Student errors as humorous teaching tools

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Reference data:

EFL students' attitudes toward error correction range from wanting immediate correction to not wanting to be bothered. Likewise, EFL teachers respond to errors in many ways, according to experience, research, and philosophies regarding the best ways to correct. After considering recent research in error treatment, I wish to show the successes and failures of an attempt to approach error correction in a humorous way by portraying various types of student language error. I start from examples of humorous linguistic errors in popular media—particularly some committed by native-speaking high school and college students in America—and move on to my students' own errors. By doing this I hope to point out, in a sensitive way, that language error is ubiquitous among native speakers as well as language learners, and that errors need not be something to regret and suppress, but rather can be something to laugh at and learn from.

　EFLの学生達の英語に誤りがあった場合、即座に直してもらいたいと思う者から、全く構わないでほしいと思う者まで、その姿勢は様々である。同様に、EFLの教師の場合も、それぞれの経験や研究によって、また訂正方法の適性に対する見解の相違により、学生の誤りに対する反応が千差万別である。本論考では、いろいろなタイプの英語の誤りを学生達に提示することで、楽しく間違いを正そうとした取り組みの成功例と失敗例を、言語学的見地に立脚した訂正方法に関する最近の研究を踏まえた上で、示していきたい。まずは、大衆メディアに見られる滑稽な英語の誤りの例---特にアメリカの母語話者の高校生、大学生が犯す誤り---を手始めとし、最終的には自分の学生が犯す誤りへと論点を移していく。このようにすることで、現実に認識される言葉の誤りは、英語学習者だけでなく、母語話者の間にも同様に偏在するということを指摘したい。さらには、こうした間違いは、落胆したり間違えないよう抑制するものではなく、むしろ笑い飛ばし、そこから学びを得るものであるということを指摘したい。

Here Aristotle sees the tendency to laughter as a force for good, which can also have an instructive value: through witty riddles and unexpected metaphors, though it tells us things differently from the way they are, as if it were lying, it actually obliges us to examine them more closely, and it makes us say: Ah, this is just how things are, and I didn't know it. (Eco, 1980, p. 472)

I believe that a sense of humor in class helps put students at ease and promotes learning. Humor has at least two sides to it, though, and it can have harmful effects if used indiscriminately. Part of my research in the past has been on increasing knowledge of the threshold between humor that helps and humor that hurts, because it is important to work the appropriate side when dealing with others who are in the sensitive position of studenthood.

When it comes to error correction, I am not a dedicated scholar. My experience with it is mainly in EFL writing. As for listening and speaking, rather than address a student's productive shortcomings, I tend to applaud their ability to have successfully communicated an idea, and then to stop at that. Just as with using humor, there are good ways to correct error and bad ways. Also like humor, the threshold between the two sides is still being explored.

My motivation in combining these two areas of study for this workshop and paper is to approach an important area of EFL instruction that I neglect—treatment of error—through other important areas of pedagogy in which I have a much greater interest—humor and student motivation.

Grow's (1995) description of humor used to defuse tense academic situations applies somewhat to what I would like to achieve with humor in helping my students improve their production:

> There is a method of humor that works by bringing into the open things that are unspoken, making a joke of them, and allowing people a way to decompress an inexpressible feeling. Some people use this kind of humor as a method of attack—with sarcasm. It can also be used empathetically,

as a way of acknowledging that you already "read" what the other person is feeling, that it is all right, and that you are willing to reassure them to move ahead with the conversation. (p. 3)

My workshop presented a project I was developing, in which I tried to see if students working together could come to appreciate the humor that sometimes results from linguistic errors and to put aside their fears about making mistakes. I warmed them up to this first by having them look at some examples of humorous native speaker student errors, and then at some of their own errors which I found ambiguous and funny.

Past examples of "humorous" classroom incidents

To illustrate in my workshop the opposing paradigms of humor as a positive and negative social force as such ideas apply to the classroom, I provided two personal examples of humor used in a classroom context which had, as I see it, very different effects. Admittedly these are subjective interpretations of events, but humor usage in class is inextricable from subjectivity (hence its difficulty as a research area in foreign language acquisition).

First, when I was a high school student in a geography class, one of the teacher's questions to the class one day was, "Who knows the location that is the source of the Prime Meridian?" After a prolonged silence from everyone I finally offered the word "Greenwich." Unfortunately I had only seen the word in print, never heard it pronounced, so I said it as it appeared from its spelling: *green witch*. As a result my teacher laughed out loud for several seconds (minutes?) and

then between chuckles he informed the class—as if I were not even in the room—"It's pronounced *grenitch*."

Several years later I was the one teaching, in a university Intercultural Communication class in Japan. I was asking students to name some world religions for me to write on the blackboard. When one tried to say "Catholic," using hesitant katakana pronunciation and getting stuck, I jokingly tried to finish the word for him by offering the word "*katorisenko* (蚊取り線香)?" I could probably create a whole list of differences between these two situations that might explain why I feel that one joke worked positively and the other negatively, but somewhere in my mind I still wonder if the "*katorisenko*" and "Greenwich" incidents really differ all that much.

The role of error correction

Debate continues over how, when, and how much to correct student linguistic errors. In some areas, such as grammar correction in student writing, there is still debate over whether it should be done at all (see Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999). It's probably safe to say, though, that most teachers do correct student errors to some degree, whether small or large. Correction seems to be part of the package of being a language instructor, and most of us would feel remiss as teachers if we didn't point out a student's mistake now and then.

With an often unknown and unconfronted reader (in the case of writing), accuracy and fluency seem to be more of a requirement, while in a face-to-face dialogue in which both interlocutors can immediately gauge the success of their communication, both accuracy and fluency can be

maneuvered around to some extent until both parties either give up or are satisfied that they have communicated enough of their intentions. However, the drawback of relying on the success of communication is that flawed production that still communicates may be perpetuated *ad infinitum*, resulting in a type of fossilization. Without feedback at some stage specifically telling the speaker what his or her utterances are lacking, the utterances may never be repaired, and may in fact hinder communication in other situations. If language learners truly wish to develop overall, they must receive some feedback telling them where they can improve, in both their written and spoken discourse. Chaudron states that

> From the learners' point of view, the use of feedback in repairing their utterances, and involvement in repairing their interlocutors' utterances, may constitute the most potent source of improvement in both target language development and other subject matter knowledge. (Chaudron, 1986; quoted in Crookes & Chaudron, 1991, p. 60)

Working under the assumption that feedback and correction, if used correctly, can improve students' language proficiency, I developed a list of very general guidelines for my workshop, based on a number of readings on the subject, but particularly on Walz (1982):

Time/place

— Don't correct in the middle of communicative act

— Correct at appropriate levels at appropriate times (worry about an essay's content before worrying about its grammar, etc.)

— Decide whether an error can go uncorrected or not (weigh fluency/accuracy)

— Can all students benefit from feedback for one student?

— Is correction embarrassing to student?

Amount

— Do many errors require many corrections?

— According to Walz (1982), base correction on:

1) interference with comprehension

2) frequency (collective or individual) of error

3) relation of error to pedagogical focus at the time

4) individual needs and personalities of the students

These guidelines are perhaps oversimplified, but I wish to point out that in drawing them up for the purposes of my workshop, my focus was on issues that relate to my use of humor in the class, particularly humor based on spoken and written errors that my students make (discussed below).

Some of my error correction methods (mostly writing-oriented)

In order to show in my workshop how ready my students were to deal with humorous examples of their own production, I decided to demonstrate some of the feedback my students are used to getting from me. First of all, in my writing classes my students receive a healthy dose of peer feedback. Each paper they write is read by at least one other class member, and students are allowed ample time to discuss each other's papers (in Japanese) according to questions on a feedback form and to their own questions and concerns. More recently I've begun to have writers prepare their own questions for their peer feedback partners, so that both sides are asking questions about the same paper.

Another activity I sometimes do, which is actually a sort of prototype for the humorous errors they looked at as the subject of this workshop, is the "good sentence / bad sentence" activity (Appendix 1). For years I've been saving copies of student papers, and then preparing worksheets composed of one good sentence and one bad sentence from each student on a recent paper. I then ask them to appreciate and comment on the good ones, and then to correct the bad ones. For anonymity purposes I sometimes change keywords in the sentences in order to eliminate traces back to authors. This activity can serve as another round of group feedback which can remain anonymous, so that even egregious errors can be discussed honestly.

One drawback to this activity is its tendency to focus on grammar and on single sentences, which taken out of context can sound worse or better than they would when placed in the environment of the paper they came from. While doing anonymous group feedback of entire texts can be a large, time-consuming task, I and some other researchers are currently experimenting with online feedback activities which can be done on entire essays, anonymously and outside of class.

The third primary form of feedback I provide my students is standard teacher comments written directly on student

papers, with (hopefully) a focus on global errors in logic or development, but occasionally a comment on particular passages that fail to communicate. (I try to provide positive feedback this way as well.) It is through providing this kind of feedback that I have been able to collect some of the samples for my "humorous error" activities.

The role of humor in education

In my workshop at JALT2005, I provided a bit of background on various historical theories on the role of humor in society at large. However, for the sake of brevity here I will limit my review of humor to ideas of its role in education.

There is a legacy in education of a very "serious" relationship between teacher and students during lectures and tests (see Torok, et al., 2004), in which teachers impart knowledge to their students without irony, and students pay heed to their teachers without doubting. That image is very old, and probably very far from reality, but the image still endures for some reason, perhaps even more so among cultures such as Japan in which the benefit of dynamic, personal interaction between teacher and students is still a relatively new concept.

More recently, though, the use of humor in post-secondary classroom learning has become acceptable and even encouraged in some areas such as law and statistics education (Torok, et al., 2004). Studies by Zillman and Bryant (1983), Koga and Cane (1995), and Hilleson (1996) reinforce the idea that a humorous classroom reduces stress and creates an environment more conducive to learning.

Hilleson, particularly, in his analysis of a survey on student anxiety, draws together both strands of my approach in this paper with the following quote: "the teacher's *attitude to errors* and the personal characteristics of the instructor (*humor*, patience, degree of positive feedback, etc.) seemed important to the learners" (Hilleson, 1996, p. 272; emphasis mine).

Most of the above research focuses on attitudes of students and environments in classrooms. Whether or not humor and laughter in the classroom actually improves learning of a foreign language is a question that has not yet been answered satisfactorily. While several empirical studies (see Zillman & Bryant, 1983) downplay humor's measurable affect on learning, a few contend that real improvements do take place. Studies by Ziv (1976; cited in James, 2001) showed that students taking a statistics class with three or four topical humorous episodes per hour did better on their final exams than students taking the same class with no humorous elements. Another study linked topic-relevant humor in class with increased memory retention (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977, cited in Zillman & Bryant, 1983).

Diana Loomans and Karen Kolberg are two primary educators who go around the US promoting humor among teachers, both inside and outside the classroom. "Kids [naturally] bring unlimited playfulness and creativity to any task, transforming what might be a boring activity into one that is filled with quips, songs, goofiness, wonder, delight, and even awe" (Loomans & Kolberg, 2002, p. xiv). Loomans and Kolberg introduce a chart with four quadrants in which they place four "styles" of humor, especially as it is used with (or by) students in the classroom. These four

humor styles are: Joy Master (+ +), Fun Meister (+ -), Joke Maker (+ -), and Life Mocker (- -) (Loomans & Kolberg, 2002, p. 13-19). The symbols indicate how positive or negative that style of humor can be. Notice that Fun Meisters and Joke Makers can put their humor to use either positively or negatively (both intentionally and unintentionally), while Life Mockers are consistently negative mood makers and Joy Masters are reliable mood builders. Loomans and Kolberg believe that humor used in the right way makes the environment in the classroom much more healthy and natural, as well as conducive to learning.

As a summary of what I had found in regard to humor in education for participants in my workshop, I listed several precautions a teacher had to take in the use of humor:

- Things to consider
  - ✧ level of students
  - ✧ mood of students
  - ✧ number of students
  - ✧ relationship with students
  - ✧ relationship among students
- Don't pit yourself against students, or students against other students
- Use humor to relax, not to create tension
- Try to be understood by as many students as possible (don't leave people out)
- Nothing offensive

Opinions about instructive value of humor

I wanted to get ideas from my own college students about the educational value of humor in the classroom, so I asked them in small groups to think of examples of how humor could work positively and negatively in a language classroom as part of instruction. I asked them to think of classes they had experienced in the past as well as their own classrooms in the future (most students in my advanced English speaking class are studying to be English teachers). I also asked them to think of humor's interactive value (either in or out of the classroom), between people dealing and communicating with each other. The following table shows my summary of their responses:

Table 1. Summary of responses to Qs about instructive and interactive value of humor

Instructive value	
CON	**PRO**
— Full of lies	— Allows us to see things differently than we usually do, so we can learn more about them
— Why study humorous distortions of truth instead of truth?	
Interactive value	
CON	**PRO**
— Always a butt to the joke	— Used to bond with others
— Challenge to listeners	— Lightens mood of group
— Ridicule when someone doesn't get it	— Laughing together promotes friendship
	— Strengthens "us" against "them"

The fewest responses fell into the "positive instructive value" category, while the most responses came under "positive interactive value" (although "us vs. them" could be a two-edged sword). While I couldn't make any objective generalizations from these responses, they reinforced for me that, at least among these students, there isn't much faith placed in humor and laughing as a direct educational benefit.

Examples of humorous native speaker writing errors

I collected several native English student errors from Lederer (1987; see Appendix 2) and had my students in small groups do two things: find the ambiguities, and correct the sentences. There were 15 funny sentences on the list (I wanted my students to see that such goofs were not rare), but I had different groups work on only 3 of the examples. Some of the sentences came very easy to students, particularly those with words or symbols that translated directly across to Japanese, such as "135 degrees" or "H_2O". Slightly more difficult were those that had unusual or silly words replacing similar-sounding alternatives: "Mongrels" or "bowels" (dictionaries came in handy here). By far the most difficult were the logically impaired ones, such as "The death of Francis Macomber was the turning point of his life." For one thing this sentence uses an idiom—*turning point*—that is not generally known by English L2 learners, and for another it uses a fictional character from a Hemingway short story that is virtually unknown even to many English speaking college students. These unknowns served to draw students away from the primary flaw in the sentence, which is that death does not change your life so much as it ends your life.

Though my students could not quickly figure out all of these errors, they were amazed and perhaps slightly heartened to learn that native English speakers who were approximately their age had committed these errors. It is perhaps too much to assert that analyzing these specific errors benefited their own writing, for as Ferris (2002) reminds us, "Written errors made by adult L2 acquirers are…often quite different from those made by native speakers" (p. 5). Having said that, the /b/ and /v/ error in "The bowels are *a, e, i, o, u,* and sometimes *w* and *y*." could easily have been committed by a Japanese English learner. In any event, my goal was not to teach particular humorous and embarrassing structures and words to avoid in writing, but to show students that native English speakers commit errors in their own language, and that sometimes those errors are funny.

Some humorous English from my students

After doing activities with native-speaker errors from the Lederer book, I tried to bring the issue closer to home by confessing some speaking and writing errors I had made in the past, which had resulted in laughter and embarrassment. I started with some errors I had made, or at least allowed to pass, when I was a student editor and proofreader for some journals at my university. These errors included, but were not limited to: "Untied States" rather than "United States," and "a fist impression is usually the strongest." I followed these examples with some that I had made in studying and speaking Japanese. These included using the word *terekura* ("telephone club") when I meant *purikura* ("print club"), and asking a server at a restaurant for another *oshiri* (buttocks)

when I wanted another *oshibori* (warm hand towel). These examples were intended to help my students realize that real people like me err in their own language, and do so even more in a second language. Sometimes these errors are funny and embarrassing, but we learn from them just the same. Perhaps we learn even better from these kinds of mistakes than from the ones that simply "fail to mean" anything. From there I went the next step to trying them out on some of their own errors from their own writing. Again, I was careful to keep the samples anonymous.

- "Western countries urged Japan to open trade, and then the way of wearing clothes greatly changed. From then we started to wear clothes."

- "It is shameful for me to say that I have many friends."

- "Swimming is an honest sport, because if you train to swim faster, you can swim faster."

- "I want to drive my motorcycle in strange country."

- "After opening of the country to the world, many western things that are essential for our modern life flew into Japan. So did bicycles."

- "I like to travel to a place where I didn't go."

- "There are a lot of staples in my home, Okayama Prefecture."

As with the Lederer samples I used before, I had students work in groups to try to identify the errors (and hopefully the humor) and to make the sentences unambiguous (and hence no longer funny). Afterward I asked the students again for honest feedback on whether they liked looking (and laughing) at their own errors. Four questions in particular I asked were: 1) Is it fun to look at these examples?; 2) Is it embarrassing to look at these examples?; 3) Can you learn anything about your own speaking and writing errors by looking at these examples?; 4) If "yes" to Question 3, what can you learn? Most students felt it was fun and harmless to look at these examples. Since they were actual errors committed among themselves, they mostly felt that in each case they were helping their own writing as well as that of the person who wrote the funny sentence. They did, however, think it was a little embarrassing, and were glad that I didn't point out whose error was whose (some students voluntarily revealed this information). A summary of their responses to Question 4 follows:

What can you learn?

— Direct translation doesn't always work.

— Must think carefully about what I am saying.

— It's OK to laugh at my mistakes.

— Is it OK for others to laugh at my mistakes???

As a final reinforcer, I located two instances in recent student writings in which the students were *intentionally* clever or funny. By this I hoped to show that laughing at errors is not the only kind of humor involved in writing:

- "*Kiki* will animate you!" [*Kiki's Delivery Service* is an animated film]

- "The place where I saw a UFO was called 'Yuuhodou'. This is not a pun."

This aspect of the activity is something which I should expand on in the future, similar to my "good sentence/bad sentence" idea of before. As Loomans and Kolberg (1993) point out, there are many styles of humor to be used in the classroom, and if I am going to dwell on unintentional humor in my students' writing, I should try to balance that with whatever intentional examples of humor I can find there. Harking back to ideals surrounding error correction, it is logical to assume that students want to be praised for what humor they tried to convey as well as, or more so than, they want to be razzed for unintentional humor. My students are capable of being very funny, both intentionally and unintentionally, and I should let the whole class enjoy those attempts.

Conclusion

This project was carried out very informally, so there are no reportable positive or negative results of the project as I carried it out. I hoped through doing it, though, that my students would look at their errors, and at their writing, in a different light, and perhaps be more forgiving of themselves, as well a bit more careful in their future speaking and writing. Their responses to the questions afterward seemed to show that they thought about errors differently. If L2 learners want to feel free and comfortable in their interactions, without anxiety over errors, "[their] attention should be drawn away from form, accuracy, and proper social impressions, and be focused on communicating the messages they feel are important" (Gregersen, 2003, p. 31). While none of the humorous errors were examples of successful communication, they did draw everyone's attention toward the phenomenon of communication, and its many winding paths. Such errors can actually heighten interaction, rather than simply kill it, as most students would assume.

A final justification for parading these errors in front of students is that their humor arises from ambiguity. Ambiguous or double meaning means that the students have failed to communicate clearly their intentions. But there was not a failure to communicate *per se*, because what was communicated was unintended information, which turned out to be funny. Whether unintended communication is worse than failed communication can be debated, but either occurrence warrants a look at error correction. By using them as objects of laughter in class, I hoped to show students that errors matter, but that they don't hurt.

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Appendix 1: Good sentence/bad sentence

Super sentences

- After the trip, teachers manage to notice the difference between what the students are and what they were.

- As soon as it started in 1994, it created a sensation and high audience rating in America.

- I know that Japanese educational standards are quite high so that Japanese students must have rich English knowledge.

- Secondly, Cooper (2001) also describes that deception and misunderstanding provide humour in the play and make people look foolish.

- There is sufficient evidence to show that using colors in a piece of work fires our imagination.

- This does not mean that parents always have to provide the children with whatever they want.

- We can catch a glimpse of his opinions in every part of his work.

- We can easily find humor in the novel and know how the writer uses it to amuse the reader.

- We live in a society where we are busy, yet enjoy material affluence; at the same time we have no time to think about our identity.

Struggling sentences

- A young poor dead man is dead and, his wife and his children are sunk in grief of his dead.

- He typified the times in from 16th century to 17th century.

- If we were to live in such fantasy world, we would be confused and as the result would find ourselves trying to find who we are.

- It was not long before cold wind close in on them.

- Mike did not followed the man's warning, so he has a terrible experience.

- Nowadays, international understanding education is requiring to schools.

- Students will get the communication competence and become not to hesitate to speak.

- There are many social issues presented in this program. For example, doctors couldn't treat the man who had the will that means the rejection of life extension.

- We can know what the person think from the speech style.

Appendix 2: Humorous native speaker writing errors

Group 1

1. Although the patient had never been fatally ill before, he woke up dead.

   _____
   _____
   _____

2. A triangle which has an angle of 135 degrees is called an obscene triangle.

   _____
   _____
   _____

3. A virtuoso is a musician with real high morals.

   _____
   _____
   _____

4. The bowels are *a, e, i, o, u,* and sometimes *w* and *y*.

5. The first scene I would like to analize occurs in *Heart of Darkness*.

6. The death of Francis Macomber was a turning point in his life.

7. The divine wind protected Japan by sinking the fleet of invading Mongrels.

8. During the years 1933-38, there were domestic problems at home as well as abroad.

9. The difference between a king and a president is that a king is the son of his father, but a president isn't.

10. H_2O is hot water, and CO_2 is cold water.

11. Three kinds of blood vessels are arteries, vanes, and caterpillars.

12. When you breathe, you inspire. When you do not breathe, you expire.

13. Rural life is lived mostly in the country.

14. Heredity means that if your grandfather didn't have any children, then your father probably wouldn't have any, and neither would you, probably.

15. Last year many lives were caused by accidents.

(Selections from Lederer, 1987)