An Analysis of Syntactic Errors: One Case Study

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Abstract. With the development of globalization, error analysis in second language acquisition theory has received increasing attention from scholars. Significant progress has been made in error feedback, correction, and treatment. In this article, the five steps proposed by Corder of collecting, identifying, describing, explaining, and evaluating errors are used to analyze the statistical data and elaborate on the oral syntactic error classification of one case. The errors are divided into five categories: tense, consistency, component missing, composition of redundant, and mismatch, and each is classified in more details. Then, reasons accounting for those errors are explained from the negative transfer of native language, target language and cultural factors, learning strategies and communicative strategies, and influence of learning environment. Finally, it is suggested that we should establish correct concepts in the face of errors and apply error analysis to teaching practice.

Keywords: Corder, error classification, the source of the errors.

1   INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization, communication among people of different nationalities and languages has become increasingly important. Theories about second language acquisition have been increasingly developed. Among these theories, error analysis theory has attracted more and more attention from scholars. For example, in the early error analysis studies, scholars used structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology as the basis. Through the four steps of description, selection, comparison, and prediction, they emphasized the co-temporal comparison of the linguistic forms of both native and target languages. And they concluded that the similarities between the two languages produce a positive transfer, and the differences produce a negative transfer. The greater the difference between the two languages, the greater the learning difficulty. Based on this conclusion, Practor proposed the "difficulty scale model," which classifies learning difficulty into six levels, allowing the theory of contrast analysis to be applied as objectively as possible in the prediction process.

It was not until the 1970s, when Selinker introduced the concept of mediated language, that attention was focused on acquiring a second language, marking the independence of error analysis. Based on Chomsky's universal grammar and the cognitive

theory of psychology, scholars have made notable achievements in the definition and extraction of samples, error description, and error interpretation through the unfolding of the five steps of collecting, identifying, describing, explaining, and evaluating errors proposed by Corder. Among them, the description of errors is developed from two perspectives of linguistics and error expressions. Richards divides errors into verb phrases, prepositions, article, and interrogative errors, while some scholars divide errors into four categories of omission, addition, misuse, and inversion [1,2].

The initial and most recognized study in China is the integration of Chinese and foreign error classification by Cai Longquan and Dai Weidong in 2001. They classified errors into three major categories related to each other, namely cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral errors, and appended three important parameters, namely number, nature, and order, as a fourth aspect. Ultimately, a total of 20 representative errors were derived after the secondary classification of the four aspects. The purpose of this article is not to provide an exhaustive statistical and categorization of data, but rather to classify errors in a way that is as self-contained, interactive, systematic, and objective as possible. And to promote a two-way study of error analysis as both a theory and a method in second language acquisition, and to seek ways to reduce errors in second language learners on this basis [3].

Wang Ying classifies the errors studied into six types: tense, agreement, omission, superposition, sequence, and over-formed generalizations of "be." She suggests that

1) tense errors mainly focus on the past tense;

2) the third person singular errors account for a large proportion of consistent;

3) omission errors are mainly manifested by the absence of the auxiliary and link verb "be" and "do, does" in interrogative and negative sentences;

4) the superposition error means the presence of a component that should not exist, such as "She did not slept.";

5) Sequence error refers to the use of correct components and wrong order;

6) the overgeneralization of "be" refers to replacing it in the progressive tense with a verb that has not undergone a tortuous change [4], such as "I'm come from Beijing."

A total of 417 syntactic errors were collected by Huanling Dong and grouped into four categories from the perspective of negative native language transfer: omission, word order, tense, and agreement. Among them, omission included the omission of zero subjects and be verbs and particles; word order included the word order of interrogative sentences and the position of modifiers; agreement included the agreement of verbs and the agreement of pronouns or nouns and antecedents. The data were also counted and concluded:

1) among the errors caused by negative native language transfer in syntax, tense errors were obvious, accounting for 49.3%;

2) next was the consistency problem, accounting for 20.0%;

3) the difference in sentence structure between learners' native Chinese and second language English led to the problem of omission, accounting for 18.3%;

4) and finally is the word order problem, accounting for only 12.4% [5].

In terms of the causes of errors, various scholars have different explanations. The consensus is that errors come from many sources and are caused by a mixture of factors. Li Hongde, on the other hand, divides the deeper causes of Chinese students'

English speaking errors into three categories: errors caused in the English learning process, errors caused by cultural differences, and errors caused by social factors. The first point, errors in learning English, is divided into internal and external factors. The former has eight perspectives: overgeneralization, ignoring syntactic rules, one-sided application of grammar rules, misconceptions, tongue slips, Chinese interference, personality and thinking factors, emotions, and environment. The latter includes errors caused by teachers' teaching and the emphasis on the written word over the spoken word. The second point, errors due to cultural differences, is divided into cultural and psychological differences. The third point, speaking errors caused by social factors, refers to the situation where social status prevents learners from expressing their thoughts fluently and accurately in the foreign language they have learned [6].

Concerning the sources of errors, Liu Xun proposes five situations, and most Chinese scholars also recognize his idea:

1) negative native language transfer. It occurs mainly at the primary level when learners rely on the rules of their native language to utter or write the target language;

2) negative transfer of the target language, i.e., over-generalization. It occurs mainly at the intermediate and advanced levels when the learner uses his limited knowledge of the target language and applies it by analogy to the linguistic phenomena of the target language;

3) negative transfer of cultural factors. It is the error caused by the lack of understanding of the target language culture, such as inappropriate sentences in the context, et cetera;

4) learning strategies and communicative strategies. The former includes a negative transfer of the native language, negative transfer of the target language, and simplification, such as learners deliberately reducing the target language they consider redundant. The latter includes avoidance and language shift, such as avoiding specific words or sentences when they are unsure, resulting in errors;

5) the influence of the learning environment. This situation Includes teachers' wrong demonstrations, poorly organized teaching materials, et cetera [1].

Yu Yangxiao adds the category of hypercorrection to this, which refers to learners' use of errors in other places after they have been corrected. For example, when learners have been corrected by teachers or themselves for missing an article, they tend to overuse them [7].

In this article, the author will follow the steps of Corder error analysis to analyze the syntactic errors of this test subject in the TOEFL speaking test by studying a specific case. The study results include the classification and the causes of syntactic errors. The error classification is mainly based on the articles of Wang Ying and Dong Huanling, and integrated and innovated with the knowledge of modern Chinese, which is divided into tense error, consistency error, component mutilation, component redundancy, and improper collocation. Among them, the consistency error accounts for the most, while the tense error is the second and the redundant component is the least. The sources of errors are following the five types summarized by Liu Xun.

2   METHODOLOGY

This is a personal case study of syntactic error analysis based on quantitative and qualitative analysis. A total of 103 data from one case were used, and the spoken syntactic error of this case was determined by category and source.The research materials are error transcriptions of a self-study New TOEFL candidate's speaking practice recordings, and the research tools include Excel and recording software. The steps of the error analysis are based on Corder's five-step method:

1) Collect the corpus for analysis in the form of spoken or written language;

2) identifying errors. Firstly, regular errors that reflect the subject's ability and occasional errors that reflect performance (mistakes); secondly, the distinction between structural errors and pragmatic errors;

3) classifying the errors;

4) explaining the causes of errors;

5) assess the severity of the errors. Whether they affect communication or not [1].

2.1   The Data Collecting

Regarding data collection, three main aspects are needed to be observed, namely, collection methods, influencing factors, and scope [8]. Therefore, firstly, this study used spoken language recordings transcribed from written language in the data collection method. The sample data took into account both language and learner levels. In particular, the transcribed language was the speaking practice of the new TOEFL, similar to the form of conversation and content retelling, and the content includes campus life and general lectures. Due to the weak initial foundation of the studied case, the practice method was timed but not limited to complete content. The candidate's speaking practice was tracked for two months, and all the recordings were kept and converted into text, with more than 60 recordings total. Next, all the recordings were listened to twice, each syntactic error was recorded, and the author also requested the assistance of a TOEFL speaking teacher to ensure that nothing was missed to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the error recordings. Finally, the errors were entered into Excel in order, and a total of 103 syntactic errors were collected.

Second, the learner's native language background, target language level, and learning environment are considered. The case selected for the study was a female Chinese native speaker aged twenty-two, who had not been exposed to the TOEFL two months ago when the study started. She scored 88 on the first test and 20 on the oral test. The total score and speaking level are within the average level of Chinese examinees, which has representative significance. In addition, the practice process of the examinee is based on self-study, supplemented by intensive oral guidance before the test, without the target language environment, which to some extent reflects the current English teaching situation in China. The teachers and the students attache great importance to listening and reading but lacks the output of oral and writing.

Finally, this error analysis is a case study based on individual research.

2.2 The Identification of Errors

Once the data collection is complete, the error analysis step is underway. The first step in analyzing case errors is to clarify the difference between regular errors and accidental mistakes. Exclude mistakes in language use due to carelessness, fatigue, or other aspects, and focus only on errors committed by learners with incomplete knowledge, which reflect problems with the learners' underlying language competence. At the same time, a distinction is made between structural and formal errors and semantic and pragmatic errors. Among them, syntactic error is caused by differences in the superficial, visible components of the language, the order of arrangement; semantic error is caused by learners' lack of understanding of the meaning and the relationship between meanings in a sentence; pragmatic error consists of misapplication of a sentence to a real situation.

2.3 The Data Analysis of Errors

The purpose of sorting out and quantifying the observed data is to present the distribution characteristics of errors in a more intuitive way and to evaluate the severity of errors. In this process, on the basis of careful proofreading of the transcripts, the 103 error instances collected were roughly classified from the perspective of syntax and based on the structure of Wang Ying's error classification. Then, all the errors were reviewed again, the classification types were adjusted, and the classification of each category of errors was refined. Finally, the number of errors in all categories was counted and all data were percentages. Based on the concept that the salient errors are more important and serious than the major predictive errors, the data are compared, and the salient errors and their characteristics are described in detail. The distribution of errors is presented in a more intuitive way with tables and graphs, which becomes the basis for the interpretation and evaluation of error characteristics and individual phenomena.

3 THE PRESENTATION OF DATA

3.1 The Classification of Errors

The classification criteria of the errors were based on Wang Ying's six divisions: 1) tense errors, 2) agreement errors, 3) omission errors, 4) superposition errors, 5) sequence errors, and 6) over-formed generalization of "be". In error analysis, appropriate deletions and expansions were also made. Finally, the learners' oral syntactic errors, in this case, were classified into five types: tense, consistency, component missing, the redundant composition and mismatch. The following table and figure show the proportions of subtypes of oral syntactical errors:

Table 1. Oral Syntactical Errors [self-designed]

Error Type	Error Distribution	Ratio of the Total Errors
Tense	20	19.4%
Consistency	44	**42.7%**
Component Missing	17	16.7%
Composition of Redundant	7	6.8%
Mismatch	15	14.6%
Total	103	100%
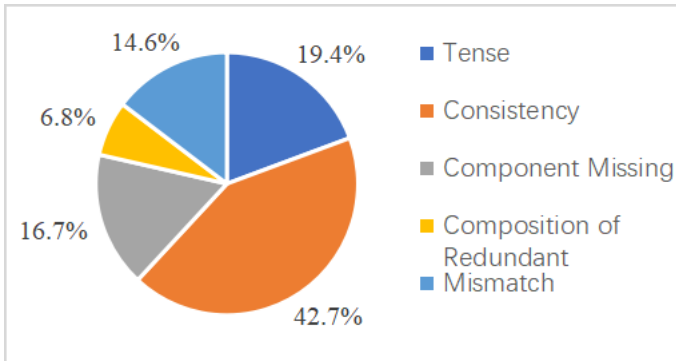
Fig. 1. Ratio of the Total Errors [self-designed]

As shown in the table and figure above, consistency errors accounted for nearly half of the syntactic errors, showing a cliff-like dominance, double that of Tense errors, which accounted for the second-highest percentage of 19.4%. The one with the minimum proportion is the Composition of redundant, which is only 6.8%.

In the following, the data, representative features, and subordinate classifications will be analyzed for all error types, and the causes of errors will be speculated in the next section.

3.1.1. The Tense.

Table 2. Typical Examples of Tense Errors [self-designed]

False	True
the last time … it **takes** a long time	the last time … it **took** a long time
which **is** very important	which **was** very important
Tom and I **have**	Tom and I **had**
Total (19.4%)	

Due to the limited nature of the materials taken, the tenses of the spoken data were limited to the general past tense, general present tense and general future tense, and the past tense was predominant. The learner's errors in tense were also observed that they were mainly focused on the past tense of verbs, which tended to replace the general past tense with the general present tense. Even though the observed learners were

constantly reminded of the tense importance, a large proportion of the utterances still omitted the transformation of the past tense. However, in the context of the general present tense, there is no such case of replacing the general present tense with the general past tense that arises.

3.1.2. The Consistency.

Table 3. Typical Examples of Consistency Errors [self-designed]

Type		False	True	Quantity	Ratio	
Verb	Subject-Predicate Consistency	Classes **is** over.	Classes **are** over.	11	25.0%	**43.2%**
	Variant	I should **starting** a program.	I should **start** a program.	7	15.9%	
	Conjunction	spend…in **de-parting** the old buildings and **construct** the new ones.	spend…in **tear-ing down** the old buildings and **constructing** the new ones.	1	2.3%	
Nouns & Pronouns		a **students**	a **student**	18	40.9%	
Article		**a** actor	**an** actor	2	4.5%	
Sentences Combining		**It** will **take** them a lot **in main-taining**.	1)**It** will **take** them a lot **to maintain**. 2)**They** will **spend** a lot **in maintaining**.	4	9.0%	
Total (42.7%)				44	100%	

Consistency errors account for the most significant proportion of all error types. In the usual sense, it refers to the third person singular changes of verbs and the agreement of pronouns with nouns in sex, number, and person. In this article, it can be extended into four major error types, which are verb, noun, pronoun, article, and sentences combining. Among them, the predominance of verb agreement errors is the most prominent, with 43.2%. Although the noun and pronoun agreement errors ranked second, the percentage was not much different from the first, with 40.9%. The consistency errors of verbs can be divided into subject-predicate consistency, variant, and conjunction, among which subject-predicate consistency accounts for the most. The consistency errors of verbs can be divided into subject-predicate consistency, variant, and conjunction.

In addition, among all the errors in this category, sentence combining needs a special explanation, which is inspired by the analysis of modern Chinese speech disorders. It means that when two sentences can express the same meaning and are distributed quite frequently and similarly in the learners' daily use, they tend to mix them up [9]. As the table shows, this learner mixes "it takes sb sth to do" with. This learner mixes "it takes sb sth to do" with "sb spend sth in doing/on sth" and creates a sentence like "It will take them a lot in maintaining.

3.1.3. The Component Missing.

Table 4. Typical Examples of Missing Composition [self-designed]

Type			False	True	Quantity	Ratio		
Sentence Trunk	Verb		when the phone call **coming**	when the phone call **comes**	5	29.4%		88.2%
	Object		**the light-ing** is as good as the li-brary	**the light-ing** is as good as **the li-brary ones**	1	5.9%		
	Be	Linking Verb	people will **nervous**	people will **be nervous**	4	23.5%	52.9%	
		Auxiliary	There is a kind of insect **called** moth and they eat ragwort.	There is a kind of insect is **called** moth and they eat ragwort.	5	29.4%		
Function Word	Preposition		**plenty** extra time	**plenty of** extra time	1	5.9%		11.8%
	Article		take **taxi**	take **a taxi**	1	5.9%		
Total (16.7%)					17	100%		

Component missing is what we often call "omission," and missing subjects are an essential part of it. However, during the two months of observation, in this case, the missing subject did not occur due to personal tendencies. The component missing errors category is divided into two primary types: the missing sentence trunk and the missing function word. Second, as shown in the table above, these two are divided into five sub-categories - the missing verb, object, the lack of "be," preposition, and article. Then, the statistics show that this error type is mainly the missing verb and auxiliary verb "be" in the sub-category, each accounting for 29.4%. Finally, it is worth noting that the omission of the tense verb and the auxiliary verb "be" are similar and can easily be confused into one category. These two superficially similar errors should be classified into two different categories. The absence of the auxiliary verb "be" has its peculiarities, which are related to the differences in the expression of the Chinese and English passives, and will be fully explained in the following chapters.

3.1.4. The Redundant Composition.

Table 5. Typical Examples of Redundant Composition [self-designed]

Type	False	True	Quantity	Ratio
Verb	if there is no friend **provide** you a free ride,you can't go to the airport	if there is no friend **providing** you a free ride,you can't go to the airport	6	**85.7%**
Conjunction	the **reason** why the construction took so long **is because**	the **reason** why the construction took so long **was**	1	14.3%
Total (6.8%)			7	100%

Composition of redundant accounts for the lowest proportion of the total sample, but it should not be underestimated. The author divides them into two categories, one is verb redundant, and the other is conjunctive redundant. Among them, the number of errors of verb redundant has the absolute advantage, accounting for 85.7%. In addition, the verb redundancy is related to the verb missing mentioned above: first, the same essence of the two is the deviation of the use of predicate verbs; second, the analytes tend to use non-predicative verbs in the form of "doing" rather than "to do " or present and past participles.

3.1.5. The Mismatch.

Table 6. Typical Examples of Mismatch [self-designed]

Type	False	True	Quantity	Ratio
Notional Word	spend…in **departing** the old buildings and **construct** the new ones.	spend…in **tearing down** the old buildings and **constructing** the new ones.	3	20%
Preposition	**add** extra attention **for** professors	**add** extra attention **to** professors	6	**40%**
The Nature of Words	reading is **relax**	reading is a **relaxing** activity	6	**40%**
Total (14.6%)			15	100%

For the type of mismatch, it is divided into three categories: mismatch of notional words, mismatch of prepositions with verbs and nouns and mismatch due to the nature of words. Among them, the latter two have the absolute advantage. In addition, the main characteristics of this type of error are: first, the observed person is not clear about the fixed collocation of English, and a tiny preposition can make the meaning very different; second, once the learner has mastered the correct usage, the frequency of this type of error will be significantly reduced.

4   THE ANALYSIS OF ERRORS

4.1   The Explanation of Errors

In error interpretation, the source of errors is often the focus of attention, and different scholars have different views on this. Contrastive analysis theory suggests that errors originate from the learner's native language interference. The author believes that this analysis is too one-sided. According to Liu Xun's view, the sources of errors should be divided into five aspects: 1) negative transfer of native language; 2) negative transfer of target language; 3) negative transfer of cultural factors; 4) learning strategies and communicative strategies; 5) influence of learning environment [1].

From the data above, we can conclude that consistency errors are the most serious in this case, followed by tenses, missing components, collocation errors, and redundancy of components in that order. It is noteworthy that, despite its small share in the total number of errors, the verb redundancy in the component redundancy dominates its superordinate classification by a considerable margin, occupying 80% of its domain, far more than its peer classification.

The disappearance of order errors and missing subjects in the process of second language acquisition in the collected data is also noticed. The reason for this point is, on the one hand, because of the incomplete data collection and the task's limitations. On the other hand, it is because of the psychological reasons of the case individuals. They will be thoroughly described in detail In this section. In addition, special attention needs to be paid to the fact that the occurrence of error is often the result of confounding of multiple factors.

4.1.1. The Negative Transfer of Native Language.

Negative native language transfer is the main focus of comparative analysis, divided into six levels from zero to five, in Practor's "Difficulty Level Model."

Level 0: the same components in both languages.

Level 1: two separate items in the native language, combined into one item in the target language.

Level 2: a linguistic item in the native language and not in the target language.

Level 3: a linguistic item in the native language that has a corresponding item in the target language and differs in its use.

Level 4: a language item in the native language that does not have a corresponding item in the target language.

Level 5: a language item in the native language divided into two or more items in the target language [1].

It is known that the subjects' native language is the isolated language, Chinese and the target language is the flexural language English. The lack of word-formation variation characterizes the former, and all words consist almost of root morphemes. The latter is characterized by a structural relationship between words that relies mainly on morphological changes. Therefore, the consistency error, which accounts for the most significant number of errors, is classified as level 4 of the difficulty scale, which is more difficult to master for people with the same native language as in this case and

often results in the same errors. The same can be said for the passive component of the fragment mentioned in the statistics. Although there is a passive sentence pattern of a preposition followed by an object in Chinese, unlike in English, the preposition can be omitted while the auxiliary verb "be" cannot. Therefore, passive sentences belong to the third level of the "difficulty scale," and their importance in language acquisition cannot be ignored.

4.1.2. The Negative Transfer of Target Language.

Negative transfer of the target language, i.e., overgeneralization, can be used to explain verb redundancy. Typical examples of this category are:

1) It is save time.(√ It saves time.)

2) which was kind of destroyed her career (√ which kind of destroyed her career)

3) were lack of (√ lacked of)

The example here is the redundancy of the tense verb and the auxiliary verb "to be," which, in the author's opinion, is due to the overgeneralization of the "it is" clause, some subordinate clause, and the passive. When "it" or "which" appeared, the subjects tended to use the tense verb "be"; when "lack When verbs such as "lack" were used (also an overkill), they tended to use the passive rather than the subject-verb relationship. And none of these errors can be caused by negative native language transfer but belong to the syntactic rules of English.

4.1.3. The Learning Strategies and Communication Strategies.

Learning strategies include the negative transfer of the native language, the target language, and simplification. The first two have been mentioned above, while simplification refers to learners deliberately reducing what they consider redundant components or dividing a complex part into several simple components resulting in errors. For example, "the lighting is as good as the library (√as good as library ones)." Communicative strategies include avoidance and word building. Avoidance refers to avoiding the use of a phonological, lexical, or syntactic pattern when the learner is unsure of it, such as an unrecorded inflection error in the data. In this case, the participant avoided using inverted and interrogative sentences and wanted to say, "Only in taking a taxi can he go to the airport. order to go to the airport, his only choice is to take (√take) a taxi". Word formation refers to creating words that do not exist in the target language, or the form does not match the semantic meaning of the word [10]. For example, in "spend...in departing (√tearing down) the old buildings", learners used the word "de-," meaning "away from" as "separating." The word's actual meaning is "leave" rather than "destroy or remove something."

4.1.4. The Negative Transfer of Cultural Factors and the Influence of Learning Environment.

Negative cultural transfer refers to the error caused by not understanding the target language's culture, such as the first name and the last name being reversed. The influence of the learning environment is an external factor, mainly referring to the incorrect demonstration of the teacher, the improper arrangement of the teaching materials,

and the deviation of the classroom training. Neither above is reflected in the data collected in this case study.

4.2   The Evaluation of Errors

The evaluation of errors plays a crucial role in their correction and profoundly affects learners' language development. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a correct understanding of errors. We should not view errors in an entirely negative way and mechanically correct each one, nor should we be too optimistic that errors will disappear of their own accord and that all errors do not need to be corrected. The usual approach is to start with the nature of the error, see whether it affects communication, and take different ways of correcting it according to the occasion in which it occurs.

In this case, according to the percentage comparison of the five error categories and the chart, the consistency problem is particularly serious, up to 42.7%. Such errors do not affect communication in daily life, and native English speakers can eliminate a considerable amount of interference. However, this kind of mistake may cause serious mark loss in standardized tests such as TOEFL. Learners participating in the test, contrary to the general communicator, pursue perfect presentation of language ability rather than successful communication. Therefore, without interrupting the test or practice, all TOEFL speaking syntactic errors should be corrected immediately. On this basis, returning to the communicative nature of language, the fluency and effectiveness of expression, along with the content and the logic of the theme should also be paid attention to. On the test, if the errors seriously affect the fluency of the language and lead to insufficient output, the requirement for syntactic accuracy should be reduced and corrected in a concise and targeted manner. On the contrary, if the errors are so much that they affect comprehension, syntax learning should be appropriately increased to avoid the rigidity of the errors.

5   CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the application in the field of syntactic error analysis of spoken language and will be illustrated from the following perspectives:

1) From the research point of view, the spoken language has an irreplaceable research significance in second language acquisition because sound is the most effective way to convey information. In order to better understand the nature of spoken errors, this research adopts the method of Error analysis to study the spoken errors in several cases, due to the prospective and summative significance of error analysis for second language learning and teaching.

2) From the results of the study, the analysis of a standard case enriches the classification of syntactic errors in speaking; the analysis of the causes of errors by using examples enables Chinese students to gain insight into the shortcomings of their speaking practice and to have a more precise direction to work.

3) This study can provide a corresponding reference for TOEFL speaking learning and teaching. The study aims to establish a correct concept of error and treat learners'

error correctly through error analysis. To enable teachers to take the initiative in the teaching process, to understand in advance the possible errors of learners and the sources of error, and to gradually improve English learners' speaking ability.

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