematically categorized based on linguistic domains and psycholinguistic origins. The third phase involves error source analysis, requiring teachers to diagnostically examine whether the mistake stems from competence deficiencies or performance factors, often through learner interviews or comparative linguistic analysis. Subsequently, remedial intervention occurs, employing strategies ranging from immediate recasts for communication-impeding errors to delayed metalinguistic explanations for fossilized mistakes. The process culminates in error pattern documentation, where instructors maintain longitudinal records of recurrent mistakes to tailor future instruction, thus completing an iterative improvement loop. This integrated approach ensures that each phase dynamically informs the others, creating a responsive ecosystem for language development.

2.1 Error Detection in Language Learning

In many cases, the primary challenge in error detection is determining the acceptability of language errors, i.e., what constitutes an acceptable linguistic expression. Teachers hold divergent views on this issue, which is also influenced by factors such as teaching objectives, curriculum progression, learners' age, personality, learning motivation, classroom time constraints, and room for improvement.

For example, teachers vary in their tolerance of students' pronunciation errors and adopt different corrective approaches accordingly. While fewer controversies exist in the domains of vocabulary and syntax, discrepancies arise due to dialectal variations across countries, particularly between British and American English. Many sentences considered correct in the U.S. may be deemed unacceptable in the UK.

Another common issue in error detection is that teachers, despite their ability to detect errors, may develop psychological expectations about potential mistakes due to teaching experience and cognitive inertia. This leads to excessive sensitivity to normative accuracy, causing teachers to focus solely on correcting anticipated errors while overlooking the possibility of alternative interpretations. For instance, "I saw some worker in that factory" is grammatically valid when "some" means "a certain" or "unspecified," but teachers may misclassify it as an error if they assume students are unaware of this usage. To address such issues, teachers must comprehensively evaluate both the semantic context and students' actual language proficiency.

2.2 Error Taxonomy Development

Linguistically, errors can be categorized in multiple ways, but teachers should align their classification methods with teaching objectives to minimize future errors. Some teachers advocate on-the-spot categorization (e.g., overcorrection, cross-association, false analogy), but post-class analysis remains essential. Linguistic categorization of error causes can significantly improve teaching methods, such as lesson planning and supplementary explanations. Superficially, errors may seem attributable to omission, redundancy, substitution, or word order mistakes, but underlying causes are often more complex. For example, "Cow is a useful animal" is commonly corrected as "A cow is a useful animal" (omission of the indefinite article), but it could also be rephrased as "Cows are useful animals" (singular-plural mismatch). Similarly, "She came on last Monday" may be corrected by removing the redundant preposition "on" or reordering it as "She came last on Monday" (word order error). Error taxonomy involves multiple linguistic dimensions—phonetics, orthography, lexicology, semantics, stylistics, and sociolinguistics. Teachers must recognize that the same error may fall under multiple categories; for example, "Go to the shop and get a bread" contains both a grammatical error (using "a" with uncountable "bread") and a lexical error (replacing "bread" with "loaf").

2.3 Error Source Analysis: Error source analysis typically involves four approaches

Analyzing the contextual meaning of the utterance; Referencing similar errors from past teaching; 3. Explaining the role of the learner's native language (Chinese) in causing errors, especially phonetic ones; 4. Directly asking students to clarify their intended meaning. For example, to explain the error in "My teacher used to were sot pens. (wear short pants)", a teacher might: 1. Establish the context (describing the teacher's appearance, familiar to both teacher and students); 2. Highlight common mistakes with "used to," "usually," and "always"; Point out the spelling confusion between "wear" and "were"; 4. Note the regional pronunciation error in Chinese (e.g., mispronouncing "short" as "sort," similar to "dog/door" or "fat/get"). Error source analysis helps students deepen their understanding of specific error types in a relaxed mindset while reinforcing previously learned language knowledge.

2.4 Remedial Intervention

There are two key considerations about remedial intervention. Firstly, teachers should prioritize the learner's communicative intent over native speaker norms when appropriate. For example, while native speakers might use "shorts" instead of "short pants," teachers should first address the learner's target structure ("wear" for "were") before introducing idiomatic alternatives. Secondly, the principle of minimal intervention is widely favored, but teachers must ensure students have mastered the corrected language point. For instance, changing "He threw some mangoes with a stick" to "He hit some mangoes with a stick" assumes students know "hit"; if not, a simpler correction (e.g., "picked") may be more suitable. Errors can be classified into four types for differentiated treatment: Immediate correction (critical errors affecting comprehension); Delayed correction (non-urgent errors addressed during class intervals); Post-class correction (complex errors requiring follow-up); Negligible errors (minor slips not interfering with communication). When correcting critical errors, teachers must be mindful of students' psychological reactions, especially for introverted learners. Public correction should be avoided to prevent anxiety about using new vocabulary or structures, which may hinder fluency.

2.5 Error Pattern Documentation

At intervals, teachers should summarize accumulated errors through analysis, language point review, and error-correction exercises. Key criteria for selecting errors include frequency, impact on meaning, effect on expressive ability. Overloading students with too many errors can breed anxiety, so focusing on a few high-frequency errors with in-depth analysis is more effective. Teachers must also distinguish between "errors" (systematic competence gaps) and "mistakes" (incidental performance lapses). While minor mistakes due to carelessness can be pointed out for self-correction, recurring errors require thorough analysis to determine if they stem from underlying knowledge deficits. Conclusion With ongoing education reforms and the popularization of English among younger learners, college English teaching faces significant challenges. There is a consensus that traditional teaching and testing models no longer meet societal or professional needs, necessitating reform. Innovative approaches like full-English instruction and CLT have enhanced classroom participation, but they also increase error occurrences. The goal of error analysis is not to eliminate errors entirely but to reduce them while prioritizing fluency. After all, fluent English with minor errors is more practical for communication than halting, error-free speech.

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