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ADVANCED LEARNERS' ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH
TWO-WORD VERBS

The English expressions consisting of a verb and a particle or a preposition (two-word verbs) have been repeatedly recognized as a serious teaching problem, particularly at the advanced level (cf. Bywater 1969, Bolinger 1971, McArthur and Atkins 1974, Cowie and Mackin 1975). It is the purpose of this paper to illustrate the above claim by providing some information about the types of errors in this area of English, committed by advanced learners.

Sources of errors in the use
of two-word verbs

Cowie (1978, 1979) analyses systematically the difficulties that a learner has to face while attempting to master English two-word verbs. He distinguishes the following major syntactic problems:

- (i) deciding whether the verb is used with or without a direct object, or in both functions;
 - (ii) determining whether the second element functions as an adverbial particle or a preposition;
 - (iii) discriminating between the combinations in which the particle is freely transposable to either side of a short NP object, and those where it is fixed in the middle or final position;
 - (iv) being aware of the transformational potential of the construction (passivizations, nominalizations, etc).
- (Cowie 1978:257 f.)

The impeding effect of the above difficulties is aggravated by the specific semantic features of the construction, viz:

- (i) very frequent polysemy¹;
- (ii) restrictions on collocability². (Cowie 1979: 83 f.)

Difficulties experienced by learners attempting to study two-word verbs can also be related to certain aspects of the psychological theories of learning. The psycholinguistic sources of errors could thus be viewed as:

- (i) inability to keep intact established links between lexical elements (cf. Ingram 1975)³;
- (ii) inability to maintain high dissociability (discriminability) of newly acquired items from the old ones; (cf. Ausubel et al. 1978);
- (iii) disturbances of coding processes (cf. Herriot 1974).

T h e a n a l y s i s o f s t u d e n t s ' e r r o r s

The study discussed here does not pertain to the status of systematic error analysis (cf. Arabski 1979 for methodological principles of error analysis). No statistics counts were included, as the purpose of the analysis was not to measure the frequency of the occurrence of errors in relation to one another, but rather to find out generally what types of errors were made, and to try to explain the mechanisms of their occurrence.

In addition to Cowie's hypotheses concerning the sources of errors in the use of two-word verbs, another assumption tested in the present paper was that of Taylor (1975 a, b), stating that foreign language learners mostly rely on the strategies of L₁ transfer and L₂ syntactic overgeneralization in their attempted L₂ production. Taylor views these two learning strategies as two distinctly different manifestations of the same psychological process of relying on prior knowledge in order to facilitate new learning (Taylor 1975, 1975 a:87). Which one of these becomes the dominant strategy depends on the learner's degree of proficiency in the target language. The reliance on

the native language grammar will therefore decrease with the increasing TL proficiency. At the same time, there will be simultaneous relative increase in the number of overgeneralization errors.

As in the analysis of students' errors discussed later in this paper all subjects were advanced students of English, in view of Taylor's hypothesis the overgeneralization errors might be expected to be dominant.

Our analysis of errors in the use of two-word verbs was based on a corpus consisting of samples obtained from University students of English.

Subjects: The group studied consisted of 55 subjects, aged 19-24, who were intermediate advanced (first and second year) and advanced (third year) students of the English Department at the Pedagogical University of Bydgoszcz.

Materials: The following three sources of students' foreign language production were involved:

- (i) 138 copies of classroom tests of various nature, where the two-word verbs were the tested item. They included the following exercises (see Appendix for examples):
 - a) fill-in-the-blank, particles missing only;
 - b) fill-in-the-blank, whole expressions missing;
 - c) partial translation;
 - d) substituting two-word verbs for their more formal equivalents;
- (ii) tape recordings of 23 students' FL performance;
- (iii) students' free FL production samples.

Procedure of data collecting: The classroom tests were administered regularly to different groups of students, throughout the period of two academic years, as part of their practical grammar course. The written assignments were obtained from composition classes. The tape recordings were made during oral practical English examinations (some of the errors were elicited, as the students' proper use of TWVs (two-word verbs)

was being evaluated; others were noticed in the "free conversation" part of the examination). The free production errors were also collected during conversation classes, and noticed in informal conversations with the native speakers.

The observed errors have been classified into three groups, as lexical errors, grammatical errors, and collocational errors. The table below provides the number of errors in each group.

	I LEXICAL ERRORS	II GRAMMATICAL ERRORS	III COLLOCATIONAL ERRORS
TOTAL NUMBER	124	19	28

Fig. 1-1

The actual total number of committed lexical errors was higher, as many of the errors were repeated.

The distribution of lexical errors was the following:

GROUP 1	37
GROUP 2	23
GROUP 3	21
GROUP 4	9
GROUP 5	3
GROUP 6	4
GROUP 7	27
TOTAL	124

Fig. 1-2

I. LEXICAL ERRORS

This term was employed to refer to errors that concerned the form of the TWV expression. Several subgroups were distinguished here:

1. Correct verb, followed by incorrect second element

This was the most commonly encountered error (cf. Fig. 1-2), both in the studied tests⁴ and in the free production samples. 20 examples were selected for analysis.

- (1) * Is there enough whisky to go around? (go round)
- (2) * I can see across you. (see through)
- (3) * Most of the applicants have been turned over. (turned down)
- (4) * I picked up a really nice one. (picked out)
- (5) * Masked men held on a wages van. (held up)
- (6) * I came round this book in the attic. (come across)
- (7) * I tried to call on you last night. (call up)
- (8) * He has been let out several times. (let down)
- (9) * You didn't throw away any of the first year students? (throw out)
- (10) * John and Mary quarrelled last night and now they broke off. (broke up)
- (11) * You should cut off smoking. (cut out)
- (12) * Peter dropped off after the first semester. (dropped out)
- (13) * The chairman put down several suggestions. (put forward)
- (14) * He has been out for several months. (been away)
- (15) * Mary's laid down with a flu. (laid up)
- (16) * The man gave out his fortune (gave away)
- (17) * Hold round a second while I get my notebook. (hold on)
- (18) * I brought him up to accepting my point of view. (brought round to)
- (19) * He is out to a very unpleasant surprise. (is in for)
- (20) * A thief will hold in a person. (hold up)

(1) is an example of confusion due to the similarity of form ("underdifferentiation"). (2) seems to be the only clear case of L₁ transfer. We believe (3) - (8) to be the result of over-generalization of L₂ rules, i.e., the verb is followed by a

particle or a preposition which despite being incorrect in the required sense, does nevertheless collocate with the given verb in other meanings that may have been known to the students.

(9) - (16), the largest group, may, on the surface, appear to be the same case of overgeneralization. Upon more detailed investigation, however, it seems that they have resulted from the subjects' conscious attempt to use a particle or a preposition with an inherent meaning which they believed to be appropriate to convey the desired message. Thus for instance the particle down in (15), off in (10), (11) and (12), and away in (9), all express in their original adverbial meanings the concepts that the students have in mind, e.g., location - direction in (15), separation - termination in (10) - (12), etc. The boundary between this strategy and L_1 transfer is not very clear, however, as it seems that the conjectures referring to the inherent meanings of the particles may have been arrived at on the basis of their Polish meaning.

Errors in (17) - (20) probably occurred as a result of a communicative strategy of guessing, employed by the students particularly often in the written classroom tests.

2. Incorrect verb followed by a correct second element

The following 12 examples have been analysed:

- (1) ✖ Put off your coat. (take off)
- (2) ✖ That dress should be let up. (taken up)
- (3) ✖ The ship will go out. (set out)
- (4) ✖ She will come up sooner or later. (turn up)
- (5) ✖ I look after my mother. (take after)
- (6) ✖ They came on me unexpectedly. (called on)
- (7) ✖ He broke through with pretending. (was through)
- (8) ✖ I took out a really nice one. (picked out)
- (9) ✖ A new record has been put up. (set up)
- (10) ✖ He will always call off doing things. (put off)
- (11) ✖ We've been waiting for you to set up. (show up)
- (12) ✖ All those stories he picks up make me mad. (makes up)

(1) and (2) are obvious examples of L_2 overgeneralization, where * put off and * let up have been used as apparent opposites of put on and let out.

We believe (3) - (8) to be cases of L_1 transfer, the verbs corresponding to their literal Polish equivalents, e.g., * come up = "przyjść," * look after = "wyglądać podobnie," * come on = "przyjść z wizytą," * take out = "wybrać," etc.

The remaining errors in this group, i.e., (9) - (12), may be regarded as idiosyncratic; it is very likely that correct particles were used accidentally.

3. Correct verb, second element missing

12 examples were analysed:

- (1) * He was brought in a tiny village. (brought up)
- (2) * What has brought this heart attack? (brought on)
- (3) * He has taken drinking recently. (taken up)
- (4) * A car will pick you there. (pick up)
- (5) * I'll take you from here. (take away)
- (6) * The letter was sent last week. (sent off)
- (7) * The ship will set tomorrow. (set out)
- (8) * She pointed it to me. (pointed out)
- (9) * I had to pick it from the floor. (pick up)
- (10) * Did you put mushrooms? (put in)
- (11) * I had to fill the form first, (fill in)
- (12) * Any car would come this road. (come up, come down)

All these examples could be interpreted as L_1 transfer, in the broad sense of the subjects being more accustomed to rendering ideas by means of "one-word verbs." We feel, however, that they will be better accounted for as instances of a strategy whereby the learner perceives the second element as redundant, and the verb as carrying most of the meaning of the construction. The claim that the verb is generally recognized as the "more important" part of the construction can be supported by the fact that while the above discussed type of error was a fairly frequent one (cf. Fig. 1-2), only one example of an opposite strategy was noticed ("*The boy

was over by a car"). In addition, only two examples were discovered of cases where there was an unnecessary addition of a particle to a verb that did not require it ("*She wanted to use the words she found out in the dictionary"; "*I gave him in this bribe").

4. Wrong preposition following a correct verb and particle

The number of these errors was considerably lower than the number of those in the previously discussed subgroups. 5 examples have been analysed.

- (1) * I'm fed up of hearing your excuses. (fed up with)
- (2) * When you look back at your childhood, was it happy? (look back on)
- (3) * Tom is looking forward on his vacation. (looking forward to)
- (4) * Let's get out from here. (get out of)
- (5) * He shouldn't get away of such breach of rules. (get away with)

(1) and (2) can be classified as quite clear instances of L_2 rule overgeneralization. The errors in (3) and (4) seem to have been caused by L_1 transfer (cf. "czekać na ...," "wychodzić z...",) while (5) most probably resulted from the student's misunderstanding of the meaning of the sentence.

5. Unnecessary element added (a preposition or a particle)

Only 3 occasional errors of this type were discovered:

- (1) * He gave up with smoking. (gave up)
- (2) * John has put up on weight. (put on)
- (3) * Canada will hold down on delivering corn. (hold down)

We suggest attributing these errors to the overgeneralization of L_2 rules which permit a TWV expression to be frequently followed by a preposition. Another possibility is to consider them to be a manifestation of a transfer of training process, in the same sense of the term in which Selinker (1972) used it. Richards (1971) refers to such errors as "building of false systems and concepts."

6. Proposition missing after a particle

Only 4 examples were found:

- (1) * That film is on our cinema. (is on at)
- (2) * He shouldn't get away such breach of rules. (get away with)
- (3) * He let on me that he was very rich. (let on to)
- (4) * He was very busy when John dropped in him. (dropped in on)

It seems that cases (1), (2) and (3) were the result of erroneous interpretation of the particle as a preposition, which further led to the deletion of the preposition proper. We believe this process to be the effect of a learning strategy of simplification. It might, however, also be interpreted as L₂ rule overgeneralization, or as a result of the transfer of training (i.e., students being led to believe that TWV expressions consist usually of two parts only).

Example (4) in addition to the processes described above, is the result of the erroneous use of drop in as a transitive verb.

7. Wrong expression. Errors in this group included expressions in which both elements were used incorrectly. This was a common type of error, especially in the test samples. 10 examples have been analysed:

1. * He finally broke down with pretending. (was through)
2. * We will break out for hard times. (are in for)
3. * We will come upon hard times. (are in for)
4. * You look passed on. (run down)
5. * Peter broke up before completing a term in Cambridge (dropped out)
6. * The whole thing has failed down. (fallen through)
7. * Most applicants have been put out. (turned down)
8. * I came up a really nice one. (picked out)
9. * John has got with weight. (put on)
10. * You should knock off smoking. (give up, cut out)

We found it difficult to account for the above errors in other terms than considering them to be a result of guessing strategy. Incidentally, none of the errors in this sub-class comes from free production samples; they were all elicited by instructing the students to use a TWV (classroom written tests). Only in examples (6), (7) and (10) could we detect the subjects' conscious strategy of analysing the inherent meaning of the particle and using it in connection with a verb whose meaning was considered to be appropriate. While these three can be regarded as a special case of overgeneralization (cf. the discussion of sub-class 1), the rest of the errors in this group must be considered idiosyncratic.

II. GRAMMATICAL (SYNTACTIC) ERRORS

This term was employed to denote errors consisting in a violation of grammatical rules (for example, of transitivity or the position of the particle), the form and the intended meaning of the expression being correct. 10 examples were studied.

- (1) ✖ He knocks off work at 6.
- (2) ✖ When do students break up school for Easter?
- (3) ✖ This marriage wasn't working out love.
- (4) ✖ In this situation my family decided to get away my grandmother from her house.
- (5) ✖ Jane was dropped out after the first semester.
- (6) ✖ If you feel bored, why don't you take some sport up.
- (7) ✖ My mother told me to keep from the dog away.
- (8) ✖ I ran him into the street.
- (9) ✖ I tried to call up you.
- (10) ✖ Somebody must have knocked off it.

The following types of rule violation have occurred:

- (i) treating intransitive verbs as transitive, viz. examples (1) - (4) (adding a direct object), and (5) (passivization);
- (ii) separating non-separable constructions, viz. examples (6) - (8);
- (iii) not separating constructions where separation is obligatory if a personal pronoun functions as an object, viz.

examples (9) and (10).

We will suggest the following processes as being possibly responsible for the above type of error: (i) L_2 overgeneralization, (ii) transfer of training, (iii) a communicative strategy of dismissing the separable vs. non-separable distinction as redundant.

Errors in this group were relatively infrequent (cf. Fig. 1-2). The above examples come from students' written assignments and spontaneous speech samples.

III COLLOCATIONAL ERRORS

This term refers to well-formed TWV constructions which were used in wrong contexts. The 12 examples below come from both oral free production samples (tapes) and written home assignments.

- (1) * Men will never be able to work the women out.
- (2) * He promised faithfully to stick to his parent until their death.
- (3) * The information on the board was clearly set out.
- (4) * When winter comes, all trees die down.
- (5) * You didn't throw away any of the first year students, did you?
- (6) * Even if the strike lasts only 15 minutes, they think they must break it down.
- (7) * They want to push away martial law.
- (8) * I'd like to drop out of that relationship.
- (9) * Mr Granding dropped out of his business maintaining that it was not worth investing the money.
- (10) * They really wanted to pull down the government.
- (11) * I fell through the exam.
- (12) * Do you have it in for going to church every Sunday?

Collocational errors usually involved the choice of subjects, objects, and adverbials⁵. They were the commonest type of error discovered in the students' free production samples. The TWVs in the examples above had been used spontaneously, which means that the students felt confident about both their form and meaning. That they failed to use them appropriately,

however, must have resulted from inadequate information about the collocational restrictions, or insufficient practice in their proper use. We shall thus attribute the above errors to the transfer-of-training influence.

The analysis of the recordings containing samples of the students' performance in free language production revealed that the occurrence of TWV expressions, whether correct or erroneous, was very low. This may be attributed to the phenomenon of avoidance strategy, manifesting itself in a "low incidence of error in conditions where the learner is experiencing great difficulty" (James 1980:183). The phenomenon is due to the learner's strategy of not using the item that he perceives as difficult, and resorting to circumlocution, "message adjustment", or even "message abandonment" (Corder 1981)⁶.

C o n c l u s i o n s

As the above analysis was not a rigorous procedure but rather a pilot study, the conclusions can be only tentative. It has been confirmed, we believe, that the two-word verb constructions are a serious teaching problem for Polish students. Some observations were also made concerning the distribution of errors in this area of English.

It was revealed that in the spontaneous language production of advanced Polish students of English, avoiding two-word verbs was the most common strategy. They were usually substituted by their more formal English equivalents, which resulted in unnatural formality of style. If the two-word verbs were spontaneously employed, the most often encountered errors consisted in disregarding or violating collocational restrictions of the individual constructions.

Errors found in the written tests, where TWVs were the elicited items, fall into a number of categories, the most common being the use of an incorrect second element following a correct verb, incorrectly used verb, or the use of a totally wrong expression (usually attributed to guessing strategy).

All of the previously discussed error types were noticed in the recorded examination samples, where students were compelled to use TWV constructions, and avoidance was impossible. The prevailing types were the wrong expressions and collocational errors.

An interesting finding is that the errors noticed in written tests and those found in oral samples belong to different categories. Although no systematic study was performed regarding the correlation between the same student's test results and the level of correctness of his spontaneous use of TWVs, some conclusions can be drawn nevertheless. It seems a legitimate observation that good performance in written tests, usually of the "fill-in" type, did not necessarily increase the students' ability to correctly use TWVs in spontaneous interaction. This leads to a conclusion that the most commonly used test exercises do not, in fact, test the students' ability to handle TWV constructions in real-life situations.

The mechanisms believed to be responsible for the occurrence of the analysed errors were described respectively, following each group. Taylor's hypothesis was confirmed to a great extent, in that the process of overgeneralization of TL rules occurred in the majority of cases; the transfer from L_1 was less often an apparent cause of an error. We would like to hypothesize, however, that in considerably many cases the overgeneralized forms had been previously acquired with the help of positive L_1 transfer. We therefore believe that it is not accidental that the particles consciously used by students to convey what they identified as their inherent meaning were those that regularly correspond to Polish prefixes or adverbials, e.g., out, off, down, up, etc. The diagram below illustrates this relationship between L_1 transfer and L_2 overgeneralization in the mechanism of error production.

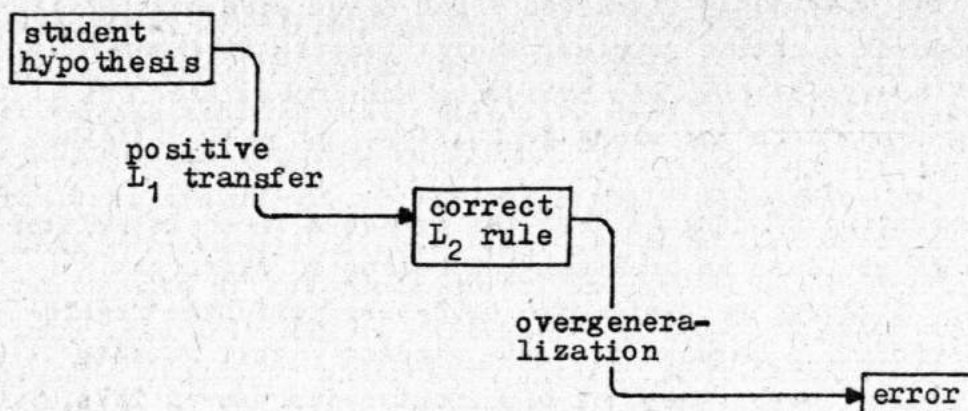


Fig. 1-3

Yet another aspect of the above observation is the students' clearly noticeable tendency to study the separate meaning of the second element of the TWV construction, and to form hypotheses about its use on the basis of that meaning. It is, of course, impossible to tell in what cases this strategy proved successful, resulting in a desired effect; it is only possible to isolate the cases where it failed. This student strategy, however, might be taken into consideration while preparing teaching materials for the TWV study, as it implies the possibility of making fuller use of positive transfer. At the same time, it will be advisable to keep in mind Kellerman's (1977) finding related to the issue of positive transfer and the "strategy of differentiation" (Kellerman 1977:103). It seems that good students tend to be especially apprehensive of one-to-one correspondence, which may result in undesirable blocking of positive transfer.

NOTES

- 1 "The source of problems of acceptable use and precise recognition within this area (...) is the relatedness in form or meaning of two combinations between which there is a genuine syntactic discrepancy. In such cases, the syntactic rules governing the one are extended or generalized to cover the other." (Cowie 1978:257)

- 2 With most two-word verbs, the choice of a suitable object, subject, or prepositional or adverbial noun phrase, is rarely open. It is usually limited to a class of semantically related items. The amount of choice varies in degree, sometimes being limited to a single phrase. (Cowie 1979)
- 3 In view of Gagne's scheme (discussed in Ingram 1975), idioms, as well as collocations, are examples of verbal chains formed in the learner's mind as a result of a form of learning called "chaining". The subsequent more complex form of learning is "multiple discrimination", which consists in "keeping the links and chains intact, without confusing them". (Ingram 1975:252) It may be at this stage of learning two-word verbs that the learner's inability to discriminate between them in terms of "keeping the chains intact" leads to errors. Another possibility is that in some cases the established links between the verb and the second element are so strong that the formation of new chains, involving the same verbs and particles but in different combinations, is hampered.
- 4 The picture may have been distorted by the inclusion of tests where the students were instructed to add missing particles and prepositions to the already given verbs; however in the other tests (i.e., translation) these errors also occurred frequently.
- 5 In reference to Richard's (1971) classification of intralingual and developmental errors they could be regarded as "ignorance-of-rule-restrictions", or "incomplete-application-of-rules" types.
- 6 The strategy of avoidance has received a lot of attention ever since Duškova (1969) first noticed this phenomenon. Several other studies have dealt with avoidance in the context of foreign language learning, e.g., Schachter (1974) and Kleinmann (1977).

APPENDIX

Examples of sentences used in tests (different types):

(Complete the sentences)

1. John is likely to _____ (odziedziczyć) a large sum of money.
2. She _____ (zemdląła) when she heard the news.

(Insert missing particles and prepositions:)

3. You'll never get _____ a breach of rules like that.
4. I ran _____ one of his early recordings in a second _____ hand shop.

(Insert missing two-word verbs:)

5. He was born and _____ in a tiny village (raised).
6. If the rain continues, they will have to _____ the soccer game.

(Replace the underlined phrases by two-word verbs:)

7. They exhausted their supply of food before they got back to town.
8. The tyre will explode if you don't slow down.

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BŁĘDY W UŻYCIU ANGIELSKICH CZASOWNIKÓW
FRAZOWYCH U UCZNIÓW NA POZIOMIE ZAAWANSOWANYM

Streszczenie

Czasowniki frazowe (konstrukcje składające się z czasownika głównego i partykuły lub przyimka), bardzo częste w potocznym języku angielskim, sprawiają bardzo wiele trudności uczącym się. Jest to problem szczególnie istotny na poziomie zaawansowanym, gdzie wymagana jest znajomość i prawidłowe użycie bardzo licznych frazowych połączeń tego typu. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono główne źródła błędów w użyciu czasowników frazowych oraz analizę korpusu błędów popełnianych przez studentów I i II roku filologii angielskiej. Błędy zaklasyfikowano do trzech głównych kategorii: leksykalne (7 typów), gramatyczne i kolokacyjne. Stwierdzono istotne różnice w dystrybucji błędów w zależności od typu produkcji językowej ucznia (np. "strategia unikania" w spontanicznych wypowiedziach ustnych, niepoprawne użycie drugiego elementu konstrukcji w testach pisemnych). Przedstawiono również hipotezę dotyczącą powstawania pewnych typów błędów wskutek nałożenia się procesów transferu z języka ojczystego i fałszywego uogólnienia.