Collecting and analysing a sample of second language learner data
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This essay analyses the strengths and weaknesses of an English student's language output, discusses the individual factors affecting her language output, and makes recommendations as to how she can improve her output. We will use a taxonomy to classify strengths and weaknesses: phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, discourse, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. The person I have interviewed is Ayumi, a 21-year-old Japanese nursing student who has been learning English for nine years. She received instruction throughout elementary, middle, and high school, and also visited New Zealand for a year on a school exchange during her high school years. Ayumi attended my high school during this exchange. She continues to learn English through a university course and through watching YouTube videos.

A strength of Ayumi's English is some usage of chunks and collocations. Ayumi uses *"I guess"* as filler, and says that she *"looks forward"* to things. She has also learned some common phrases, such as *"I'm twenty-one years old,"* and *"that's cool"*. Chunks are two-word or multi-word phrases that are learned and processed as a single unit. Collocations are similar, except the phrases are more general. *"I guess"* and *"I'm twenty-one years old"* are examples of chunks; other salient examples are *kicking the bucket* and *cream of the crop. "Looks forward"* and *"that's cool"* are collocations – other salient examples include *"weather conditions"* and *"record player"*. Usage of collocations and chunks aids Ayumi's proficiency (Cook, 2008; Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). This is because certain phrases, such as *"groom and bride",* while not necessarily grammatically incorrect, sound more natural when phrased in a different way, such as *"bride and groom"*. Moreover, *"I'm excited"* is correct, but *"I'm looking forward"* suggests that the learner has a more advanced command of English. Learning chunks and identifying collocations, therefore, classify as a strength in vocabulary in our taxonomy, as chunks increase one's vocabulary and makes a learner appear proficient in their L2. Ayumi, while she does not have a wide array of these, does know some of them.

Another strength of Ayumi's English is the general word order. Sentences in English are structured in a subject-verb-object format, and Ayumi adheres to this well, especially considering that her native language is Japanese, a subject-object-verb language. The contrastive analysis hypothesis was developed in the 1970s and 1980s. It states that when producing output, the learner's L1 would interfere with a learner's L2, and that L2 mistakes can be traced back to a learner's L1 (Ellis, 2008). Therefore, we would expect Ayumi to have made this error often. However, Ayumi does not deviate from this word order in any of her sentences. Many errors language learners make are actually not a result of transfer from their L1, and some errors that learners are expected to make as a result of L1 transfer do not occur at all (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In the taxonomy, this would be classified as a strength in her syntax – getting the order of the words right contributes to correct grammar. Contrastive analysis is now an outdated form of language analysis, as some errors that learners of second languages make cannot be traced back to a learners' L1, and errors that contrastive analysis predict may not happen at all.

Using the method of error analysis, we will now analyse two main weaknesses of Ayumi's English. Error analysis is a method of analysing learners' L2 output developed in the 1980s. Error analysis does not use a learner's L1 as a method of prediction for mistakes they might make. Rather, we analyse the errors through the lens of understanding the learner's interlanguage – the learner's developing skills and understanding in their L2 (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). For example, take a learner who does not use the third person -s marker in the sentence *She love books.* Contrastive analysis would predict this error due to this marker not being present in the learners L1. Error analysis, on the other hand, will explain this as the learner getting a grasp on the English language system. The person may have learned the marker but doesn't consistently apply it, as they may have

trouble remembering when to use it. Error analysis has its drawbacks, however – it only analyses the presence of errors, not the absence of them. L2 learners may avoid using certain sentence structures that they find difficult to use (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), and error analysis will not detect this. Still, it is used by many language analysts today.

A main weakness of Ayumi's English is her developing usage of verb forms and their accompanying auxiliary verbs depending on tense. Instead of saying *"I watch YouTube in English"*, which would be the simple present tense, Ayumi says *"I watching YouTube in English"*, which uses *watching* instead of *watch*. Ayumi also says, *"...they are used grammar textbook"*. She has mixed up the present auxiliary plural verb form of *to be* with the past tense form of *use*. An L1 speaker of English would say *"They used grammar textbooks"*, or *"They are using grammar textbooks"*. In the taxonomy, this would be classified as a syntax error.

Another weakness of Ayumi's English is cohesion. In our interview, we discuss my upcoming trip to Japan and how I may be able to meet Ayumi when I am there. She says *"I'm looking forward to come"*. An L1 speaker would phrase this as *"I'm looking forward to you coming to Japan"*. Some speakers may mistake Ayumi's words for her saying that she's looking forward to coming to my country. In addition, when asked why she liked English, she replied *"Being able to interact with people who are not my friend- who are not my first language"*. Ayumi does show evidence of self-correction here, however the sentence that results still does not make sense. An L1 speaker would say, *"Being able to interact with people who do not speak my first language"*. In the taxonomy, this would be classified as a discourse error. These sentences are partially incomplete, and need context to be understood.

An individual factor affecting Ayumi's acquisition of English is her environment. Ayumi mainly studied English in a classroom setting, where she received instruction from her teacher: *"In elementary school, they read English picture books, played music, but in middle school and high school, they are used grammar textbook"*. After a while, she also went to high school in New Zealand for a year in which she was completely immersed in English. Ayumi found that after she visited New Zealand, she could speak English better: *"I'm... more confident than I was before I studied in New Zealand."* Gass, S. & Mackey, A. (2014) say that most students improve their language learning skills while abroad, however results do vary. Moreover, other factors, such as exposure to media, attitudes towards L2, and goals add complexity to the learner's L2 outcome. Ayumi admits, however, that her academic abilities in English were not so great, despite the rigorous textbook focus. Evidence also suggests that while the practical aspects of learning a language abroad (speaking, listening, and the acquisition of pragmatics) improve for an L2 learner, this does not necessarily translate to improved academic performance (Paige *et al.*, 2002).

Another factor affecting Ayumi's acquisition of English is the main method by which she learned it, which is through textbooks. Ayumi states that there was an emphasis on getting grammar correct above all else during her studies: *"… many people are not good at speak, because they focus on grammar in Japan … all I learned in class was grammar. So I doesn't mean I can speak."*. She also states that she worries about getting her grammar wrong before she speaks. Tarone and Swaine (1995) corroborate Ayumi's claims that in a classroom setting, "a premium is usually placed on grammatical accuracy rather than communicative appropriateness". Accuracy in grammar does not translate well to one's ability to speak. In addition, a classroom is a formal setting where formal styles of speech are used to communicate with the teacher and with classmates. When speaking with others who speak an L2, the context will be more casual. Ayumi may find it hard to use a style of speaking that is more casual when most of her speech practice is formal.

Yet another factor that affects Ayumi's English acquisition is her anxiety. As stated before, Ayumi worries about getting her grammar wrong before she speaks, and says that English is still very

difficult for her. She self-corrected her grammar and sentences several times in our interview, further proving her anxiety about speaking English. As described by Brown (2007), Ayumi may have either trait anxiety or state anxiety. If a learner is generally anxious about many different things, the learner will have trait anxiety. On the other hand, if a learner is only anxious when it comes to a particular act or event (such as speaking out loud in class), the learner will have state anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three components of foreign language learning, one of which corresponds to Ayumi's fear: "communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas". This can have a negative effect on one's language learning journey (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). While it's difficult to test whether or not Ayumi has trait anxiety (Brown, 2007), she likely has state anxiety when it comes to conversing in English with people.

To enhance Ayumi's English learning, I would recommend shifting her focus away from getting her grammar correct, and towards learning lots of vocabulary to better convey her message. Ellis (2005) formulated ten principles of instructed language teaching, prioritising aspects of language that should be learned. The first of which is the need to "develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence"; the second being the need to "focus predominantly on meaning"; the third being to focus on form. As this is a hierarchical ordering, Ellis prioritises form below chunks and meaning; while learning form is certainly important, chunks and meaning enable an L2 learner to be more easily understood by other speakers of the L2. Therefore, learning more chunks and general vocabulary will enable Ayumi to speak English more easily and be understood by other speakers of English. This will also serve to reduce Ayumi's anxiety around speaking with perfect grammar. Ayumi has learned much grammar through her classroom study, and she can apply this knowledge at a later stage.

I would also recommend speaking with native speakers through instant messaging and video/voice chat. As Japan is quite a monolingual country, finding L1 and proficient L2 speakers in Japan would be difficult for Ayumi. To get around this, Ayumi does watch YouTube videos in English for two hours a day. In addition to this, however, she can still talk to English speakers over the internet to improve her English. This is supported by Mackey and Goo (2007), who suggest that interaction-driven learning is more helpful for expanding vocabulary and improving grammar, especially in the short-term. Ayumi can reconnect with her classmates during her time in New Zealand and converse with them to improve her English. She can also join websites and mobile applications that allow her to practice speaking with many English speakers around the world. When discussing the factors that affected Ayumi's English learning, it was suggested that Ayumi may have spoken in a formal tone to teachers and classmates most of the time, and therefore was not able to speak casually to friends. Interacting with English speakers in her own time will develop her ability to speak casually. This will also serve to lessen Ayumi's anxiety when speaking English with other English speakers. By talking to people in a setting where there is no pressure to speak fluently, Ayumi will feel less guilt and shame about any mistakes and errors she may make.

In conclusion, Ayumi has some strengths and weaknesses in her English, and individual factors have affected this, but she is progressing very well. Extra usage of her language and reducing anxiety around getting her grammar perfect would improve her English abilities.

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Appendix I – Interview transcription

R: Hello Ayumi!

A: Hello Raashna!

R: How are you?

A: Good, but little nervous.

R: It's okay, it's okay. It's not you who's being tested, it's me who's being tested.

A: Okay.

R: So how have you been?

A: I have a... I have a class today. I have a university class today.

R: Oh okay. What are you studying?

A: Uhh Department of nursing.

R: Nursing?

A: Yeah.

R: Oh okay.

A: So hard.

R: Is it hard?

A: -nods- Very very hard.

R: Oh okay. Okay we'll do the interview now then.

A: Haha, okay.

R: How old are you?

A: I'm twenty-one years old.

R: Twenty-one, okay. When did you start learning English?

A: Ummm... elementary school?

R: Elementary school? Uh how old were you then, roughly.

A: Uhhh... [counts with fingers] maybe mmm... 12?

R: 12? Okay.

A: But all I learned in class was grammar. So I doesn't mean I can speak.

R: That's okay, yeah. Um how long did you learn English for? Until about what age?

A: Um? How long? Mmmm... how long... mmm... five years?

R: Okay, yeah. Um, what was your reason for learning English?

A: Umm... hmm... reason for... reason for.... it's used to for grad- grad-es, graduates... how can I say.. mmm... I study for grads? G-R-A-D-S.

R: Grades?

A: Yes right, grades. [Laughs] But now I guess to talk to my friends overseas.

R: Okay, that's cool. What do you like about English? What do you like about the English language?

A: Umm... Being able to interact with people who are not my friend- who are not my first language.

R: Okay. So how did you learn English in school. What were the kind of processes that you used?

A: Umm.. Wait what the question?

R: Okay. How did you learn English in school?

A: Learning Eng... in elementary school, they read English picture books, played music, but in middle school and high school, they are used grammar textbook.

R: How often did you study English? As in, how many hours in a day did you study for?

A: Now, I watching YouTube in English. I watching it for about two hours per day. And I have a English class... it's one class a week at the school.

R: Okay. How long is that class, is that like one hour or two hours?

A: One hour and half.

R: Okay. How were your grades in English? How well did you do.

A: [Laughs] My grad are okay, but not great.

R: It's okay, you don't have to say exactly what. How did your English improve when you came to New Zealand?

A: Umm... Just talking with friends through native speakers, like yours.

R: Yeah. When you came to New Zealand, what did you find difficult about learning and using English compared to when you were learning in Japan?

A: In Japan, we studied just textbook... just grammar textbooks. I can speak English so much. So... mmm... I difficult to... mmm... I difficult about learning English... yeah... speaking English is hard for me.

R: Yeah. That's okay. It's okay. Um. Have you... when you speak English with native speakers, do you get nervous and why do you get nervous?

A: I get nervous, you know. Because I'm worried about getting my grammar wrong before I speak. So mm... so... I said before, many people are not good at speak, because they focus on grammar in Japan. So I get nervous when I speak English.

R: That's okay. So when you are speaking, what do you do to help, like, calm yourself down and reduce that nervousness.

A: Using... translate?

[Laugh]

R: That's okay. Last question. How confident do you feel using English now? When you're speaking English. Not just speaking but also typing I guess, yeah.

A: Mmhmm. I'm... more confident than I was before I studied in New Zealand.

R: You're more confident?

A: Yeah.

R: Okay. Cool, that's it!

...

R: Wait do you still do saxophone?

A: No... I don't have saxophone, so I can't. How about?

R: I don't have a saxophone either, so I can't.

A: Same. But I wanna play the saxophone.

R: Oh yeah. Maybe one day you can buy a saxophone.

A: You come to.. you will come to Japan.. End of June?

R: Yes, yeah.

A: I'm looking forward to come.

R: Yeah I'm looking forward to coming over there. I'm going to Tokyo, Osaka, Nara, Inuyama, yeah lots of places. Yeah Kyoto as well. I'm pretty sure we're going to see Mount Fuji as well. Yeah. Lots of places.

A: That's cool! So, you are going to Japan... west of Japan?

R: Yeah, the west of Japan, west-South kind of area.

A: Can you go Tokyo Disneyland or Universal Studio Japan?

R: I'm not sure if we'll have enough time to go there. Yeah.

A: Ohh.

R: But you live near Shibuya don't you?

A: Yes.

R: Hopefully we will go shopping there, yeah.

A: I can go maybe 15 minutes on train.

R: Fifteen? One-five or five-zero?

A: One-five.

R: Okay

A: So I will go to soon.

R: Okay that's good news. Okay. Okay well hopefully I'll see you in Japan. I will let you know when I'm in Japan if I'm free that day.

A: Awesome.

R: Well, nice to see you again Ayumi.

A: Yeah, me too Raashna!

R: Long time.

A: Yeah. So you send you my name, Ayumi.

R: Yes, Ayumi.

A: But I remember your name is Raashna. But I forgot your spell.

R: Oh spelling? Yeah, I'll type it in the chat.

A: But, so, I found... I found um like... [goes to get something from closet] I found music class message for me.

R: Oh! Our music class gave you a card. Yeah!

A: So. This one. [She points to the message I wrote for her on the card.]

R: Oh that's so cute!

A: So Raashna's spell is here! So I finally found this.

R: Oh that's cute, that's nice! Maybe I will learn a little bit of Japanese once I get to Japan. Just so I can get around.

A: You can speak Japanese, you know?

R: I can read hiragana and katakana. But I can't have a conversation.

A: Ohhh. You can read hiragana and katakana?

R: Yeah.

A: Ohhh that's cool! Haaa... I can explain different katakana and hiragana?

R: Yeah.

A: Hmmm that's hard for me...

R: Well the way I see it, Katakana is used for foreign words, the non-Japanese words. And hiragana is for the Japanese words.

A: Ohhh, that's smart. Wait. You learning record... classic record right?

R: Yeah yeah yes I do yeah. Like the old kind of 80s music, yeah.

A: Yeah. What's she's name... Do you have uh, favourite singer in classic record.

R: I like... Okada Yukiko?

A: Okade?

R: Okada.

A: Okada. [searches up name] Ohhhhh. I've heard... 50 years ago singer.

R: Yeah.

A: Ohhh that's cool.

R: There's like a lot of popular... from the eighties there's a lot of popular artists in the West. Like Yamashita Tatsuro? You know him? Lots of people know him.

A: Yeah I do!

R: Yeah! Um, Takeuchi Mariya? I know that one too.

A: Ohh.

R: Uh, Nakamori Akina?

A: Oh, Akina, yeah.

R: Yeah and Matsuda Seiko too.

A: Matsuda Seiko.

R: Yeah a lot of those people, they've become really popular in like, English speaking, yeah.

A: Ohhh. Maybe I know more... maybe you know more than the youth, younger of Japan.

R: I know more like, older artists than the younger people in Japan? Yeah, I think so. Yeah I like that type of music a lot. Yeah. What type of music do you listen to now?

A: Ummm.. I listen to, Jpop, Japanese pop music. Yeah.

R: Do you listen to idols?

A: Yeah. Yes. What else do you like about Japan.

R: I like music is the main thing. Sometimes I watch anime. But not that much anymore. I just like how there's a lot of beautiful places there.

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