

Focus on errors: learner corpora as pedagogical tools

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Introduction

- INTELeNG project (Innovación tecnológica para la enseñanza/aprendizaje de las lenguas)
- **Purpose** of INTELeNG: development of **teaching materials** based on a **database of errors**
- **How** materials are developed:
 - identify problematic areas
 - evaluate their level of difficulty
 - develop relevant learning materials

Aim of this paper

To show that a small corpus can help:

- (i) develop pedagogical materials, and
- (ii) improve curriculum design

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Conceptual motivation for database of errors

- Contrastive analysis (CA) (Lado 1957, 1964)
- Error analysis (EA) (Corder 1967): Interlanguage (IL) vs. MT
- Resurgent interest in CA and EA as a consequence of the availability of both native and learner corpora

Errors and mistakes

An error is an "unsuccessful bit of language" (James 1998: 1)

- Error vs. mistake
 - **Errors** as the manifestation of learners' systems
 - **Mistakes** as performance deviances which are self-correctable.

In our study, the distinction between error and mistake is blurred

A fully contrastive approach

1. **MT** (Spanish) vs. **TL** (English) — (CA)
2. Learners' **IL** vs. **TL** (English) —(EA)
3. **MT** (Spanish) vs. Learners' **IL**

Motivation for focus on error approach

- Learners compare their IL and TL
"The way learning proceeds is by learners doing their own error analyses, something that learners are naturally inclined to do but often need teacher guidance in doing effectively"
(James 1998: 258)
- Learners compare their MT and TL

Our hypothesis

Teachers and teaching materials can help students become better Error Analysts and Contrastive Analysts by fostering **language awareness**, with the ultimate purpose of promoting proficiency.

The role of learner corpora in relation to EA and CA

- **As a pedagogical tool:** to assist IL development
(e.g. Longman Learner Corpus)
- **As a research tool** for the analysis of the features of the IL
(e.g. ICLE, COALA)
- Small learner corpora:
 - To cater for the needs of a particular group of learners

Other uses of learner corpora

- Classroom methodology:
 - exploiting the corpus in class for inductive learning
- Curriculum design:
 - through selection and sequencing of grammatical phenomena

Advantage: 'authentic' data

Combining learner and native corpora

- Learner corpora are useful to show the gap between the learner's IL and the TL
- Native Corpora show the features of the TL

Role of grammar in the process of language learning

Growing consensus that grammar must play a larger role in the classroom than that granted by the communicative approaches of the 80s and beyond (see Hawkins and Towell 1996)

Some sort of formal instruction is required for raising learner consciousness of grammatical structures in the TL, in order to promote advanced level of TL attainment (Ellis 1990, Fotos 1993)

The INTELeNG Project (1): learners and context

- Our learners:
 - university students
 - 1st year English Philology at UAM
- Learners' context:
 - English as medium of instruction: correctness and accuracy are highly valued
 - English as object of study: explicit reference to grammar rules and concepts

The INTELeNG Project (2): the corpus

- Exam papers of Academic Writing component
- *English Language 1* course (Academic Writing, Listening, Reading, Vocabulary and Grammar)
- 500 words minimum

The INTELeNG Project (3): the database

- Grammar and lexis errors (2000 so far)
- Extracted from 60 essays
- Manual identification and labelling of errors
- Errors placed in a database (Microsoft Access).

The INTELeNG Project (4): sample from database

IDN	YI	Ess	GfC	ET	Original Error	Correction
1	1	1	2	GP	I think that is the main reason that "them" became criminals	I think that is the main reason that they became criminals
2	1	1	1	XNCO	I think that is the main reason "that" them became criminals	I think that is the main reason that they became criminals
3	1	1	1	XNCO	A person *loved* is a happy one	A person who is loved is (a) happy (one/person)
4	1	1	1	LSF	*Miles* of children are abandoned every year	Thousands of children are abandoned every year
5	1	1	2	WM	Older children take care of the *younger*	Older children take care of (the) younger ones

GRC: Grammatical category

1. Nouns and Noun Phrases
2. Pronouns and Determiners
3. Adjectives and Adjective Phrases
4. Adverbs and Prepositions
5. Verbs and Verb Phrases (1) Tenses and Modals
6. Verbs and Verb Phrases (2) Phrasal Complements of Verbs
7. Complex Sentences
8. Passive and Causative Constructions
9. Reported Speech
10. Conditionals
11. Others

ET: Error Type

- Error tags employed in the **ICLE** project (see Dagneaux *et al.* 1998)

[error 1:..that *them* became criminals...]

GP: Grammar, Pronoun =
wrong choice of pronoun (*them* instead of *they*)

[error 2:..the main reason *that* they became...]

XNCO: LeXico-Grammar, Nouns, **C**omplementation =
error in the complement of a N (the Relative Clause should be introduced by *why*, not by *that*)

[error 4: *Miles* of children...]

LSF: Lexical Single, False Friends =
wrong lexical choice ('Miles' instead of *thousand*) due to MT interference (Spanish *miles* = English *thousands*)

The INTELeNG Project (5): The Pedagogical Materials

- For use in *Grammar* component of *English Language 1* course
- Tasks for each of the 11 categories in the database.
 - Tasks graded (*, **, ***, ****):
 - depending on degree of difficulty
 - to cater for different learners in mixed-ability classes.
 - Tasks contain:
 - error and comments
 - exercises

Task sample: error and comments

Topic 2: Task 2 Partitive expressions and determiners with uncount nouns**
Learners often have problems with the use of uncount (or mass) nouns. The following are two errors from our corpus:

*A recent news reveals this football players are taking drugs

→ A recent piece of news reveals that football players are taking drugs

*It is acceptable to take soft drugs or drink alcohol in a little dosis

→ It is acceptable to take small amounts of soft drugs or alcohol

In the first error, an uncount noun *news* is used with the determiner *a* which can only appear with count nouns (e.g. *a book, a man*...). Instead, a partitive expression like *a piece of* should have been used.

In the second error, the wrong expression is used to express quantity. Uncount nouns express that notion with determiners like *little* and *much*, as well as expressions like *a lot of, a bit of, a great deal of, a small / big amount of*... and so on.

The INTELeNG Project: The Comments

- **The role of explanation:** external knowledge provided by grammatical explanation:
 - is expected by learners
 - can help in organizing their knowledge about TL grammar
- **Level of technicality:**
 - Technical terms included (e.g. noun phrases, partitive expressions, degree adverbs)
 - Students are familiar with the terms used in most grammars
- **Theoretical background:**
 - neutral but coherent

The INTELeNG Project: The exercises

Deductive and inductive activities

- Common exercises: error correction, cloze, rewriting, translation.
- Data-driven and discovery learning type of activities (based on concordances from native corpora).

Different types of exercises:

- Exercise 1: exploratory, inductive (motivational)
- Exercise 2: translation (contrastive approach: English-Spanish)
- Exercise 3: error-correction (contrastive approach: IL-English)
- Exercise 4: fill-in-the gaps (testing)

Discovery learning exercise

Exercise 1: Collocations with degree adverbs

The following adjectives, verbs and participles are often used with the adverbs like *highly, strongly*, and so on. On the basis of these examples, try to identify the meaning that the adverb adds to the verbal/adjectival elements it appears with. Can you observe any patterns, i.e. semantic types of verbal or adjectival elements which appear with particular adverbs?

closely	related, linked, spaced, surrounded, interlinked, followed
highly	respected, recommended, regarded, respected, specialized, talented, critical, possible, productive, protective, educational, intelligent, significant
strongly	advised, condemned, criticised, denied, favoured, preferred, object, supported, competitive
greatly	admired, affected, attracted, desired, enhanced, helped, pleased, surprised, perturbed, encouraged

Translation exercise

Exercise : Partitive expressions

Translate the following sentence into English using the noun(s) in brackets. Use partitive expressions when appropriate.

Example: *Me dió un buen consejo* (advice)

→ *He gave me some good advice*

→ *He gave me a good piece of advice*

1. Tuvimos un tiempo **buenísimo** en vacaciones el año pasado. (weather)
2. Los trabajadores causaron **daños** en el material y tuvieron que pagarlos. (damage, equipment)
3. Compramos un mueble muy bonito para nuestro piso nuevo. (furniture)
4. Se hizo mucho **daño** a las perspectivas de paz. (harm)
5. Nos compraron una **cubertera** muy bonita como regalo de bodas. (cutlery)

Error identification and correction exercise

Exercise: Some errors in the use of passive sentences

Some of the following sentences contain one or more errors. Identify the errors and correct them:

1. To sum up, in this essay it was discussed some possible solutions
2. Linguistics is taught in some universities in Britain and Spain.
3. His articles are referred to by relevant academics
4. Also can be said that for a single parent to bring up a child it's a very hard work
5. This bench has been sat on all day
6. John is resembled by his brother
7. The prize was given me by the jury
8. This bed was slept in by Queen Victoria
9. John is rumoured to be a millionaire
10. It was believed the letter to be a forgery

Conclusions

- A small learner corpus (and its associated database) **can** assist the development of pedagogical materials specifically suited for a particular learner group.
- Learner corpora may be used for :
 - the elaboration of teaching materials,
 - as part of classroom methodology (exploiting the corpus in class for inductive learning)
 - as the basis for curriculum design (selection and sequencing of grammatical phenomena).

Conclusions: Drawbacks

- Regarding classroom methodology:
 - discovery learning activities do not fit well within a 20-hour grammar course for first year undergraduates
 - **HOWEVER**, we believe an effort must be made to encourage this type of exploratory learning at perhaps a smaller scale

Conclusions: The Future

- As more data is gathered for the INTELeNG project we will be able to identify clear areas of difficulty, and use these findings to influence the way topics are presented in the course.
- In this way, we hope:
 - to achieve a better understanding of learner difficulties
 - to help learners overcome these difficulties by designing materials which focus on their errors.