The error with “errors:” Re-imagining assessment in second language education

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Handout available at: http://sched.co/DmSM

The unique position of teachers

Prescriptive grammar

- “Good” vs. “bad” grammar
- How language should/ought to be used
- “Proper”/“correct” grammar

Descriptive grammar

- How language is used
- Systematicity → grammaticality/ungrammaticality
- ‘Natural’ languages
- Sociolinguistics: variation/style/genre
Why is oral language our focus today?

- 80%+ of literacy research is on monolinguals
- Phonics instruction works well for monolinguals, but often misses a critical component for multilinguals: meaning
- Meaning is primarily a function of oral language development

(Hellman, 2009; WIDA Consortium)

Let’s get started...

- If you brought an assessment with you today, grab what you have...
- If you didn’t, just prepare to describe an assessment (formal, informal; summative, formative; etc.)
- In a small group, share the following:
  - What the assessment was (content, language forms/functions, modality, etc.)
  - How did your students do? (and how did you define success on this assessment?)
What do we mean by “errors?”

- Behaviorist models: “practice makes perfect”

Input vs. intake: “what goes in’ is not what is available for going in” (Corder, 1967, p. 165).

Internal syllabi

“the learner is using a definite system of language at every point in his development, although it is not [the system] ... of the second language...The learner’s errors are evidence of this system and are themselves systematic” (Corder, 1967, p. 166).
- Second language (L2) learners produce utterances that are not like the target language (TL) norm, nor like their native language (NL)
- Systematicity: Interlanguages should be treated as ‘natural’ languages
- L2 learners have “transitional competence” (Adjemian, 1976, p. 299)--Interlanguages are constantly changing
- Most (all?) adults do not achieve native speaker competence in the L2 (fossilization)

U-shaped curve of development

English: progressive -ing, irregular past tense

Spanish: copula contrast (ser/estar), subject pronouns, object pronouns, word order (SVO), por/para

(Ellis, 2015; Geeslin, 2014)
What do all of those forms have in common?

- morphology/syntax
  
  ...i.e., grammar!

What might that mean for instruction/assessment?

(ORAL) morphosyntax appears to be largely impervious to corrective feedback/instruction.

(Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013; Gunterman, 1992)

Some forms *don’t* follow a U-shaped curve

English: third person -s, past tense -ed, articles

Spanish: subjunctive, grammatical gender

All of these forms also have something in common:

- Low phonological salience
  AND/OR
- High semantic redundancy

Implication: explicit instruction and practice is likely required (Van Patten, 2004)
One SLA theory to coordinate them all (almost)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages in Processability theory (Pienemann, 1998)</th>
<th>An example (Adapted from Pienemann 2008)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) lexical</td>
<td>1) Peter // home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) categorical (grammatical)</td>
<td>2) Little = Adj // Peter = Noun // go = Verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) phrasal</td>
<td>3) Little Peter = Noun Phrase // go home = Verb Phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) sentential</td>
<td>4) Little Peter goes home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) sub-clusual</td>
<td>5) Peter, <strong>who is little</strong>, goes home.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more interesting...

Learners’ performances vary across tasks, interlocutors, topics...

Bob w/teacher: “I want to publish a book.”

Bob w/peers: “Look, he doesn’t know how to draw.”

Bob w/researcher: “I’m not tell you what I’m doing now.”

(Adapted from Tarone & Liu, 1995)

Different stages of development in different contexts--but synchronous!

But...as complexity increases, accuracy drops...

And...the Interlanguage system is more permeable!
Big ideas

- Oral language acquisition is not linear, and varies based on context.
- Literacy development depends on oral language proficiency. Though Oral language proficiency and literacy are different, they are interconnected.
- Opportunities to experiment with language are critical to oral language acquisition.
- As the emphasis on accuracy decreases, students’ ability to experiment with more complex speech increases.

What are implications for your assessment practices?

Gracias,
Thank you