
Interlanguage Analysis as an Input to Grammar-Teaching

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Abstract

The last decade has seen a revival of interest in the teaching of grammar, though in a different form from 50 years ago. Regardless of the approach one adopts, it is important for teachers to try to gain a deeper insight into the ‘interlanguage’ grammars of their learners – i.e., the internalized linguistic systems, approximating the target language system but differing from it in various ways, which enable learners to generate the same kinds of sentences repeatedly, and which can account for the persistent errors that they make.

The present paper argues for the importance of an analysis of the interlanguage grammars of learners as an input to the teaching of grammar, in providing a reliable indication of the problem areas in their internalized grammatical competence, and thus enabling teachers not only to focus on the learners’ needs, but to get at the roots of their problems. The rest of the paper provides a detailed summary of the author’s analysis of the interlanguage grammars of his students at the Hong Kong Baptist University, as revealed through their written assignments.

I. INTRODUCTION

After decades of neglect, the teaching of grammar has been undergoing reassessment in recent years and is finally coming back into its own, though not (of course) in the same form as before.

Theoretically, this owes something to modern linguistics. Instead of being a collection of prescriptive rules or a form of behaviour, **grammar** is now generally conceptualised as part of an ‘internalised’ linguistic system, or **competence**, which

enables a speaker to produce as well as understand an indefinite number of sentences in a language. Specifically, grammar includes the organising principles of word formation and sentence formation in a language (i.e., morphology and syntax). Every speaker of a language -- of whatever degree of proficiency -- has an internalised grammar of some sort, without which it would literally be impossible for them to put words together to form sentences. Viewed in this light, instead of asking whether one should teach grammar, the question should be how one could possibly afford *not* to teach it.¹

The acquisition of second language grammar is complicated by several factors. First of all, learners have already internalised the grammar of their first language (L1), which is bound to exercise a significant influence on how they acquire the grammar of the second language (L2). Secondly, their exposure to L2 data is usually limited, both in terms of quantity and variety. It is likely that they will encounter the less commonly attested grammatical structures of L2 rarely or not at all, and even when they do encounter them, these structures may go unnoticed by them.

The aim of L2 grammar-teaching is to guide learners in developing their internalised grammar of L2, by exposing them to carefully selected data which provide a necessary basis for their own

grammar-construction, and by raising their consciousness to structures which are either hard to notice or hard to generalise. The term '**grammatical consciousness-raising**' was popularised by William Rutherford, whose *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching* (Longman, 1987) is one of the most important contributions to the field. For other comprehensive discussions of modern approaches to grammar-teaching, the reader is referred to Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Odlin, 1994; and Rutherford & Smith, 1988.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the learner's linguistic competence, because a better understanding of it is crucial for deciding what aspects of grammar to teach, and how to teach it. Linguistic 'competence' can be distinguished from linguistic '**performance**,' which refers to the actual utterances produced by speakers, including their lapses. In applied linguistics, the notion of **error** vs. **mistake** is related to this distinction. Errors are systematic and recurrent, whereas mistakes are momentary lapses. When given their own writings to check, learners can usually correct their own mistakes, but not their errors. Errors are valuable indicators of what goes on in the internalised linguistic system or competence of learners, and can help the teacher to identify problem areas in their acquisition of grammar.

¹ I should add here that grammatical competence is not, of course, the only competence that matters. As Dell Hymes (1970) pointed out long ago, 'communicative competence,' which has to do with appropriacy of language use in various social contexts, is no less important. But in the present paper I shall focus only on grammatical competence.

II. INTERLANGUAGE GRAMMARS

Learners' language has, since Selinker (1972) first introduced the term, been referred to as an '**interlanguage**' – an evolving linguistic system that incorporates features of both the learner's L1 and L2, as well as features unique to itself, arising from various factors such as over-generalisation, simplification, etc. The analysis of the learner's interlanguage grammar is an essential step towards understanding and remedying their grammatical problems – i.e., the non-standard features in their grammatical system. In some ways, interlanguage analysis overlaps with **error analysis**, but error analysis suffers from the disadvantage of having only the learners' overt errors to work on. It is well-known that learners often adopt avoidance strategies which save them the trouble of using structures which are difficult or complicated. The fact that they make few errors in a grammatical structure does not necessarily mean that they have no problems with it; it may simply be that they avoid using it as far as possible.

Interlanguage analysis is more revealing than error analysis because it attempts to look at the learner's internalised linguistic system as a *system*, and not just as a collection of individual surface errors.² For this purpose, an extensive corpus of students' writings is needed to provide the necessary data. A colleague from another university in Hong Kong, who has been building up such a corpus, has told me (via personal communication) that he has discovered many interesting features about the interlanguage grammars of Hong Kong students. For example, by comparing Hong Kong English and native English corpora, he

found that one of the grammatical features that most distinguish the former from the latter is the (in his words) 'over-use' of the plural forms of nouns. Now, I am not saying that this is necessarily a problem (in this case I do not think it is). But what I am saying is that interlanguage analysis, as opposed to error analysis, gives us a much more complete picture of the learner's interlanguage grammar, including features that do not show up as errors.

Whether we do error analysis or interlanguage analysis, it is essential that we try to probe beneath the surface into the learner's internalised grammatical system, or else we are liable to misunderstand the underlying problems. To take a simple example, learners often produce sentences like these: 'My friend very angry with me,' 'Her brother very tall,' etc. If you ask teachers what the problem is, most of them will probably say 'adjective/verb confusion,' or even 'word class confusion,' because the adjectives 'angry' and 'tall' are being used as if they were verbs. But is that really what is going on in the learners' interlanguage grammar? If they were really confusing adjectives with verbs, they would be inflecting adjectives with verb morphology, and producing forms like *'angrying, talling, angried, talled' and so on, but they never do that; they would also be intensifying verbs with 'very' and producing forms like *'very eat, very talk' etc., but again they never do that. Clearly, then, there is no basis for claiming that learners who say 'My friend very angry with me,' 'Her brother very tall' etc. are confusing adjectives with verbs; there is every evidence to say that they do distinguish between the two word classes.

² For a comprehensive example of interlanguage analysis, see Yip 1995.

If you look beneath the surface at the regularities in learners' underlying interlanguage grammar, you will probably come to the conclusion that their grammar permits either a verb *or* an adjective to be head of the predicate, while in standard English only a verb can function as such. This is by no means an unusual syntactic rule -- Chinese and Malay also have it. So, it is not really that they 'confuse' adjectives with verbs at all, but that they have a different phrase structure rule for the predicate. Teachers who go rushing out to teach their students what an adjective is and what a verb is will be wasting their time and their students' time. They should instead be focusing on the structure of the predicate in standard English.

In the Language Centre of Hong Kong Baptist University, I have started collecting a corpus of students' writings, but it is not extensive enough yet to be called a databank. But the research so far has been very interesting, and I do urge other teachers who are so inclined to collect data from their own students for purposes of analysis. To give one example from my collection, there are several sentences of this type:

1. There are many students study in the library.
2. There are over 80% of them agree with that.
3. There were more and more competitors entered the market.

This is the so-called existential construction. What is the underlying interlanguage grammar of learners who produce such sentences? Do they not know how to use the

relative pronoun 'who,' to produce 'There are many students who study in the library'? Teachers who attempt to correct these errors merely by inserting the relative pronoun 'who' after 'students,' or changing the verb 'study' to 'studying,' are surely missing the underlying grammar that produces such sentences in the first place, and are therefore unlikely to help their students see the point of these corrections and acquire the correct grammatical structure. If you analyse enough sentences like these, you will notice the following important regularity: all these sentences would be perfectly grammatical *without* the existential marker 'there is/are':

- 1a. There are [many students study in the library].
- 2a. There are [over 80% of them agree with that].
- 3a. There were [more and more competitors entered the market].

From this, it is not difficult to generalise that the learner's interlanguage grammar has a rule that goes something like this:

- 'To produce an existential sentence, simply attach *there is/are* to the beginning of a regular sentence.'

This rule looks simple enough, but it is ungrammatical in standard English. In an English existential sentence, the introduction of 'there is/are' changes the status of the main clause, which is now relegated to a subordinate clause, which must either take the form of a relative clause ('There are many students who study in the library'), or a non-finite clause ('There are many

students studying in the library'). So, it is not basically a relative clause problem, but a 'deviant' syntactic rule in the learner's interlanguage grammar on how an existential sentence is formed.

I was not going to say anything about **contrastive analysis**, but I should at least mention that, just because it does not give you *all* the answers, as it was once believed to do in the 50's and 60's, that does not mean that it does not give you *any* answers. The rationale for contrastive analysis is consistent with one of the basic tenets of educational psychology, i.e., that prior learning influences present learning, and the more I look at my students' interlanguage grammar, the more convinced I am that we can understand it better with a knowledge of the learners' L1 grammar. In the case of the existential construction, for instance, the interlanguage grammatical rule referred to above works just like its counterpart in Chinese, where you simply attach the existential marker *you* to the beginning of a regular sentence: *you [hen duo xuesheng zai tushuguan nianshu]* ('there be [many student in library study]'). 'you' literally means 'have,' which further explains mistakes such as this: 'There had some environmental changes.'

If I have emphasised the importance of analysing the learner's interlanguage grammar and identifying problem areas, it is because much of present-day grammar-teaching is too diffuse in focus. To borrow an analogy from Rod Ellis' paper at the RELC International Seminar in Singapore (April 2000), it is like firing a shotgun that sprays pellets over a broad area, as opposed to rifle shots that pick out individual targets. He intended it as a favourable analogy, but I

take the opposite view. To me, teachers ought to focus on the grammatical forms that most need attention, and they can do so only by trying to understand the learner's interlanguage grammar and how it differs from standard English grammar.

III. AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTERLANGUAGE GRAMMARS OF HONG KONG STUDENTS

In the next section of this paper, I shall provide some examples of my interlanguage analysis based on data from HKBU students' writings, classified according to syntactic category.

I. SUBJECTHOOD

The notion 'subject' should not be taken for granted as an essential part of a sentence in all languages. In fact, one of the major distinctions in the typology of languages is between so-called 'subject-prominent' languages, like English, and 'topic-prominent' languages, like Chinese (cf. Li & Thompson, 1976). In the former, the subject is an obligatory part of a well-formed sentence, and certain important syntactic consequences follow from that. In the latter, on the other hand, sentences are organised on the basis of a topic followed by a comment, and unlike the subject, the topic is a semantic rather than a syntactic category. Certain common errors in students' writing can be attributed to the dominance of the notion 'topic' over that of 'subject' in their interlanguage grammar, from which a number of consequences fall out -- including the lack of subject-verb agreement, missing subjects, topic/subject clash, and even some putative

passive constructions (dubbed 'pseudo-passive' in Yip, 1995).

1. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

1. It help produce mucous.
2. A super carrot have been produced by plant breeders.
3. It also form the pigment of eyes.
4. Harry, Ted and Gavin was talking about their families.
5. The pigment of eyes which control the light..
6. One of the team members are going.

DIAGNOSIS

(i) Lack of subject-verb agreement in the learner's interlanguage (IL). This is exacerbated not only by the lack of S-V Agr in the learners' L1, but by the limited manifestation of S-V Agr in English (which occurs only with verbs in the present tense with singular 3P subjects, except the verb *be*);

(ii) Difficulty in identifying the head of a complex NP subject (which is always final and easily identifiable in Chinese, but not in English), which controls agreement.

2. MISSING SUBJECT

1. $\hat{\quad}$ felt angry with people
2. Moreover, $\hat{\quad}$ can help us to communicate concisely.
3. Besides, $\hat{\quad}$ can enhance my English standar.
4. As a junior marketing executive, $\hat{\quad}$ find speaking fluent English is necessary.

DIAGNOSIS

Lack of the notion of a syntactically obligatory subject in these learners' IL

grammar, where the subject can be dropped if the topic is understood.

3. 'PSEUDO-PASSIVE' CONSTRUCTIONS

1. And it can find in carrots.
2. It cannot produce by the body.
3. So freedom should grant to the citizens.
4. The Housing and Development Board has set up in order to provide ...

DIAGNOSIS

In these learners' IL grammar, there is (as in Chinese) apparently no true 'passive' construction, and the same verb form can be used in both 'active' and 'passive' senses. This gives rise to two kinds of problems: (i) At a lower level, errors in the morphology of the passive verb; (ii) at a higher level, as a consequence of the topic-prominent nature of their IL, sentences with a topic (e.g., 'it') followed by a comment consisting of a subjectless clause (e.g., '[one] can find in carrots').

II. THE VERB

Verb inflections in Indo-European languages, even in a relatively 'simple' case like English, are the source of many errors, especially for learners with an uninflected L1 like Chinese. These errors stem mainly from the lack of the finite/non-finite distinction in the learners' IL, and the consequent failure to inflect verbs, or confusion in using the various inflected forms of verbs.

1. FINITE/NON-FINITE

1. About 16 percent of them being neutral with that

2. I went to the park and see her playing football.
3. Would Kevin stopped seeing his friends?
4. More than 50% did not agreed that...

DIAGNOSIS

For these learners' IL, the finite/non-finite distinction is blurred, resulting in main verbs not being marked for tense, or else redundantly marked (as in (3-4)). The IL apparently lacks a rule requiring a finite clause to have a finite verb, and another allowing only the first verb in a verb group to be marked for tense.

2. AUXILIARIES

1. We were asked 30 chief executives about what is the necessary...
2. I am agree with you.
3. I am strongly recommend this book to all of you.
4. Why they go to the centre of the earth?
5. She thinks she not know.

DIAGNOSIS

(i) In these learners' IL, auxiliaries are apparently capable of taking on an 'emphatic' function, similar to the English *do* ('I am agree with you' = 'I do agree with you'). There is a lack of 'primary' auxiliaries in Chinese.

(ii) In the IL grammar for (4-5), auxiliaries are not required in negative and interrogative clauses (exactly as in the learners' L1).

3. PRESENT/PAST PARTICIPLES

1. It was useful to cause the remained part of the plants to...
2. A survey conducting among 30 chief executives reveal that...

3. A million years ago, there were many giant plants grown on the Earth.

DIAGNOSIS

As modifiers, the difference between present participles (e.g., 'the *remaining* part' = 'the part that remains') and past participles (e.g., 'the *discarded* part' = 'the part that was discarded') is essentially one of active verb (with the modified noun as the subject) vs. passive verb (with the modified noun as the original object). This distinction is apparently lacking in these learners' IL, and it is possible that they also lack the active/passive distinction.

4. TRANSITIVE/INTRANSITIVE

1. The figure raises.
2. The financial crisis deteriorated the economy of Hong Kong.

DIAGNOSIS

Though there is a transitive/intransitive distinction in the learners' IL (as there is in both their L1 and L2), certain verbs are marked transitive or intransitive in a way different from standard English, partly due to the influence of L1. This is more a lexical problem than a systematic grammatical problem.

5. PHRASAL/PREPOSITIONAL VERB

1. Questionnaires dealing ^ the importance of the qualities for...
2. it can provide us ^ enough vitamin A.
3. children that suffer ^ permanent blindness.
4. They are concerned ^ each other.
5. They argue ^ each other.

DIAGNOSIS

The learners' IL obviously does not incorporate many phrasal verbs. Unlike the more regular uses of prepositions, the prepositions used in phrasal verbs are largely unpredictable, and have to be learnt on their own. This is basically a lexical rather than syntactic problem.

III. NOUN

Like the verb phrase, the structure of the noun phrase in English is a source of frequent errors, as it seems too complex to be fully acquired by many learners whose L1 is Chinese, where the noun phrase is relatively simple, with the noun head always occurring at the end and therefore easily identifiable. This causes problems in subject-verb agreement, as discussed in Section I.1 above.

1. DETERMINERS**(i) ARTICLE OMISSION**

1. the majority of $\hat{\quad}$ respondents agreed that executives should have...
2. Most of $\hat{\quad}$ plants were giant plants.
3. All of them agreed that $\hat{\quad}$ ability to communication was the most important quality.
4. can inhibit $\hat{\quad}$ development of cancer
5. used by $\hat{\quad}$ human body ...
6. His father took $\hat{\quad}$ bath twice a day.

DIAGNOSIS

- (i) Lack of articles in Chinese;
- (ii) Inability to recognise contexts in which a particular article is required.

FOCUS ON:

(i) Obligatoriness of a determiner for singular count nouns ('a/the/this/my student');

(ii) Contrast between *the* and *a* in terms of given and new information;

(iii) Structures where *the* is specifically required.

(ii) REDUNDANT ARTICLES

1. Half of them agree that the writing ability is also important.
2. Super Carrot can inhibit the cancer.
3. Finally, the coal was formed.
4. So we should save the energy to save the coal.

FOCUS ON:

mass nouns - *the* is inappropriate if the reference is indefinite or non-specific.

IV. CLAUSE/SENTENCE STRUCTURE**1. COORDINATION**

1. Vitamin A is also called retinol, $\hat{\quad}$ occurs naturally only in ...
2. and the lower part was the vegetation, $\hat{\quad}$ this vegetation was up to 5kms.
3. Coal is the most important fuel in our daily life, $\hat{\quad}$ it has been used for a long time.
4. His father was very clean, $\hat{\quad}$ do not need to have a bath.
5. However, giant plants died many years later, thus the plants decomposed gradually.

DIAGNOSIS

In these learners' IL grammar, the concept of the 'sentence' is rather loose, and independent clauses can occur in

juxtaposition without conjunctions, as in Chinese.

2. EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

(i) *There is/are...*

1. There are over 80% of them agreed with that.
2. There are about 23 percent of them disagreed with the importance of leadership ability.
3. There are students study in the library.
4. There were more and more competitors entered the market.

(ii) EXISTENTIAL VERB (*have*)

1. Normally, it had about 30 metres high.
2. It includes some giant plants that have 30 meter high.
3. There had some environmental changes.

DIAGNOSIS

(i) In Chinese, the existential construction (*yau...*) is much more common than in English, and is required when the subject is indefinite. In an existential construction in English, the form of the lexical verb is either non-finite ('There are many shops selling pirated VCDs'), or finite if embedded in a relative clause ('There are many shops which sell pirated VCDs'), but in Chinese it's just *yau* + a normal, unmarked clause ('many shops sell pirated VCDs').

(ii) The existential verb in Chinese (*yau*) is often equated with *have* in English.

FOCUS ON:

(i) The contrast between an existential and non-existential sentence: 'There were ten people applying for the job' or 'There were

ten people who applied for the job', vs. 'Ten people applied for the job')

(ii) Draw attention to: (a) the fact that in English this construction is much less used; (b) the verb *have* cannot be used for this construction, or anywhere with the meaning 'exist.'

3. PREDICATORS

1. They concerned about each other.
2. Gavin afraid to say that.
3. The respondents disagreed educating abroad and attractive appearance important.
4. Most of them agreed that capable of working in a team is important.

DIAGNOSIS

In Chinese, both verbs and adjectives can be the predicator (head of the predicate), but in English, only verbs can.

FOCUS ON:

The obligatoriness of verbs as predicators, including the copula verb *be* when there is no lexical verb.

4. SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

(i) RELATIVE CLAUSES

1. The early symptom of people $\hat{=}$ lack of vitamin A...
2. One of the plant $\hat{=}$ contains carotenes is called ..
3. The heat $\hat{=}$ came from the earth would make the mud becoming rock.

DIAGNOSIS

In these learners' IL, the relative clause lacks a relative pronoun (*who*, *which*, etc.).

This is apparently due to the influence of their L1, which also lacks a relative pronoun.

(ii) SUBORDINATORS

1. There are different opinions about ^ leadership ability, writing ability and selling ability important or not.
2. More than 50% of sample disagree ^ attractive appearance is necessary for...
3. Africa countries adapt super carrot and find ^ the super carrot can inhibit...

DIAGNOSIS

As in the case of missing relative pronouns, these learners' IL apparently lacks subordinators (*whether, that, etc.*) for subordinate clauses.

IV. APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

An analysis of the learners' interlanguage grammars can lead to the design of various grammatical consciousness-raising tasks which are specifically geared to the needs of these learners.

(i) One type of task aims at helping students *notice* the grammatical structure in question. Let us take, as an example, the existential construction (*there be...*), which (as noted in section III.IV.2 above) constitutes a problem for our learners. The students can be asked to read through short texts where this construction is highlighted, in such a way that they cannot help but notice its form and usage. It would be much easier for teachers to write such texts themselves than to search among existing materials. For example, it took me less than 10 minutes to write the following text. I

simply thought of a story from the many that came to mind (being a Sherlock Holmes fan, I naturally settled on *A Study in Scarlet*), and described a scene from that story, deliberately using a lot of existential constructions, which are highlighted in the text given to the students:

Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective, was once taken to a house where a murder had apparently taken place. This was how his partner Dr. Watson described the scene:

When we arrived at the house, there were dozens of people standing around and pointing at the upper floor. We went upstairs into a large, empty room. There were no windows which were open. There was a dead body lying in the middle of the room. It was that of a stout, middle-age man. There were no visible wounds on him, but there was a pool of blood a few feet away. There were no signs of a struggle. The floor was dusty, and there were clear footprints going round and round the body. On the wall, there was a word written in blood: 'Rache.'

Now close the book and describe the scene from memory.

(ii) Another type of task gets the learners to think about the appropriateness of the existential construction:

In each pair of sentences below, which one seems more 'natural' to you? Do you understand why?

- 1a. *A man is looking for you.*
 1b. *There is a man looking for you.*
 2a. *A book is on the table.*
 2b. *There is a book on the table.*
 3a. *A word was written on the wall.*
 3b. *There was a word written on the wall.*
 4a. *A country has 10 times as many sheep as people.*
 4b. *There is a country which has 10 times as many sheep as people.*

(iii) A third type of task asks learners to produce the construction in a limited way, by filling in blanks that require the appropriate form of the verb:

Fill in the blanks with the correct forms of the verbs:

1. *There are five books _____ (recommend) by the teacher as essential.*
2. *There were many people _____ (sleep) on the floor after the party.*
3. *There was a student _____ (say) that the subject was boring.*
4. *There will be many students _____ (apply) for the new course.*
5. *There is a country _____ (be) constantly in a state of war.*
6. *There are very few cars _____ (can accelerate) from 0 to 100 kph within 3 seconds.*
7. *Is there anyone _____ (wait) for the bus?*
8. *Were there people actually _____ (fly) on the first day of the new millennium?*

(iv) Another type of task gets the learners to discriminate between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences:

Some of the following sentences are ungrammatical. Point out the errors and correct them.

1. *A man is washing the car.*
2. *There is a man is washing the car.*
3. *A man has been arrested 20 times by the police.*
4. *There is a man has been arrested 20 times by the police.*
5. *A student scored 8 distinctions in the exam.*
6. *There was a student scored 8 distinctions in the exam.*

(v) One final type of task requires the learners to produce a short text that naturally involves frequent use of the existential construction:

Here is a picture of a street scene in Bangkok (or Hong Kong or Singapore). Describe what you see in this picture. Try to use the 'there is/are' construction as much as possible.

Given the general principle of teaching grammar through consciousness-raising and inductive learning, anyone with any imagination can indeed think of a variety of tasks that will achieve the same end.

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