

Mistakes of form

by Julian Edge

from Mistakes & Correction (Pearson Education 1989) Chapter 2.

When we talk about mistakes of form, we are comparing something in the student's English with standard English. For example, if a student says,

I am came yesterday.

we would probably compare that with the standard form,

I came yesterday.

and call it a mistake.

Now let's go further and look at what causes mistakes, and then at a teacher's view of different types of mistake.

Causes

- One cause of mistakes in speaking a foreign language is the influence of the speaker's first language.

We can usually hear this, for example, in the pronunciation of the language. That is why we say that we can tell where someone comes from by their accent. Many Spanish speakers, for instance, have difficulty with words which start with *st*. Instead of 'star', they tend to say, 'e-star', as in:

Look at the beautiful e-stars'

We can also notice the influence of the first language in the vocabulary and grammar of learners. Sometimes this is deliberate, sometimes not. When people don't know how to say something in a foreign language, one possibility is to use words and structures from their own language and try to make them fit into the foreign language. A German speaker with a cigarette and no lighter might ask,

Have you fire?

- A second cause of mistakes is when learners think they know a rule, but in fact they don't know quite enough.

Thus, a learner who knows about the past tense *-ed* and who can say, 'I showed him the room', might also say,

He growed up in Canada.

This mistake would be caused by trying to use creatively what the learner already knows about English.

In another case, a learner might have made up a rule that is simply wrong in itself. Some students learn about making comparisons in English with *-er* and with *more* and they think that both have to be put together, in sentences such as,

Your room is more tidier than mine.

Compared to standard English, these are mistakes. In their own minds, however, the students are successfully using their knowledge about the language.

- Thirdly, people may say things that they know are not correct, because this is still their best chance of getting their message across. This is another intelligent use of knowledge about English in order to communicate in English.
- Fourthly, mistakes can happen because someone is in a hurry, or tired, or thinking about something else. The exact details of which mistakes are made by native speakers and which are made by learners will often be different, but slips of the tongue or of the pen are found in everyone's English.

It is quite easy to think of possible causes of mistakes that learners make when speaking a foreign language, but it is very difficult indeed to say in any one case exactly what caused a particular mistake to occur. If we look at the categories we have outlined above, it is easy to imagine a student being affected by several things at once. That is to say, the student might be in a hurry, influenced by the words and structures of his or her first language, and also trying to apply a rule of English which may not be correct.

A teacher's view

It is very useful to have an idea about the possible causes of mistakes. What teachers need to know most about, however, is their learners. In this book, we shall divide up mistakes into different categories according to the teacher's opinion of how a mistake fits in with an individual student's stage of learning in his or her class.

Slips, errors and attempts

Slips

First of all, look at the following tiny mistakes of linguistic form.
What do you think these mistakes have in common from the point of view of the learner?

He had been their for several days.
She left school two years ago and now work in a factory.
My father was a farmer. he wanted me to be a doctor.

My guess is that anyone who writes sentences such as these could correct the mistakes in them if they were pointed out. Teachers often call these 'careless mistakes' for just this reason. We know that if students concentrated their attention on these details, they could easily put them right.

So, whatever the cause of the mistakes, we can classify mistakes according to whether or not the teacher thinks that the student could correct them if given the chance.

If the teacher thinks that a student could self-correct a mistake, we shall call this type of mistake a **slip**.

Errors

Secondly, then, we must have a category for mistakes which individual students couldn't correct even if they were pointed out. Such mistakes will be different for different students, of course, or for the same student on different days, but the following were examples for some students:

Although the people are very nice, but I don't like it here.
That was the first English film which I have understood it.
It is fortunate the fact that she loves you.

With mistakes such as these, it is more difficult for the teacher to guess whether or not the student will be able to self-correct, although as teachers we probably think we can recognise what the student wanted to produce here and we may know that they have some familiarity with the correct forms.

If a student cannot self-correct a mistake in his or her own English, but the teacher thinks that the class is familiar with the correct form, we shall call that sort of mistake an **error**.

Attempts

We can make one more distinction in this area of mistakes. Let's say we have a class of students who have not learnt much English, but they have learnt simple present and simple past tenses. If such a student says,

I wish I went my grandmother's house last summer.

then that student is trying to mean something but has no real idea of how to structure that meaning correctly in English. There is no point in talking about slips or errors here. In this example, the student has succeeded very well in communicating the meaning, but this is not always so. Take, for example, the following statement from a beginner,

This, no, really, for always my time. and then I happy.

There is no point in talking about slips or errors here, either. It is more useful to think of such mistakes as **attempts**.

When the teacher knows that the students have not yet learned the language necessary to express what they want to say, we can call their mistakes **attempts**.

When it is not clear what the students want to mean, or what structure they are trying to use, we can also call these mistakes **attempts**.

The distinctions we have suggested here describe mistakes from the point of view of learners and teachers. Teachers have to depend on their knowledge of their learners in order to decide how to categorise mistakes as they occur.

So, the mistake above,

I wish I went my grandmother's house last summer.

could be a slip for one student, an error for another, and an attempt for a third. Or, for the same learner, it might be an attempt today, an error next month, and a slip next year.

Now that we have these three categories of mistake to think about, we are one step closer to deciding what to do about them. In order to link ways of correction to mistakes, however, we have to give some thought to the significance of mistakes. That is what we do in the next chapter.

Summary

- 1 Mistakes of linguistic form can be caused by the influence of the first language, by misunderstanding a rule, by a decision to communicate as best one can, by lack of concentration, and by a mixture of these and other factors.
- 2 We can divide linguistic mistakes, according to the teacher's knowledge of his or her learners, into:
 - **slips**, which a student can self-correct;
 - **errors**, which a student can't self-correct, but where it is clear which form the student wanted to use, and where the class is familiar with that form;
 - **attempts**, where students have no real idea how to structure what they want to mean, or where intended meaning and structure are not clear to the teacher.
- 3 This division has to be made repeatedly by teachers, based on their knowledge of individual learners and classes.



Teacher Development Pack

Now that you have read **Mistakes of form** complete the following tasks:

- Causes of error

Complete the chart with examples from Julian Edge and any others you can think of.

Language interference mistakes (when the student's own language provokes English mistakes)	Developmental errors (when students make mistakes because they over-generalise; mistakes that are a natural part of the learning process.

- What, in your own words, are 'slips', 'errors', and 'attempts'? How would you treat them differently in class?