PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND TEACHING EFL COMPOSITION

A General Teaching Model

英文作文研究與教學

T.L. Huang

The Crane Publishing Co., Ltd.

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND TEACHING EFL COMPOSITION

A General Teaching Model

英文作文研究與教學

T.L. Huang

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND
TEACHING EFL COMPOSITION

A General Teaching Model

英文作文研究與教學

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In recent years the English writing abilities of high school students have become a major national concern. The very nature of the research reported here therefore makes it especially appropriate that these findings and the design for teaching written composition will be used to fill the gap between educational research and the classroom teaching of written English at high schools in Taiwan.

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of the following institutions and individuals, without whose support, counsel, and labor, this study could not have been conducted.

Funds for the support of this research were granted by the National Science Council of the Republic of China.

Data for this research were collected from the Annual National English Composition Contest for High School Students held by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China.

Space does not permit me to mention by name the many students from whom I received compositions and wholehearted cooperation.

Second in importance only to what is owed the students is my indebtedness to Miss Yen Ai-chu and Mr. Huang Dai-fu, who assisted in the seemingly endless task of data tabulation, analyzed each of the 200 compositions, and offered their ideas and helpful comments.

Lastly, my special thanks go to Dr. Michael Miller, visiting professor from Chicago State University, who read the manuscript

ii

and offered a number of valuable suggestions.

March 1988

T. L. Huang
English Department
National Taiwan Normal University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Writing may be considered the most difficult of the language skills and is thus a valid means for the assessment of the overall foreign language proficiency of learners. In the summer of 1981, the Ministry of Education announced that a test of writing would be incorporated in the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE) in the following year. Since then, there have been a succession of books published about the teaching of writing. These books might be of some help to classroom teachers, for they were caught unprepared for the task and were baffled as to what materials and methods they should use in teaching writing, but writing is still inadequately taught in Taiwan. One of the reasons for this is that most high school teachers lack competence in teaching writing. There are myriad problems concerning teaching methods and materials for the composition classes. Teachers generally spend little time teaching the organization of either paragraphs or the whole composition. The current practice of assigning topics and correcting errors by composition teachers often constitutes the whole work of composition instruction. Some teachers may even ask their students to memorize the so-called "Selections of Model English Compositions". They are glad to see students reproduce the "beautiful sentences" from the selections in their own compositions. In this method, the

emphasis of composition teaching is on rote memorization. Another obsticle to the effective teaching of writing is class size. In Taiwan, English classes are usually large, ranging from 40 to 60 students.   The teachers dread the overwhelming work load that goes along with being assigned composition courses, and the students consider writing English compositions an ordeal through which they are forced to suffer.

In the past two decades, there has been a popular interest among teachers and investigators in analyzing language errors made by students in the process of second·language learning. "Error Analysis" is the general label for this approach.   It aims at systematically describing and explaining errors made by second-language learners.   Under this approach, language errors are considered indispensable to the learning process in which learners continuously form hypotheses about the target language and test them.   Thus, a learner's errors provide evidence of his transitional competence and his strategies of learning a second language (Corder: 1967).   However, recent research shows that Error Analysis has many limitations.   Most error analyses result in a classification of deviations from the L2 norm in terms of errors of competence (interlingual and intralingual).   Attempts to describe L2 learning phenomena in these terms can lead to some serious problems:

(1) The distinction between interlingual and intralingual errors has only a limited use (Corder: 1973).
(2) Some L2 learning phenomena cannot be captured at all by EA (Kellerman: 1977).
(3) EA does not provide any insight into the course of the L2 learning process (Schachter: 1974; Svartvik: 1973).

Recently, the data scrutinized in error analysis has been expanded to include correct linguistic structures that students produce since error analyses based on error data alone fail to take account of several important factors, for example, students' avoidance strategies. Since these analyses deal with not only the errors but also the correct data, many investigators think that it is more appropriate to use another label for them: "Performance Analyses". The attention of a performance analysis is not simply focused on deviations from the L2 norm (errors) at a given time, but on the process of L2 learning as a whole. More and more researchers tend to be convinced that the language use of L2 learners in each stage of the learning process should be seen as an attempt to apply the structural principles of the target language in a systematic and coherent way (Corder: 1978; Selinker: 1972; Schuman: 1978).

Objectives of the Study

This research project attempts to analyze 200 English compositions written by 200 of our best students who were selected from 100 high schools, both public and private. The data will include errors and examples of correct usage in order to show (1) what students have learned as well as what they have not, (2) the areas where there is still instability, and (3) the extent of the damage, i.e. whether there is misunderstanding of a whole linguistic system or the ignorance or uncertainty is confined to a small part of that system.

This research also attempts to investigate the students'

performance grammar compared with the corresponding linguistic competence model in terms of structural complexity, derviation, frequency, and the native language of the students.

It is hoped that the empirical information derived in this study will serve as a basis for planning and re-orienting materials preparation and teaching-learning strategies so that high school students may be helped to improve their English writing skills to the level of the linguistic competence model.

Definition of Terms

contrastive analysis (CA)	A systematic comparison of the source language and the target language at all levels of structure which will generate predictions about the areas of learning difficulties in the target language for speakers of the source language.
error	A systematic deviation from the accepted system; that is, a linguistic expression which is ill-formed in grammar, meaning, rhetoric or style.
error analysis (EA)	A careful study of a large corpus of errors commited by speakers of the source language attempting to express themselves in the target language which provides factual data for developing a syllabus of second-language acquisition.
fossilization	Language behavior that has become fixed at

	certain point in development.
global error	The type of error that affects the meaning of a sentence or violates rules involving the overall structure of a sentence, the relationships between constituent clauses, or in a simple sentence, the relationships between the major constituents.
foreign language (FL)	The language in question that when studied affords insights into the life of another nation; it can be used for the purpose of understanding the culture of another nation.
hypothesis	An informed quess made with the help of given information.
interference from L1	The effects of "habit" formed in the speaker's first language as it acts upon the target language.
interlanguage (IL)	The language used as the learner progresses from no knowledge at all of the target language to a satisfactory knowledge. The interlanguage is constantly changing.
interlingual errors	Errors which reflect faulty generalizations about the rules of the target language.
intralingual errors	Errors which reflect the structure of the mother tongue.
L1	First language (usually the mother tongue).
L2	Second language (target language).
local error.	The type of error which causes trouble only at particular spots or in a particular constituent of the sentence and which do not

	much affect the overall structure or meaning of the sentence.
mistake	A non-systematic deviation from the language systems indicating incomplete learning.
learning strategy	Process used by learners (eg. mnemonics) to assist in learning.
negative transfer (interference)	Transfer of a skill which impedes the learning or has a negative influence on the command of another skill because of differences between the two skills.
overgeneralization	A failure by the learner to apply restrictions where appropriate to the application of a rule.
peer checking	Other learners assisting in checking for errors or mistakes, usually in class.
performance analysis	An examination of both "correct" and "incorrect" forms used by learners.
second language (SL)	A language extensively used for government, business, and/or education within the nation or region where it is learned; it is used as an alternative way of expressing one's own culture.
target language (TL)	The language which the learner is learning.

CHAPTER II
LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THEIR ERRORS

Nature and Aims of EA

Learners make errors and these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner. This fact has led to a surge in the study of learners' errors, called error analysis. Error analysis, unlike contrastive analysis, examines errors attributable to all possible sources, not just those which result from negative transfer of the native language. Error analysis claims that only some of the errors a learner makes are attributable to the mother tongue, that learners do not actually make all the errors that contrastive analysis predicted they should, and that learners from disparate language backgrounds tend to make similar errors in learning the same target language. Errors arise from several possible general sources: interlingual errors of interference from the native language, intralingual errors within the target language, the sociolinguistic context of communication, psycholinguistic or cognitive strategies, and countless affective variables. The aims of error analysis, therefore, are to locate or identify these sources of errors, then describe, explain, evaluate, and at last prevent or correct the errors. All these essential steps constitute the procedures of error analysis. While the nature and quality of the mistakes a learner makes can provide no direct measure of his knowledge of the language, it still probably the most important

source of information about the nature of his knowledge. From the study of his errors we are able to infer the nature of his knowledge at that point in his learning career and discover what he still has to learn. By describing and classifying his errors in linguistic terms, we can build up a picture of the features of the language which are causing him learning problems. In this respect the information we get is similar to that provided by contrastive analysis. Error analysis thus provides a check on the predictions of bilingual comparisons, and inasmuch as it does this, it is an important additional source of information for the selection of items to be incorporated into the syllabus.

Relationships to CA

In L2 learning, learners regularly produce deviations from the L2 norm. Traditionally, such deviations did not receive much attention; they were labelled as "errors" and were hardly considered as an important issue in language teaching. The audiolingual method considered pattern drills especially helpful as a remedy against possible errors. When errors occurred, they were invariably attributed to interference from the L1. As a consequence, the linguist's contribution was expected to be in the area of CA. However, at the end of the 1960's, people began to question one of the main objectives of CA, namely the explanation and prediction of L2 learning problems. People began to realize that the approach of contrastive analysis left the learner himself out of consideration. The fact that there was no empirical basis for CA in turn resulted in more attention being paid to error

analysis. The contrastive analysis hypothesis stressed the interfering effects of the first language on second language learning, and claimed, in its strong form, that second language learning is primarily, if not exclusively, a process of acquiring whatever items are different from the first language. Such a narrow view of interference ignored the intralingual effects of learning, among other factors. Recently, teachers and researchers have come to understand that second language learning is a creative process of constructing a system in which the learner is consciously testing hypotheses about the target language from a number of possible sources of knowledge: his limited knowledge of the target language itself, his knowledge about his native language, his knowledge about the communicative function of language, his knowledge about language in general, and his knowledge about life, human beings, and the universe. The learner, in acting upon his environment, constructs what to him is a legitimate system of language in its own right——a structured set of rules which for the time being provide order to the linguistic chaos that confronts him. Thus, by the late 1960's, second language learning began to be examined in much the same way that first language learning had been studied for some time: the learner was looked upon not as a producer of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes, but as an intelligent and creative being proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition, creatively acting upon his linguistic environment as he encounters its forms and functions in meaningful contexts. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, the learner slowly and tediously succeeds in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language. In short, we can