

Students' errors in English and what to do about them (Part One)

Most Thai students commence bilingual schooling with very little English. Those who enter bilingual schools at the “infants” (early childhood) level are exposed to a large amount of English in the first three or four years of their schooling. This comes in the form of teacher instruction and other less formal talk from native English-speaking teachers (occasionally by overseas-qualified near-native speakers). From an early age, therefore, students are exposed to native speaker (NS) grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal language (gestures, facial expression, etc) as it varies among English speakers from different parts of the world. It is an interesting feature of learning in a bilingual school that students appear to adjust quite quickly to a new teacher's accent and from one accent to another as they are exposed to different teachers.

We know that young students make rapid progress in acquiring the sounds of a foreign language, and by far the greater part of English used in the early childhood and primary school grades is oral – listening and speaking. One can expect then, provided young children are given sufficient opportunities to both listen and speak in English, that they will develop a more native-like accent than students who begin learning English in adolescence or adulthood. However, this advantage in native-like accent development and comprehension ability can mislead us into believing that young children acquire a second language more effectively across all the linguistic media (speaking, listening, reading, writing) and competencies (phonological, grammatical, socio-cultural, discourse/rhetorical) than later starters. In fact, it is really only in the phonological domain that young children are superior to older students and maintain that superiority. Acquisition of grammar, conversational competence, vocabulary, evaluation of intention (pragmatic competence), translation skill, meaning-making and repair (clarification) strategies appear to be learned more quickly by adolescents and adults than by younger children. However, all learners have to go through the often

uncomfortable process of acquiring a skill, making mistakes, learning from them and eventually getting things right.

In a bilingual school, a student is to some extent protected from the embarrassment and inconvenience of misunderstanding and being misunderstood, because his or her friends are in the same boat and because the teacher understands the child's situation. Nevertheless, student errors must be dealt with in some way and there is much disagreement in the community, if not among teachers, as to what is the best way to treat students' errors in English.

Error is connected to the mode in which language is being used and to the kind of error that is manifested. One can think of the mode of English use as **receptive** or **productive**, though the usual sense of these terms masks a lot of mental activity that is occurring. Listening and reading are conventionally thought of as receptive; speaking and writing as active. Of course, one does not listen or read passively. The mind and one's linguistic strategies are busy at work in both listening and reading, as we know. However, listening and reading leave no

imprint on the environment in the sense that the productive modes do. Speakers and writers impact on their audiences quite directly; they take up a space in the audience's mental life and act on it. They produce a response of some kind. Hence, they are productive in this sense, though productive language may well be a response to other speech or writing that the speaker/writer has processed while listening or reading.

Errors in receptive language are often not detected (unless students' display non-verbal indications that they have not understood – a frown, scratching the head, etc) until the receptive language user has a need or opportunity to respond productively. It will then become clear in what the person says or writes that he or she has not understood. An error of comprehension, a misunderstanding, has occurred. This error is corrected by further explanation, clarification or re-teaching until students have got it right.

Parents and teachers' main concerns, however, are over errors in *production*, especially in speech (because speech is the major carrier of the language – the absolutely

essential skill required for one to communicate in most linguistic contexts). Errors in writing are significant once a student moves into the stage where he or she will be evaluated on written competence. Clearly, students who will be going into an English-medium degree program will be disadvantaged if they cannot communicate well in writing. However, writing is based on spoken language – one “says something” to oneself mentally before writing, and corrects one’s own writing according to how it “sounds” – and is a secondary form of communication, speaking being the prior and primary form. Without the ability to speak well, one can do little in a language. We all know of people – perhaps we’ve had the experience ourselves (I have, in French) of being able to read and write in a foreign language – but having great difficulty communicating properly with speakers of that language when needing to do quite simple tasks.

(Part Two of this article will discuss the contexts and purposes of error correction and how to correct errors without discouraging students.)