

Causes of 'careless' grammatical errors in writing tests

Mu Lu

The University of Manchester, Oxford Rd, Manchester, UK

Keywords: Careless errors; Grammatical errors; Writing tests; Reasons; SLA; Information processing

Abstract: 'Careless' errors on the application of grammatical rules (for example, she like dogs) are a particularly recurrent challenge for my students in writing tests. The students are able to articulate these rules and apply them without any difficulty in grammar-type tests and when such errors are pointed out, the students can correct them independently. Furthermore, the students insist that, had they been given sufficient time, they could have avoided those errors. For these reasons, my students refer to such mistakes as careless errors. Potential reasons for these careless errors in writing tests will be explored in this paper. The theoretical basis is Krashen's (1982) model of second language acquisition (SLA) and McLaughlin's (1978) information-processing perspective. These two theories have different strengths and limitations, providing different standpoints for explaining careless errors, which allows me to reflect on my puzzle (that is to say, why my students make careless mistakes in their writing despite understanding the relevant grammatical rules) more comprehensively and critically.

1. Introduction

'Careless' errors on the application of grammatical rules (for example, she like dogs) are a particularly recurrent challenge for my students in writing tests. The students are able to articulate these rules and apply them without any difficulty in grammar-type tests and when such errors are pointed out, the students can correct them independently. Furthermore, the students insist that, had they been given sufficient time, they could have avoided those errors. For these reasons, my students refer to such mistakes as careless errors.

In this paper, I will explore the potential reasons for these careless errors in writing tests, based on Krashen's (1982) model of second language acquisition (SLA) and McLaughlin's (1978) information-processing perspective. These two theories have different strengths and limitations, providing different standpoints for explaining careless errors, which allows me to reflect on my puzzle (that is to say, why my students make careless mistakes in their writing despite understanding the relevant grammatical rules) more comprehensively and critically. Thus, I will employ both these theories to develop an understanding of this phenomenon.

2. Teaching context

I am a senior high school English teacher from China, teaching students with an intermediate proficiency in English, aged 14 to 18 years. Typical classroom tasks can be described as 'P-P-P' (presenting grammatical rules and vocabulary, practising them and producing sentences using them). Whether students will be admitted into their desired universities depends on their performances in the College Entrance Examination (CEE). Hence, achieving high marks in the CEE is the primary purpose of learning for most of my students. There are four aspects to the English part of the CEE: listening, reading, writing and multiple choice questions about grammar. Of these, the writing aspect takes 20 minutes, with a given topic and word limit of 150 words.

In the following section, two relevant theories will be discussed that will allow me to reach a new understanding of the careless errors made by my students in the CEE writing tests.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Krashen's SLA model

Krashen (1978; 1982) advances two linguistic knowledge types: learned knowledge and acquired knowledge. The essential distinction between acquisition and learning is whether the knowledge is consciously learned or subconsciously acquired through comprehensible input, that is, through exposure to natural communication and understanding meaning of input which contains 'i+1' (i.e., structures that is a little bit beyond learners' current competence level). Additionally, Krashen (1978;1982) stresses that learners can automatically call upon and utilise acquired knowledge. In contrast, learned knowledge is only available as a monitor (or editor) to modify output generated by acquired knowledge, with the prerequisite of having sufficient time and focusing on form. This is the monitor hypothesis. In other words, what one has acquired initiates utterances, while what one has learned is severely limited, only serving as an editor (Krashen, 1978; 1982). Moreover, according to Krashen's filter hypothesis, affective variables such as motivation and anxiety facilitate or impede the acquisition process (Krashen, 1982, 30-32). For instance, if students are in a high anxiety situation, input will be filtered or blocked altogether. As a result, students will acquire less knowledge than they would have without the effect of anxiety.

3.2 McLaughlin's information-processing perspective

In contrast, McLaughlin (1978, 309-332) argues against Krashen's monitor hypothesis, stating that it is impossible for learners to know whether conscious knowledge (learned knowledge) or subconscious knowledge (acquired knowledge) is being used in a given context, since this is dependent on the learner's personal introspective. Instead, McLaughlin suggests the concept of controlled-automatic processes to distinguish between learning and acquisition on the basis of information-processing theory and human behaviour. The term 'controlled-automatic' originates from Schneider and Shiffrin (1977). I will use the terms processing-limitations and controlled-automatic processes as a guide to outline McLaughlin's information-processing perspective.

"Humans are limited-capacity information processors, both in terms of what they can attend to and what they can handle at a given time" (McLaughlin, 1983, 137). This means that, for example, it is hard for some people to draw a circle with one hand and a square with the other simultaneously, due to attention allocation. When a task is complex, that is to say consisting of a number of sub-tasks, limited attention must be distributed across the various sub-tasks. Moreover, the complexity and degree of the attention-demands differ among those sub-tasks and the learner does not have an equal degree of familiarity towards all sub-tasks. For example, drawing with the left hand might be unfamiliar to those who are right-handed, thus, requiring greater attention. As a result, some sub-tasks, such as those with similar complexity and identical familiarity can be carried out in parallel, while others have to be operated in a sequential order.

However, some people can indeed draw a circle and a square simultaneously. The reason for this can be traced to controlled-automatic processing (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977). According to McLaughlin (1983, 140-142), what distinguishes controlled and automatic processing is the degree to which the skills required for a task have become routine. Information processing can be viewed as automatic when skills are well practised and can be undertaken without active control. By contrast, skills are subject to controlled processing when focal attention is necessary to apply them. Since controlled processing requires focal attention, only one such processing activity can be undertaken at a time without interference. However, with increased practice, controlled processing can become automatic processing. Once automatic processing has been established, the demands for attention are eased, allowing other controlled operations to be carried out in parallel with automatic processing. In the example of drawing a circle and a square simultaneously, once drawing a circle with the right hand has been sufficiently practised and has become a routine action, the attention demands for this sub-task are relaxed, and focal attention is freed to be allocated to the other sub-task (drawing the square with the left hand). Thus, it is possible for one sub-task to be operated simultaneously with the other automated one.

Clearly, practice plays an essential role in the transition from controlled to automatic processing. In other words, practice determines whether learners are able to employ skills automatically

(McLaughlin, 1983). By contrast, Krashen (1982) stresses that acquired knowledge generated through natural communication determines whether one can use language fluently. In my view, there are both similarities and differences to the concepts of automatic knowledge (McLaughlin) and acquired knowledge (Krashen). For instance, both theories emphasise the significance of a knowledge type that can be activated without consciousness or focal attention, whereas the medium through which learners become proficient in a second language (i.e., L2) differs. Krashen considers communication to be the only tool to enhance L2 competence, while McLaughlin stresses the necessity of practice for improving L2 performance.

4. Analysis

In the past, I have attributed the careless errors made by learners in writing tests to affective variables such as nervousness. However, following my study of the SLA theories and information-processing theories, my understanding of careless mistakes has been reshaped.

First, from the perspective of SLA theory, careless errors can be ascribed to learners having learned, but not acquired, certain rules. The reason why learning has not become acquisition to a large extent rests on my teaching mode. To be specific, the input I provided was in the form of isolated and context-free grammatical structures, which was not comprehensible, that is to say, there was no communication. Thus, there was no language acquisition, but only language learning in terms of the conscious learning of grammar in my class. However, it is acquired knowledge that initiates sentences, while learned knowledge functions as a monitor. Writing, to a certain degree, can be considered to be a kind of silent, internal communication between the writer and themselves, by imaging themselves as both the reader and the writer. In this sense, what learners primarily need in writing tests is acquired knowledge with which they can initiate sentences. Thus, the conflict between my teaching mode and what learners need has given rise to the careless errors made by the students. Besides, learned knowledge is applied only when three conditions are met: sufficient time, focusing on form and knowing the rule. In writing tests, learners do not have enough time to monitor the language they use; they therefore focus more to what to write rather than how to write, that is to say, on the meaning instead of the form. Consequently, consciously learned grammar cannot be invoked, creating an opportunity for careless errors.

In addition, from the perspective of information-processing theory, there are restrictions to the aspects of a task that can be focused on within a given time. I will explain the relevance of careless errors with respect to humans' processing limitations by describing the sub-tasks in writing and analysing a typical type of error that my learners are prone to making. Akin to Levelt's (1977) description of hierarchical task structure in speaking (see Appendix), writing in my teaching contexts is a typical example of a hierarchical task (see Figure 1).

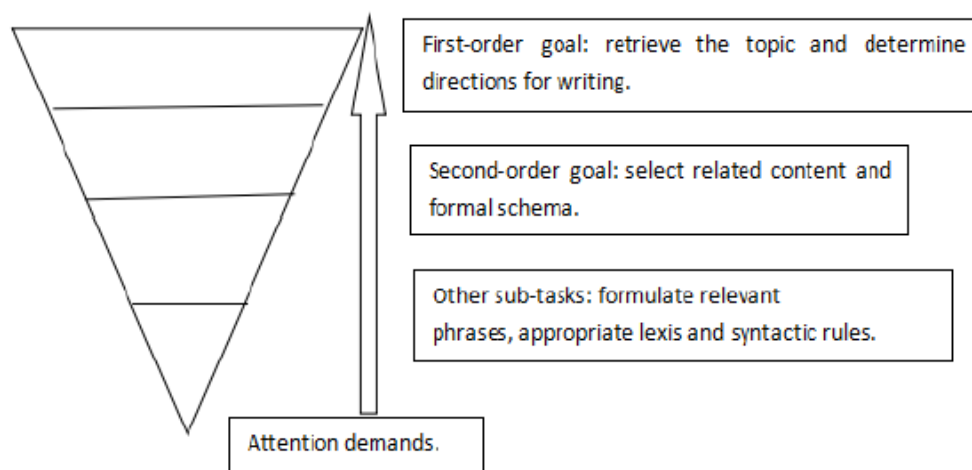


Figure 1 Hierarchical tasks in writing

Achieving higher-level goals requires some sub-tasks, such as formulating relevant phrases, identifying appropriate lexis and applying syntactic rules. These sub-activities can be illustrated as an inverted pyramid; the higher the level of the sub-task, the more attention it demands. Compared with certain grammatical rules, the writing topic and schema are more intractable and unfamiliar to learners. Thus, these activities necessitate controlled processing and focal attention, leaving little attention available for focus on grammatical rules. If these rules are not automated, they cannot be activated with only peripheral attention. Therefore, errors, especially those that are unnecessary for communication, may occur because learners' attention is on meaning (e.g., he have three sister). As Duskova (1969, 16) notes, "many of the recurrent errors of systemic character reflect no real defect in knowledge, but the mechanism of application does not yet work automatically". Therefore, the dominant cause of careless errors is the combination of the fact that these grammar rules are not automated and the students are only giving peripheral attention to them.

One typical and recurrent error type in my learners' writing is the omission of '-s' in plural noun forms. The reasons for this are that, firstly, there is no plural forms of nouns (-s/ -es) in Chinese, which increases the difficulty for Chinese students mastering and automating this rule. Furthermore, the '-s' in plural forms seems redundant to them, since its omission would not interfere in their understanding and communication. This not only adds to the difficulty of automating such rules but also increases the possibility of neglecting them in meaning-based communication or writing tasks. In addition, in writing tests, learners' focal attention is on meaning rather than rules, as has been discussed earlier, allowing for careless errors to occur. Learners attribute such mistakes to carelessness since they are able to correct them independently if pointed out. However, by having the error highlighted, one half of the conflict is disrupted, since learners' attention is directed specifically towards grammatical structures.

5. Further reflection

In addition to the above analysis, these two theories raise further points for reflection. SLA theory suggests that acquisition occurs when learners focus on message rather than form and understand the meaning of the input (Krashen, 1982). However, according to information-processing theory, noticing the forms of the target language is the starting point of acquisition (Schmidt, 2001). In other words, comprehensible input would not contribute to acquisition unless learners pay attention to the language forms that they are learning. In addition, information-processing theory emphasises the essential role of practice. For instance, Lightbown (2013) claims that only through increased practice can new skills become automatic and rapidly processed. However, if repeated practice is used to facilitate the automation of skills, learners may feel bored (or in an anxiety situation) and filter out input, thus, making it unavailable for acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 30-32). Apart from these distinctions, the two theories share some similarities. For instance, both of them emphasize the significance of such knowledge type as can be activated unconsciously or automatically.

6. Conclusion

Careless errors in writing tests result from two conflicting phenomena. With reference to SLA theory, students have learned certain rules but have not acquired them. Acquired knowledge initiates utterances while learned knowledge is used to modify output generated by acquired knowledge. However, learners have no time to monitor their language use in a test situation. The conflict between these two aspects leads to careless errors. From the perspective of information-processing, careless errors arise from the fact that grammatical rules have not been automated, yet are only given peripheral attention.

Based on the two theories discussed above, there are two ways in which careless errors in writing can be avoided: promoting acquisition through comprehensible input and facilitating automatic processing through increased practice. However, exposure to comprehensible input could risk providing inadequate input to learners. Because teachers have to adjust and simplify their speech to make the input more comprehensible. In this sense, the reason why learners could understand the modified input is that they generally focus on the re-analyzed and simplified portion of input. It is

doubtful how learners can move to a higher level with their attention primarily on the simplified input (not on new structures). If increased practice is used to facilitate skill automation, learners might feel bored and in a high anxiety situation, which would, in turn, filter out input and impede acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 30-32). Therefore, the ways in which acquisition and automatic processing can be facilitated to lower the risks of careless errors, without raising learners' anxiety levels through endless drills, is a question that requires further exploration.

References

- [1] Duskova, L. 1970. On the sources of error in foreign language learning. *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 7/1: 11-36.
- [2] Krashen, S. 1977a. The Monitor Model for second language performance. In M. Burt, H. Dulay, and M. Finocchiaro (eds), *Viewpoints on English as a second language*. New York: Regents.
- [3] Krashen, S. 1979. A response to McLaughlin, "The Monitor Model: some methodological considerations". *Language Learning* 29/1: 151-168.
- [4] Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Phoenix ELT.
- [5] Levelt, W. J. M. 1977. Skill theory and language teaching. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 1: 53-70.
- [6] Lightbown, P. 2013. *How language are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] McLaughlin, B. 1978. The Monitor Model: some methodological considerations. *Language Learning* 28/2: 309-332.
- [8] McLaughlin, B. 1983. Second language learning: an information-processing perspective. *Language Learning* 33/2: 135-158.
- [9] Schneider, W., and Shiffrin, R. M. 1977. Controlled and automatic human information processing: detection, search, and attention. *Psychological Review* 84: 1-66.