

# ○ THE PROBLEMATIC OF SECOND LANGUAGE ERRORS

**M. Obaidul Hamid** *School of Education, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*  
*M. Obaidul Hamid is Lecturer in TESOL Education at the University of Queensland, Australia where he teaches in the area of TESOL. Previously he taught English language and applied linguistics at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is interested in the policy and practice of TESOL in developing societies. He is Co-editor of Language planning for medium of instruction in Asia (Routledge, 2014).*  
[m.hamid@uq.edu.au](mailto:m.hamid@uq.edu.au)

**Linh Dieu Doan** *Department of Business English, Faculty of Foreign Languages for Economics, National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam*  
*Linh Dieu Doan is a lecturer at National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam and teaches Business English. She obtained an MA from the University of Queensland, Australia. She is interested in L2 learner English, L2 teaching methodology and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).*

The significance of errors in explicating Second Language Acquisition (SLA) processes led to the growth of error analysis in the 1970s which has since maintained its prominence in English as a second/foreign language (L2) research. However, one problem with this research is errors are often taken for granted, without problematising them and their identification. Against this background, the present study aimed to: (a) measure L2 English teachers' ability to interpret L2 learner intentions in idiosyncratic expressions, and (b) bring to light factors that facilitate error identification. Findings show that: (1) there is a significant difference between L2 students' intentions and teachers' interpretations of those intentions; and (2) L2 English teachers' knowledge of students' L1 is not an advantage in error detection. Teacher interview data were drawn on to explicate text interpretation, reconstruction and error identification, suggesting implications for L2 research and pedagogy.

**KEY WORDS:** Second language errors, error analysis, English teachers, text interpretation, teacher feedback, second language pedagogy

## INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) errors are of significance because errors: (1) are “red flags” that signal learners' L2 knowledge status; (2) serve as “tools” by which learners figure out L2 rules; and (3) help teachers and researchers bring to light learners' L2 learning processes (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994). A systematic investigation into L2 errors or Error Analysis (EA) began in the 1970s and is still dominant in contemporary research (e.g. Chan, 2010; Crompton, 2005; Nezami & Najafi, 2012). However, one problem with this research is that it often takes error identification, a key step in the EA process which also includes error data collection,

classification, explanation and evaluation (Ellis, 1994), for granted. That is, it is assumed that identifying errors is as simple and undebatable as counting natural objects:

Many error analyses treat the errors like botanical specimens. They are plucked and preserved, counted, classified, and then described and displayed for classroom instruction. (Taylor, 1986, p. 151)

This unproblematic view of errors and error detection in EA appears unjustified when contrasted with the understanding of errors from the composition perspective. For instance, under the influence of post-modernist and social constructionist theories, which conceptualise reading as an act of interpretation, both errors and responses to errors have been seen as subjective, relative and variable (see, for example, Anson, 2000; Taylor, 1986; Wall & Hull, 1990; Williams, 1981). Given that the success of EA depends on the identification of errors (Bartholomae, 1980), SLA research that subscribes to an unproblematic view of errors may produce questionable insights (Hamid, 2007). Such insights may be of limited value for effective feedback practice.

Although error identification is often taken as an intuitive exercise, Corder (1981) suggested a systematic procedure for identifying errors, particularly the covert type as opposed to the overt one, duly recognising the role of interpretation:

We *identify* or detect his [the learner's] error by comparing what he actually said with what he ought to have said to express what he intended to express. In other words, we compare his erroneous utterance with what a native speaker would have said to express that meaning. We identify errors by comparing original utterances with what I shall call *reconstructed* utterances, that is, correct utterances having the meaning intended by learners [...] The reconstructed sentence is based upon our *interpretation* of what the learner was trying to say, upon the meaning he was trying to express. (p. 37, emphases added)

Corder noted that understanding writer intention is the result of interpretation, which was concurred, among others, by Bartholomae (1980), Connors and Lunsford (1988) and Wall and Hull (1990). Interpretation is of two types: authoritative and plausible. An *authoritative interpretation* is provided when the researcher/teacher meets learners in person and consults them in their L1 about the ideas that they wanted to express in their original expressions. However, if learners are not available for this consultation, a *plausible interpretation* is made. Reconstructed sentences with learner consultation are called *authoritative reconstructions* while those made in their absence are called *plausible reconstructions*.

If understanding writer intention is a prerequisite for error identification, one crucial question facing SLA and L2 pedagogy is whether L2 teachers are able to unearth learner intentions in erroneous constructions, particularly in contexts where face-to-face consultation is unavailable. Corder (1981) speculated that it would be possible for teachers to make correct

plausible interpretations of erroneous constructions if they were familiar with learners and their L1. However, there have been very few studies to provide empirical evidence in support of this observation (see the literature review that follows). Against this theoretical and empirical background, the present study aims to:

- 1. explore L2 teachers’ ability to interpret students’ meanings intended in idiosyncratic constructions; and
- 2. shed light on factors that teachers perceive to facilitate the process of plausible reconstructions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously indicated, although the L2 literature has piled up a large body of research on L2 errors since the 1970s, studies that deal with how and to what extent L2 teachers can interpret meanings intended by L2 writers in erroneous sentences are very few. The earliest study was conducted by Chastain (1980) in the post-1970s era when ‘second language researchers [began] investigating not only how the speaker or writer expresses meaning, but also how the hearer or reader interprets meaning’ (Khalil, 1985, p. 336). Focusing on ways meanings are interpreted, Chastain (1980) investigated 48 native Spanish speakers’ reaction to L2 errors in terms of comprehensibility and acceptability using 35 sentences containing errors which were ‘representative of those of typical intermediate Spanish students’ (p. 212). Results showed that the evaluators understood over 90 per cent meanings of 27 sentences, indicating respondents’ high level of ability to interpret learners’ intended meanings. Nonetheless, doubts were raised about the findings because the study was based on respondents’ mere assertion that those errors/sentences were comprehensible; they were not asked to reconstruct the meanings intended in the erroneous sentences.

To an extent, Khalil’s (1985) research, which examined native English speakers’ evaluation and comprehension of Arab students’ ‘grammatically and semantically deviant utterances presented both in and out of context’ (p. 338), addressed the limitations in Chastain’s (1980) study. Defining context as ‘the utterances immediately preceding and immediately following the deviant utterance’ (p. 338), he first asked his participants to evaluate the intelligibility and naturalness of deviant utterances on two different scales of four values:

1	(Not at all intelligible)	1	2	3	4	(Perfectly intelligible)
2	(Non-natural English)	1	2	3	4	(Natural English)

Next, the participants were required to choose one of the four researcher-provided interpretations of learners’ deviant utterances which aimed to assess whether respondents’ judgments of intelligibility truly reflected their actual understanding of students’ ideas. Khalil’s study produced important insights. First, the grammatically deviant utterances were judged to be more comprehensible than semantically deviant utterances. Second, NS

evaluators' ability to interpret writer intention was not influenced by the context. Third, the judges' beliefs about their ability to comprehend learner intentions and their actual ability demonstrated in practice were not related. Nevertheless, one methodological problem with Khalil's research was the provision of reconstructed sentences to participants. Although the four options took the variability of reconstruction into account, the procedure blocked the full scope of the play of subjectivity in interpreting writer intention. Eschewing this limitation, Hamid (2007) conducted a small-scale study to measure discrepancy between plausible reconstructions and authoritative reconstructions. He selected fifteen erroneous sentences from writing samples of Bangla L1 students who were enrolled in tertiary level English language courses in Bangladesh and sent these sentences together with the students' writings to two groups of English teachers: Bangla speaking Bangladeshi English teachers (N=11) and English-speaking Australian English teachers (N=5). He also met the students in person and collected authoritative reconstructions of the erroneous sentences.

To measure how well the teachers interpreted the learners' intended meanings in the given sentences, the researcher devised an ordinal scale of four values which led him not only to problematise error identification but also to avoid the error-non-error dichotomy because the teachers' interpretations did not clearly fall into these two distinct categories. The four values were called RMD (reconstruction with maximum deviation), RCD (reconstruction with considerable deviation), RMM (reconstruction with minimal modification) and RIM (reconstruction with intended meaning) (see Hamid, 2007 for details on the rationale and procedures for operationalising these categories with examples). His analysis showed that only 36.6 per cent plausible reconstructions made by Bangladeshi teachers expressed the intended meanings of the students (RIM) even though they shared the same mother tongue. Those teachers did not perform better than their English L1 counterparts since it was found that the number of RIMs provided by the two groups was not significantly different.

However, these conclusions cannot be generalised given the small size of the sample and the data. The present study was undertaken to verify these findings not only by locating the study in another context (Vietnam) but also by including more teacher participants from diverse backgrounds. More crucially, we aimed at extending this line of error research by drawing on teacher perspectives on factors that are perceived to facilitate plausible reconstruction as a crucial step towards error identification. Accordingly, our study aimed to: (1) re-measure teachers' ability to interpret students' intended meanings in L2 English idiosyncratic sentences; and (2) explore factors that facilitate teachers in reconstructing writer intention.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants taking part in the study were 62 teachers of English with different language backgrounds:

i.	Vietnamese-Background English Teachers (VBET)	= 30
ii.	English-Background English Teachers (EBET)	= 06
iii.	English as a Second Language Teachers (ESLT)	= 13
iv.	English as a Foreign Language Teachers (EFLT)	= 13

The VBETs were working/studying in Vietnam/Australia at the time of data collection in early 2011.<sup>i</sup> The EBETs were Canadian, Australian or Irish who were studying in Australia. While the EFLTs came from Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan and Oman, the ESLTs came from Malaysia and Bangladesh. None of the 32 non-Vietnamese teachers spoke Vietnamese or ever been to Vietnam. In terms of the length of teaching experiences, 46 of the teachers (74%) had taught for less than three years, while the remaining 16 teachers had taught for more than three years, the highest length of teaching experience being 10 years. Information on the “non-native” English teachers’ levels of English proficiency could not be collected for two reasons. First, in our view, this information was too personal and asking for this was not ethically appropriate. Second, given the diversity of the teachers’ national backgrounds, not all of them might have taken a standardised English proficiency test. However, those who were studying in Australia fulfilled the minimum requirements of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 6.5 for postgraduate studies while those teaching in Vietnamese universities must have satisfied the local requirements of English proficiency and pedagogical training to be able to teach.<sup>ii</sup>

STUDENTS AND CORPUS SELECTION

Ten students from one class and fifteen students from another class who were studying for their bachelor’s degrees in a Vietnamese university were involved in the research. The students’ English proficiency level was approximately pre-intermediate. On request, the students provided samples of their in-class writing in English for use as corpus.

Ten recently written compositions on the topic ‘One of your unforgettable memories’ were collected from the first class and 15 on the topic ‘Benefits of yoga’ from the second one. Both compositions were assigned as classroom tasks by their writing teachers and thus were not written for the research. Both were considered as the source of our data on the understanding that the two topics would ensure some diversity in terms of structures and expressions compared to one topic.

From the 25 compositions, we wanted to select a small number of sentences for error identification with two characteristics: (1) these were idiosyncratic sentences containing ambiguity in meanings; and (2) the sentences reflected cross-linguistic (Vietnamese to English) influence and translation which were typical of Vietnamese students learning English. Although it may not be denied that ascertaining cross-linguistic influence can be arbitrary given its complexity, we relied on one of the authors' knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture as a native speaker, extensive experience of teaching English to Vietnamese students, consultation with colleagues teaching English to these students and our previous experience of researching cross-linguistic influence in the context of errors (e.g. Hamid, 2007; Hamid & Baldauf, 2013; Zhu & Hamid, 2013). The 12 sentences included in the study satisfied both characteristics which also gave us a manageable sample from the participants' point of view.<sup>iii</sup> The sentences with the two characteristics were expected to: 1) verify Corder's (1981) speculation that 'we can make a correct plausible interpretation of the great majority of the erroneous sentences produced by learners, particularly if we are familiar with them and *with their mother tongue*' (p. 43, emphasis added); and 2) to recognise the role of translation in doing plausible reconstructions, as argued by Corder.

### **AUTHORITATIVE RECONSTRUCTIONS**

Five student writers, whose compositions had been selected, were contacted over telephone and were asked for the meanings that they had wanted to express through the erroneous sentences. They were requested to re-express their intentions using Vietnamese, a procedure which Hamid (2007) followed with Bangladeshi students. The students' intended meanings in Vietnamese were then translated into English and were called authoritative reconstructions since the intended meanings were validated by the writers themselves. These are presented in the Appendix alongside original erroneous sentences and examples of teacher reconstructions.

### **PLAUSIBLE RECONSTRUCTIONS**

The 12 sentences along with the five compositions containing them were sent to all 62 teacher participants who were asked to consult the context (i.e., the compositions) and rewrite the sentences so that these sounded more like Standard English, keeping the students' original intentions intact.

## **QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **RECONSTRUCTION DATA**

In order to measure teachers' ability to interpret students' intended meanings in the idiosyncratic sentences, each of the reconstructed sentences was assigned to one of the four categories of RMD (reconstruction with maximum deviation), RCD (reconstruction with considerable deviation), RMM (reconstruction with minimal modification) and RIM

(reconstruction with intended meaning) previously mentioned. As discussed in detail in Hamid (2007) with specific examples, the four-point scale was designed to overcome the problem of error-non-error dichotomy (i.e. if something is not correct, then it must be incorrect/erroneous) that does not suggest the possibility of anything in between. The categorisation, although not foolproof, is an attempt at suggesting that usages may, more appropriately, fall into a continuum that indicates different degrees of correctness/acceptability. However, assigning the reconstructed sentences to one of the four categories, as pointed out in Hamid (2007), was a difficult task. Although the reliability of this categorisation cannot be claimed in absolute terms, each of the sentences was assigned to a category based on discussion and agreement between the researchers in order to avoid subjective biases (see the Appendix for examples of the four categories from the data).

The 62 teachers reconstructed 732<sup>iv</sup> sentences, 63 of which were RMDs, 51 RCDs, 207 RMMs and 411 RIMs. That is, the observed proportion of correct responses (RIMs, 411) given by the teachers was 56 per cent. A single proportion test was carried out to calculate Z-statistics to examine whether there was difference between the students' intentions in idiosyncratic sentences and teachers' interpretations of those intentions. Results show that there were indeed differences and the difference was significant at  $p < 0.001$  level (see Table 1).

Table 1. Z-statistic of the difference between students' intentions in idiosyncratic sentences and teachers' reconstructions (RIM)

Categorization of reconstructions					
RMD	RCD	RMM	RIM	Total	Observed proportion of RIM (%)
63	51	207	411	732	56*

\*Z-statistic=3.33,  $p < 0.001$

Note. Difference is significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

To examine whether teachers' knowledge of students' L1 played a role in teachers' interpretation of idiosyncratic sentences, the teachers were divided into two groups: Vietnamese L1 (N=30) and non-Vietnamese L1 (N=32) and reconstructions of the two groups were compared. Results show that there was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the number of sentences they reconstructed correctly ( $p < 0.05$ ) since the non-Vietnamese teachers out-performed their Vietnamese counterparts (see Table 2).

Table 2. Chi-Square test on reconstructions by Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese teachers.

L1 Background	RMD	RCD	RMM	RIM
Vietnamese L1 ( n = 30)	26	32	113	181
Non-Vietnamese L1 (EBETs, EFLTs and ESLTs) (n = 32)	37	19	94	230

$\chi^2 = 11.77, p = 0.01, df = 3. P$  is significant at  $< 0.05$

Therefore, the findings do not provide support to Corder’s (1981) hypothesis that the correctness of plausible reconstructions can be attributed to L1 knowledge.

To examine which group of teachers provided the highest proportion of correct responses (i.e., RIM), the percentages of RIM for each of the four groups were calculated. The EBETs were found to have the highest proportions of RIMs while the VBETs had the lowest. The EFLTs and ESLTs, with RIM scores of 61.3 and 57 per cent respectively, fell in between the VBETs and EBETs (see Table 3).

Table 3. Percentages of RIMs by teacher type

Teacher Types (N = 62)	Categorization				Percentage of RIM
	RM D	RCD	RMM	RIM	
Vietnamese L1 (n = 30)	26	32	113	181	51.42
English L1 (n = 6)	4	3	16	47	67.14
EFLT (n = 13)	13	12	35	95	61.29
ESLT (n = 13)	20	4	43	88	56.77

Finally, to examine whether reconstruction of the sentences varied significantly in terms of teachers’ length of teaching experience, the participants were divided into two groups: those who had taught for less than three years and those teaching for more than three years. A two population proportions test was carried out but it did not flag a significant difference between the two groups in terms of their performance of correctly reconstructing writer intentions (RIM) (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Percentages of RIMs by teacher type based on length of teaching experience**

Teacher Types (N = 62)	Categorization				Percentage of RIM
	RMD	RCD	RMM	RIM	
Less than 3 years (n = 46)	49	39	152	301	55.6
3 years or more (n = 16)	14	12	55	110	57.5

Z-statistic = 0.5958,  $p > 0.5$ .

In sum, only 56 per cent of the English language teachers were able to correctly interpret L2 writer intention in idiosyncratic constructions. Further, the beneficial effects of knowing students' first language or teaching for relatively longer period of time were not reflected in the reconstruction data.

## QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS INTO PLAUSIBLE RECONSTRUCTIONS

In this section we explore the processes of meaning construction together with the factors that facilitated interpretations of writer intention by drawing on interview data of ten teachers from the total sample. Four of the interviewees were those who had the highest number of plausible reconstructions in each of the four categories of teachers, while the other six were those who were available for interviews in a particular week. Table 5 provides some important background information for the teachers.

**Table 5. Details on teachers participating in the qualitative phase of the study. All names are pseudonyms**

Name, gender and age	Language background	Length of teaching experience (years)	Performance on reconstruction task (No. of RIMs)
Sakura, M, 40	Japanese L1, English L2	5	8
Albert, M, 60	English L1, French FL	4	8
Gen, F, 32	Vietnamese L1, English FL	5	9
Amy, F, 21	Malay L1, English L2	Less than 1	10
Sky, F, 25	Mandarin L1, English FL	1	7
Lev, F, 25	Vietnamese L1, English FL	3	7
Gass, F, 25	Vietnamese L1, English FL	1.5	7
Sun, F, 26	Vietnamese L1, English FL	2	9
Terry, M, 30	English L1	3	10
Crystal, F, 31	Korean L1, English FL	5	8

As can be seen from Table 5, all but one teacher were bilinguals and they had varied lengths of experience in teaching English. However, the length of teaching experience and performance on reconstructing writer intentions do not seem to have a clear pattern, corroborating the findings in Table 4.

Our repeated reading of the interview transcripts and content analysis showed that there were three main factors which facilitated teachers' reconstruction of erroneous sentences: (1) context, (2) teachers' techniques, and (3) knowledge of students' L1.

### CONTEXT

Since the teachers could not consult the student-writers, they exploited the context which provided them with clues to more precise interpretations of intended meanings. Gen, a Vietnamese teacher, shared her experience of reconstructing sentences with reference to the context:

For me, the most difficult one is sentence number six. When I read it: I left myself the hospital soon, after that my mother appeared, [see sentence # 6 in the appendix] I had no idea in what order the two events had happened.

The extract points out the difficulty in interpreting writers' intentions in erroneous constructions. Initially, Gen failed to reconstruct the sentence, but not willing to give up, she consulted a friend of hers, as she elaborated:

[...] a day before I handed the questionnaire back to you, I spent [some] time reading the story again. I imagined the situation. I found that the story-teller's mother gave him blood and fainted, which means she was not there beside him when he woke up. The story-teller, as he wrote in the story, was angry and sad. Since he was angry, he left the hospital by himself. If the mother had been there, she could not have let him leave alone. So the mother was not there. She appeared after that...I figured it out. The answer lied [sic] in the context.

Like Gen, many other teachers found sentence #6 difficult to interpret. For instance, Amy recounted that when she first read the sentence, she was very confused about the order of the two events. However, after consulting the context, she soon figured out the chronological order:

I started from here: my mother took me to the hospital. Then I read through and found that when the patient woke up, he did not see the mother so he was angry...angry...so he left the hospital by himself. I assumed that as he was angry at that time, he did not want to see his mother. After that, the mother appeared. I imagined that was what the student wanted to say and I gave a reconstructed sentence. My sentence: 'I left the hospital on my own before she appeared'.

Thus, it can be seen that the context facilitated the respondents to understand the students' intentions. They could rely on the context particularly because of the given genre (i.e. story)

in which, as Terry, a teacher from Ireland, observed: ‘it is less difficult because you can base on the situation it describes, the context and make inferences’.

### **TEACHERS’ RECONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES**

To interpret the meanings intended by the students, the teachers used quite a few techniques in which three were outstanding: 1) approaching texts; 2) reader-writer idea connection; and 3) word-by-word translation.

#### *Approaching texts*

The teachers followed three main ways of approaching texts: (a) whole-text approach, (b) sequence approach, and (c) sentence approach.

#### *Whole-text approach*

As shown in Figure 1, the different arrows illustrate the reading sequences that a whole-text approach user followed. At first the text was read from the first sentence to the last one. Next, the sentences needing reconstruction were dealt with in their order of appearance. In this approach the text was also re-read to ensure that the meanings constructed were correct. Re-reading did not necessarily mean reading the whole text again; rather, it meant reading only relevant parts of the text considered useful for reconstruction. This approach was mainly followed by Sakura, Sky and Gen. Sakura, who had the highest proportions of RIMs, explained his reconstruction process in line with the whole-text approach:

I often go through the whole writing. Reading this writing, you get the idea that writer has ability to construct things. She mentions one thing and then says however, another thing is more important. Or you think of this but don’t forget this. So she’s good at mentioning something to talk about something else.

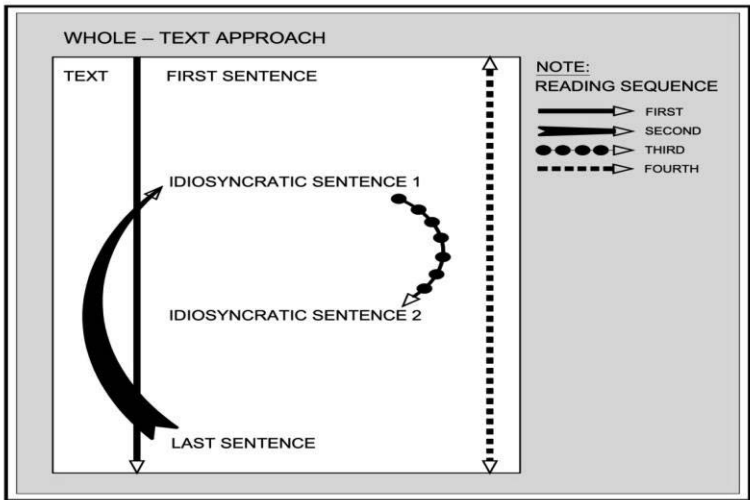


Figure 1. Whole-text approach

*Sequence approach*

As Figure 2 visualises, the direction of the arrow shows the reading direction of the followers of this approach. To begin with, they read the text from the opening sentence to the first sentence that needed reconstruction. There were two possibilities here. First, if the reader understood the meaning, s/he reconstructed the sentence and continued reading until the next to-be-reconstructed sentence. In reading further, the reader checked whether the meaning s/he assigned to the first reconstructed sentence was correct or not. Second, if the reader did not understand the meaning of the sentence, s/he continued reading until clues for interpreting the sentence were found.

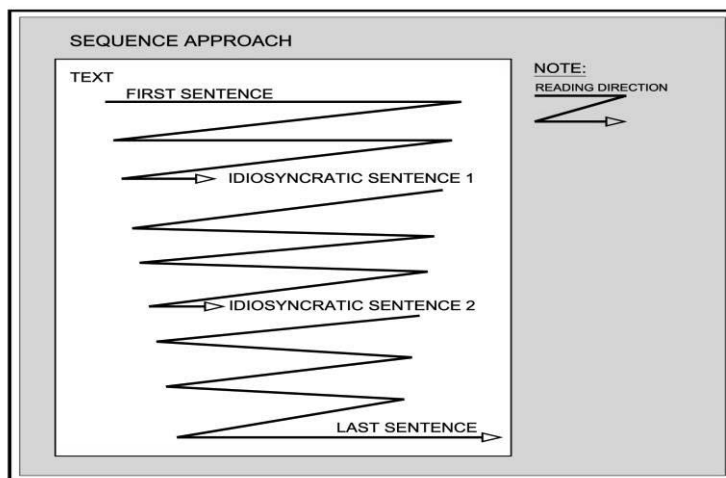


Figure 2. Sequence approach

Amy, representative of those who applied this approach including Terry, Albert, Crystal and Gass, explained:

[...] the first three texts were stories. Events in those stories happened in a sequence so I just need to follow the sequence, the time order. It would be very helpful if you follow the sequence and imagine the situation.

However, Amy dealt with the last two texts differently. As she explained:

But, the texts number four and five, they were a bit more difficult. They were not stories. They told us some facts about Yoga. There was a sequence there too. The student wrote about the benefits of Yoga in the order of level of importance. I can see that. But I had to read the whole text to make sure I interpreted the students' intention correctly.

Amy reconstructed 10 sentences as RIMs and two sentences as RMMs, which proved that she was very successful in interpreting students' intended meanings.

Despite some similarities, there is a major difference between the whole-text and the sequence approach. Readers applying the whole-text approach read the text from the beginning to the end without exception, which was seen as a prerequisite for building in their mind the context of the problematic sentences. On the other hand, followers of the sequence approach continued to read until the last sentence of the text only if they had failed to reconstruct the meaning.

*Sentence approach*

The third approach can be called “sentence approach” because those following this did not start their reconstruction from the text; rather, they started with highlighting the sentences in the text. Lev, one follower of this approach, explained:

In my point of view, there are two kinds of sentences. The first one is when we read the sentence we can understand the idea of the writer. Because they have some problems with grammar, vocabulary or sentence structure so we can help them to reconstruct the sentence very easily. However, the second kind of errors related to the meaning. Sometimes, students write some things which is meaningless or not related to the previous. In that case, it's very difficult to reconstruct those sentences. [...] For the difficult ones, they take me much more time and I read the previous sentence and the following sentence. And I have to try to understand the message that the writer want to get across, what they want to say. And you know I have to guess. And based on that guessing I can reconstruct the sentence.

Figure 3 describes the way the sequence-approach users dealt with students’ compositions. As can be seen, they first read the sentence needing reconstruction followed by their reading of two sentences appearing immediately before and after this sentence. If this focused reading did not help them reconstruct the intended meaning, they widened the focus and read more sentences around in an attempt to find clues for interpretation. Followers of this approach did not read the text from the beginning to the end.

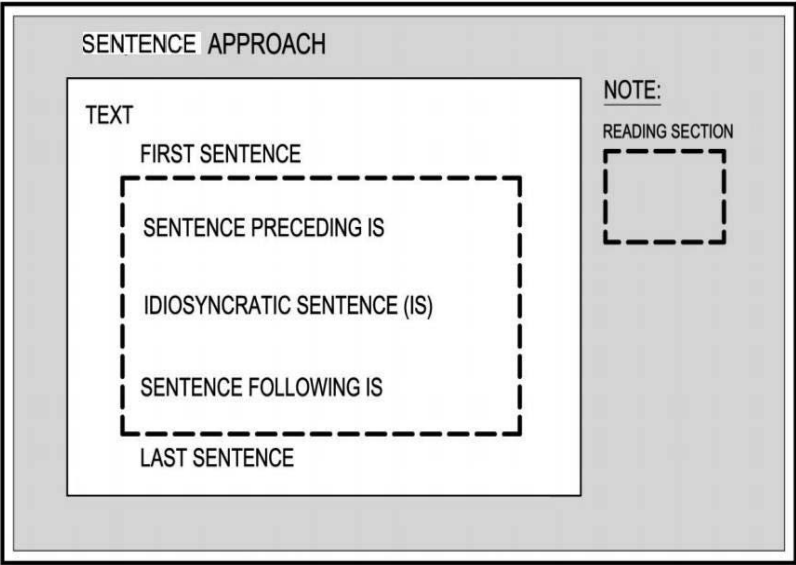


Figure 3. Sentence approach

### *Reader-writer idea connection*

This technique encouraged the teachers to imagine themselves in the students' situations in an attempt to understand their intentions. Sun elaborated on her experience of using this technique:

With sentences that were difficult for me to reconstruct, I did like this. I tried to put me in the position of the student and think...what were they thinking while writing the sentence? What do they want to tell the reader? I tried to understand them.

Lev also favoured this technique, as she explained:

But after that I tried to put myself in her shoes. I referred to my knowledge about Vietnamese society and the common idea of Vietnamese people about life. And the student's idea became clearer to me.

In order to understand the intended meaning, Lev put herself in the student's situation and thought about the Vietnamese society, which proved to be effective.

### *Word-by-word translation*

Nearly all interviewees applied this technique because they found signs of cross-linguistic transfer in the students' writing. When doing word-by-word translation, they translated each word in the to-be-reconstructed sentence into their L1. Even teachers whose L1 was not Vietnamese did this. For instance, Amy, a Malaysian teacher, used translation with any sentences that she found hard to understand, as she explained:

I tried to translate them [sentences that needed reconstructing] into my first language first and then when I catch the students' meanings then I just edit based on how I construct it. I translated because students in Malaysia usually translate the language, how to say, words per words from Malay so how you speak in Malay...the sentence structure is same in English. I tried to translate sentences into my L1 first and guessed the meaning.

Even though the writers were Vietnamese students, Amy observed that doing translation using her own language (Bahasa Malaysia) facilitated her in the process of reconstruction. Word-by-word translation was the technique used by almost all teachers except the EBETs.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF STUDENTS' L1**

Knowledge of students' L1 was acknowledged by some Vietnamese interviewees to be a facilitating factor. For example, Lev noted:

Sentence number two's grammar is not English. I think the student was influenced by his/her L1, Vietnamese. Because I know clearly the difference between the student's L1 and L2, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, I found it easy for me to understand

the student's thought. Yeah. I understood immediately when I read this sentence. I think L1 knowledge does play a role.

Gass concurred with Lev and explained:

Sentence number two: On the street didn't have anyone, it only had wind, space and me. It is a clear example of Vietnamese in English. On the street didn't have anyone. That's the way we speak in Vietnamese. In English, people have to add the empty subject like "there aren't" or "there weren't" and this sentence will be "there were not any people on the street". I can recognize it here...the Vietnamese style. So I am sure I got the student's intended meaning. I am one hundred percent sure.

However, Gen and Sun, who were also Vietnamese speakers, discounted the L1 knowledge, as the former explained: 'Actually I didn't know these writings were written by Vietnamese students. I didn't even think about who wrote it'. Sun also had similar views:

I don't know about other teachers but if you don't tell me that these compositions were written by Vietnamese students, I may think that they are from students from...maybe somewhere else. I don't see any difference.

Her views indicated that even when teachers and students spoke the same L1, it was not necessarily an advantage for teachers in understanding meanings intended by students.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the findings reported in the paper, teachers' ability to reconstruct L2 learners' intentions in their absence cannot be taken for granted, providing support for earlier studies (e.g., Greenbaum & Taylor, 1981; Hamid, 2007; Wall & Hull, 1990). The interview data showed that even though the teachers used quite a few techniques to reconstruct students' thoughts, sometimes those thoughts could not be figured out, leading the teachers to guess and/or impose their own ideas in the reconstruction process. Therefore, reconstruction should be recognised as a difficult process involving subjective judgments and variable outcomes.

Secondly, because there was no significant difference between the performance of Vietnamese teachers and their counterparts from different L1 backgrounds, it can be observed that L1 knowledge by itself does not ensure the correctness of plausible interpretations, thus challenging Corder's (1981) speculation that taking such knowledge as a requirement should contribute to the plausibility of reconstructions. However, in drawing conclusions on the role of L1 in the error identification process, the reader would be reminded that because the teachers were not informed that the sentences were written by Vietnamese L2 writers of English, we are not sure if there were any Vietnamese teachers who did not activate their knowledge of Vietnamese in reconstructing the sentences. We did not disclose this information on two grounds. First, we assumed that the Vietnamese teachers

would understand the L1 background of the writers from the L1 influence on the sentences. Second, we did not want to put off the other language-background teachers, from the L1 knowledge point of view.

Given that our aim in the study was mainly to verify teachers' ability to reconstruct erroneous constructions, examining the role of all relevant factors was beyond the scope of the study. Nonetheless, we were able to consider the length of teaching experience and our analysis showed that the teachers' reconstructions of the errors did not have a significant variation in terms of the length of teaching experience, suggesting that what is probably important is the relevance and intensity of the experience, rather than the length of time spent on teaching. Although all participating teachers satisfied the minimum English proficiency requirements for teaching in their own countries, we could not examine the relationship between levels of L2 proficiency and error reconstruction within our goal.

The qualitative component of the research provided an insightful look into the processes of reconstruction and brought into light the factors that facilitated the teachers in interpreting students' intentions. Although some Vietnamese teachers acknowledged the facilitating role of L1, other teachers from the same group downplayed this role, observing that they were not even aware that the texts had been produced by Vietnamese speakers of English. Compared to the contested role of L1 knowledge, the role of context, defined both in a global and local sense, was acknowledged by all teachers. Unlike the findings in Khalil's (1985) research, those in the present study suggest that (a) the context should not be limited to the two sentences that stand right before and after the erroneous sentence; and (b) the context plays a crucial role in interpretation when the coherence of discourse is taken into consideration. Among the three approaches described in the current study, the sentence approach had the same focus as Khalil's (1985) 'immediate linguistic context' (p. 347). However, the other two approaches—the whole-text and sequence approach—were also important for the teachers in reconstructing students' meanings which widened the definition of the context to the whole text. The findings also indicate that errors in narratives are easier to interpret and understand than in other genres.

One achievement of the present study is its explication of the processes and techniques that the teachers utilised in interpreting students' writings. Of note were the different ways the teachers approached students' writings, focusing on the whole text, text sequence or sentences and the graphic representation of these approaches. These strategies can be seen as an attempt at objectifying abstract, intuitive and subjective processes of text interpretation implying that the correctness of interpretation actually depends more on the interpreters and their strategies than on background variables. As Chastain (1980) stated:

The ability to comprehend depends to a considerable degree on the person interpreting the message; linguistic skills and/or tolerance will surely vary widely from person to person and language to language. (p. 212)

## CONCLUSIONS

L2 errors have received deserved attention from linguists, applied linguists and language practitioners over the past half century. The present study has argued that although doing plausible reconstructions is a practical and valid approach to error detection, teachers'/researchers' ability to reconstruct students' intended meanings—whether for research or pedagogical purposes—cannot be taken for granted. These findings have clear implications for traditional error research which takes errors for granted, without engaging in the problematic of error identification (Hamid, 2007). The present study suggests that researchers need to engage with errors recognising it as a problematic on the one hand and not taking teacher ability to understand and detect errors for granted on the other.

The findings have implications for L2 teachers, particularly for those who provide written feedback to students in their absence often by reconstructing their idiosyncratic constructions. We would suggest that teachers in these situations need to practice caution and sensitivity to make sure that they do not impose their own meanings on students' writing and thus colonise their thoughts. We believe that the qualitative insights from the present study will be useful for them which highlight both factors (e.g. context) and approaches (e.g. whole-text) that may guide error identification. We call for further research in the area involving larger samples of data and teachers to verify the outcomes and processes of error identification found in the present study taking into consideration all important factors including the role of L1, language status of teachers (bilingual versus monolingual), level of L2 proficiency and the breadth and depth of L2 teaching experience.

---

## REFERENCES

- Anson C. M. (2000). Response and the social construction of error. *Assessing Writing*, 5, 5–21.
- Bartholomae, D. (1980). The study of error. *College Composition and Communication*, 31, 253–269.
- Chan, A. Y. W. (2010). Toward a taxonomy of written errors: Investigation into the written errors of Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(2), 295–319.
- Chastain, K. (1980). Native speaker reaction to instructor-identified student second language errors. *The Modern Language Journal*, 64, 210–215.
- Connors, R. J., & Lunsford, A. A. (1988). Frequency of formal errors in current college writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle do research. *College Composition and Communication*, 39(4), 395–409.
- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 9, 147–159.
- Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crompton, P. (2005). 'Where', 'In Which', and 'In That': A corpus-based approach to error analysis. *RELC Journal*, 36(2), 157–176.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Greenbaum, S., & Taylor, J. (1981). The recognition of usage errors by instructors of Freshman Composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(2), 169–174.
- Hamid, M. O. (2007). Identifying second language errors: How plausible are plausible reconstructions? *ELT Journal*, 61(2), 107–116.
- Hamid, M. O., & Baldauf, R. B. Jr. (2013). Second language errors and features of world Englishes. *World Englishes*, 32(4), 476–494.
- Khalil, A. M. (1985). Communicative error evaluation: native speakers' evaluation and interpretation of written errors of Arab EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 335–351.
- Nezami, A., & Najafi, M. S. (2012). Common error types of Iranian learners of English. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 160–170. doi: doi:10.5539/elt.v5n3p160
- Taylor, G. (1986). Errors and explanations. *Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 144–166.
- Wall, S. V., & Hull, G. A. (1990). The semantics of error: What do teachers know? In C. Anson, M. (Ed.), *Writing and response: Theory, practice, and research* (pp. 261–292). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Williams, J. M. (1981). The phenomenology of errors. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(2), 152–168.
- Zhu, L., & Hamid, M. O. (2013). Englishes in China: Researchers' and English teachers' perspectives and their pedagogical implications. *Journal of English as an International Language*, 8(2), 67–87.

## APPENDIX: COMPARISON OF IDIOSYNCRATIC SENTENCES AND THEIR AUTHORITATIVE RECONSTRUCTIONS

	Idiosyncratic sentences	Authoritative reconstructions	Examples of plausible reconstructions
1	But five month ago, I must thought other	But I changed my thought five months ago.	However, 5 months ago, I thought otherwise// However, 5 months ago, I thought differently.// But I had to change the way I thought about it five months ago (RIM)
2	On the street didn't have anyone, it only had wind, space and me.	There was nobody in the street. There were just the howling winds, quiet space and me.	It was an empty street except me and the blowing wind. (RMM)
3	I am a girl but when I was a child. I was playful as a boy.	I am a girl but as a child I was a tomboy.	
4	I could see around everything other	I could see many other things around.	I could see everything around me// I could see everything around on it. (RMM)
5	It was a stormy night and then if not my mother I would have died	It was a stormy night and if had not been for my mother I would have died.	It was a night of a storm. I would have been dead if my mother didn't come and save me. (RIM)
6	I left myself the hospital soon, after my mother appeared.	I left the hospital soon by myself. After that, my mother appeared.	My mother appeared soon after, and we left the hospital. (RMD)
7	7 She work very hard for me to learn	She worked very hard to support my study.	She works very hard and sets a good example for me. (RMD)
8	This is important thing because most of people only think about the physic and forget it	This is important because most people think only about the physical aspects and forget about the mental.	-This is important because most people are becoming materialistic and gradually forget about spiritual value. (RMD)  -This is an important thing because most people usually think about their health, but they forget it later. (RMD)

9	In busy society, we are attracted from many things like money, food, jobs, etc and your work won't be well.	In our busy society, we are distracted by many things such as money, food and jobs, etc., causing us to perform badly at work.	As we are attracted to many things like money, food, jobs and etc, our trials to achieve mental value may not work very well. (RMD)  On a typical busy day, one cannot find it easy to work well on everything as there are so many for them to handle. (RCD)  In the nowadays society, we are too easily distracted by things like money, food and promotion. As a result, we can hardly concentrate on our work. (RMM)
10	In addition, developing clear thinking is not less important than educating your thinking, if you can develop your thinking, that's mean you will get more success in many things	Learning is one thing and thinking is another. If you can think more and clearly, you will be more successful in doing things.	Cultivating our mind is important because it helps us think more clearly so that we can be more successful in many things. (RMM)
11	In each person, no matter female or male has a particular emotion, some cried, some laughed, some angry etc.	Regardless of gender, we all have emotion such as sorrow, happiness and anger.	Everyone experiences certain emotions at times. (RCD)  Each individual has his/her unique personalities. Some people cry a lot, some people are likely to get over-excited, and others lose their temper very easily.(RMD)
12	Furthermore, when emotion and physical health are ameliorated, trainees will give the third interest, mental benefits.	Furthermore, when emotional and physical health are improved, Yoga trainees will feel a third benefit, improved mental health.	Furthermore, when emotional and physical health are improved, the training to achieve mental benefits will begin. (RCD)

---

## ENDNOTES

- i Ethical clearance was obtained from an Australian university for the research.
- ii Tertiary level English teachers in Vietnam must have postgraduate qualifications in English pedagogy. They are expected to have a level of English proficiency which is comparable to IELTS 6.5.
- iii Since teachers were required to read the compositions for reconstructing the sentences, we did not want to burden them with too many sentences taken from too many compositions.
- iv This number was short of 12 sentences from an expected total of 744 (12X62). Some teachers did not reconstruct these sentences giving the reason that it was difficult to understand the students' intentions.