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Sudden Possibilities: Porpoises, Eggcorns, and Error

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Inspired by Mina Shaunessey's open-minded approach to student error, Crovitz suggests playful ways to learn from mistakes. Many classroom activities are described.

> Give me fruitful error any time, full of seeds, bursting with its own corrections.
>
> —*Vilfredo Pareto*

My Porpoise

If you attended an American elementary school in the latter half of the 20th century, you probably remember *Highlights* magazine as a staple text. My own fourth-grade classroom had a stack of them on a corner shelf, available for browsing if we finished our work early. Even in the 1970s the magazine had an old-fashioned feel to it with its Rockwell-esque line drawings and wholesome content, but there were always enough puzzles and curious stories in a typical issue to keep my attention.

There was only one problem with *Highlights* that I could see as a nine-year-old. Like most kids I was fascinated by animals, and each copy of the magazine seemed to promise an interesting article about playing with marine life. It was right there on every front cover, in small letters directly below the magazine's title: "Fun with a Porpoise." I could imagine this article easily—probably a story about a lucky group of kids in some tropical locale who got to swim with these smiling creatures on a regular basis—but when I looked through the magazine, I could never find it.

I don't know how long this error continued, but in what must count as an early experience with epiphany I realized at some point that the subtitle of the magazine was not "Fun with a Porpoise," but

Making an error on porpoise can be educational. (© Tom Brakefield/Photos.com)

"Fun with a *Purpose.*" In retrospect, my mistake seems understandable. I remember my formal language instruction in those early years as a mixture of phonics and contextualism; when I encountered a strange word—which was fairly often, since I enjoyed reading—I'd been told by my parents and teachers to "sound it out" as an aid to comprehension, and this tactic (combined with an awareness of context) had generally served me well. Given my interests at that age and my awareness that *Highlights* contained content for a young audience, *porpoise* seemed like a logical interpretation of the word on the cover. It wasn't that I didn't know the word *purpose*—I probably did—but its more abstract nature was likely trumped by the concrete appeal of an interesting animal. Developmental learning theorists might see me thinking in a concrete operational sense, with *porpoise* having a lot more potential relevance and interest to me than a less tangible concept such as *purpose.*

I think of this childhood experience when I come across similar misinterpretations, misspellings, and mistakes in student writing. Perhaps our first reaction as English teachers is to see such blunders as evidence of how disconnected students today seem with written language. We shake our heads when we see these malapropisms in student papers, offering them up as jokes to colleagues: *taken for granted*

written as *taken for granite,* for example, or *voilá!* spelled as *walla!* Such mistakes might easily serve as sad evidence of reading habits nowadays and how careless young people seem to be with language. When William Savage mocks the written "stupidities" created by undergraduate "illiterates" in his history courses, surely most of us can understand his frustration if not appreciate his sarcasm (223–25).

Gradually, however, my thinking has changed. Perhaps if we look closely at such errors, we might instead see students grappling with meaning rather than simply being careless or stupid. Language is learned through a process of experimentation, error-making, and self-correction. Now that I'm a teacher of teachers, I wonder how we might put such common interpretive errors to an educative use. There is usually logic in how we negotiate meaning through language, even when we do so incorrectly. How can we acknowledge the thinking that might be happening in common kinds of errors while building on this awareness to help students be more self-reflective as they encounter and interpret unfamiliar words and phrases?

Error Analysis and Practice

The notion that close analysis of language errors can yield insight into how we think and learn seems fundamentally obvious. Yet until relatively recently, language errors were primarily treated as indicators of learner deficiency rather than opportunities to consider a student's individual cognitive context and so reconsider and adapt instruction.

Through close analysis of the errors made by basic writers, Mina Shaughnessy's groundbreaking *Errors and Expectations,* first published in 1977, explores the need for teachers to consider the "whys" behind apparent mistakes. Shaughnessy argues that the aspects of basic writing that most frustrate teachers—seemingly sloppy surface errors—often carry unseen educative potential:

> [Basic writers] write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal . . . but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. . . . [T]he inexperienced teacher is almost certain to see nothing but a chaos of errors when he first encounters their papers. Yet a closer look will reveal very little that is random or "illogical" in what they have written. And the

keys to their development as writers often lie hidden in the very features of their writing that English teachers have been trained to brush aside with a marginal code letter or a scribbled injunction to "Proofread!" (5)

A punitive emphasis on correctness, Shaughnessy argues, can actually have the opposite of its intended effect on basic writers, stifling their experiments with language for fear of failure (8). A reflection on the rationale of error-making must extend beyond a student's apparent inability to memorize and apply a rule, toward deeper considerations: "a teacher who would work with [basic writers] might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes in order to determine at what point or points along the developmental path error should or can become a subject for instruction" (13).

A pragmatist, Shaughnessy is ultimately concerned with students' ability to succeed given dominant language expectations. Teachers must be aware of the complexity and sophistication that underlie a writer's development while resisting behaviorist notions of rote learning that assign negative implications to error-making, all while considering the real-world impact of errors on particular audiences. Her work is seen by many as fundamental in the shift to a more developmentally informed view of how students learn language and is echoed in the efforts of scholars such as Rei Noguchi and Constance Weaver, who have argued for judicious writing-embedded grammar instruction "that begins with what students know and proceed[s] to what they need to know" (Kenkel and Yates 36). Conventional notions of grammatical errors and how to correct them, however, are difficult to dislodge.

How is error analysis typically dealt with in an English classroom? We might consider one common example: Daily Oral Language (DOL) activities—or the similar Daily Grammar Practice (DGP)—in which, as a class, students examine a sample sentence written on the board (or projected onto an overhead or interactive whiteboard screen) to locate and correct multiple errors (see fig. 1).

Typically, teachers ask students to write down the sentence and make necessary corrections before

FIGURE 1. Typical Daily Oral Language Sentence

yesterday i laid down in the hammock and read tom sawyer a novel by mark twain

calling on individual students for recommended changes. Many teachers begin every lesson with a DOL exercise, and in some classrooms students see the same sentence all week, addressing specific problems (punctuation, agreement, capitalization, etc.) each day.

With the pressures of standardized exams that may still test knowledge of grammar rules in isolation, the argument for this kind of regular grammar practice is understandable. Such exercises can perhaps teach students to recognize, identify, and correct common grammatical and usage errors (at least when they are presented within an isolated error-riddled sentence). DOL and DGP activities are also popular with teachers for a purely practical reason: they chew up 10–15 minutes at the beginning of each class, and thus make for easier lesson planning. To the extent that students are asked to *think critically* about typical sentence-level errors, however, the DOL approach is questionable at best, and I've never heard much argument that such exercises generate any sustained student interest or curiosity in how language and words actually work.

As usually employed, DOL exercises do not emerge from a student's own writing; many teachers use prepackaged classroom guides that provide lists of hundreds of such sentences. Since students see only one detached and random sentence at a time, the errors within exist in a vacuum, which is to say that they are contextually generic as opposed to specific to any individual's real language use. As Weaver, Noguchi, and a host of other grammar researchers have shown, isolated exercises of this sort do not translate into more grammatically correct student writing. Weaver's summary of the research mentions that student writing may actually *worsen* with such an approach since isolated grammar activities take up instructional time that might be better used (10).

DOL exercises also use a traditional grammar instruction tactic: sample sentences are chosen for how clearly they violate a limited set of grammatical rules. Sentences that expose the complexities of—or exceptions to—rules (and they are legion) are simply ignored. This is an instructional stance that presumes simple definition repetition as the key to better grammar. Patrick Hartwell has pointed out the solipsism of such methods, since the rules themselves are clear only if one already understands them;

grammatical fluency emerges not from rule recall but through contextual practice (438). DOL activities are also unlikely to deal with how meaning is construed within varying contexts and for different audiences.

Essentially, DOL-type exercises ask students to apply knowledge of standard grammar rules in an arbitrary, context-free situation using safe, cherry-picked samples containing rule-specific mistakes. Rarely does discussion dwell on *why* writers make errors, just that they do and that they need to be fixed (the behaviorist presumption being that they simply haven't bothered to learn the rules well enough, perhaps by not completing enough DOL exercises). There is little exploration of the audience effects of grammatical inappropriateness, much less Shaughnessy's call for "a readiness to look at [errors] in a way that does not ignore linguistic sophistication" (13). Put simply, Daily Oral Language–type activities present a narrow and simplistic view of language use and appropriateness, reducing error analysis to a formulaic, convenient, and exam-justifiable routine.

Meanwhile, the age-old negative feedback loop of student error-making remains. Most students suffer through these daily rituals without noticeable improvement in their actual language use, and teachers continue to do what they've always done regarding student mistakes—mark them in papers, deduct points, and wonder why these kids just don't ever seem to get it.

Eggcorns: One Example of Thinking Differently about Errors

What follows is not a formal set of explicit recommendations for what teachers should be doing with class time already crammed with curricular requirements, departmental demands, test preparation, and other mandates. It's one thing to say that if teachers are going to spend ten minutes of every class period discussing language errors, there are probably better, more engaging, and more cognitively compelling ways of doing so than disconnected DOL-type exercises (see the sidebar for a list of possibilities). It can be a challenge to deviate from the expectations of a department or district by developing alternative activities that privilege thinking, creativity, and constructive language use rather than just coverage and rule repetition.

Consider the kind of errors of interpretation that begin this essay, in which students substitute their own conceptions of words and phrases they've heard, as in *granite* for *granted.* This kind of error is a favorite whipping boy of educational naysayers, and yet, as Mark Peters points out in "Like a Bowl in a China Shop," such errors of interpretation open up possibilities for discussing with students the mechanics of sense-making. Known as *eggcorns* (a mishearing of *acorns*), these mistakes are usually the result of a quasi-logical deduction; they make an intuitive sense, as Peters points out. A student hears the word *acorn* but, unfamiliar with the word's written form, makes a speculative grasp at meaning based on phonetics and pragmatics. *Eggcorn* may strike us as initially ridiculous. But if we realize that acorns are in their nature as seeds analogous to *eggs,* and that *corn* can refer to both the plant and the seed-like kernel, we can start to unravel the folkloric reasoning behind the word's inception.

Similarly, what logic might be present in a phrase like *taken for granite*? Again we have a student's guess at meaning based on a common pronunciation of *granted* which softens the "t" sound ("grannet"). Since granite is a very hard rock, virtually immovable, we might imagine that a belief that is *taken for granite* is one which is solidly unquestionable and fundamental . . . or at least, a belief that is treated as such, which is not too far from the actual meaning of the original phrase. In the sense that *taken for granted* requires a more conceptual and abstract understanding of vocabulary, the concrete appeal of *granite* is likely more understandable to many students, similar to my own *porpoise/purpose* misreading.

What if instead of a usual DOL activity, teachers asked students to consider a typical eggcorn—or similar language oddity—and the behind-the-scenes rationale for its existence? "If students become eggcorn hunters," Peters argues, "they would have to pay attention to not only what's being said but how it is articulated. They would have to question expressions that may seem perfectly acceptable and consult the dictionary to see whether 'throws of passion' or 'throes of passion' is correct."

As a way to think about constructive uses for eggcorns, I asked my students—all of whom were preservice English teachers—to examine typical eggcorns for the reasoning that might lie beneath. I gave each group a list to analyze, evaluate, and discuss (a list of eggcorns is available online at http://eggcorns .lascribe.net/browse-eggcorns/ and on Wikipedia). I asked students to work in pairs to formulate a rationale for why someone might logically arrive at these misinterpretations, and we then examined each as a class. A list of terms appears in Figure 2, along with the consensus we reached as a class about the probable thinking process behind each.

The basic idea underpinning the kind of eggcorn analysis in Figure 2—that errors are not always random, that we might be able to understand why they happen, and that this knowledge might somehow give us a broader picture of language miscues without the threat of punishment—can be extended to other common arenas. Word-processing programs have made computer-generated student writing commonplace over the last two decades while also creating a peculiarly modern form of linguistic mistake: the spellcheck-sanctioned error. Thus a student essay might focus on an argument's *clams* (claims), refer to a politician's *manor* (manner) of speech, and *defiantly* (definitely) agree with a text's main idea. As these errors are machine-supplied substitutes for misspellings, many of them may not reveal much in the way of logic—the program simply scans a document against an internal database and offers possible corrections—although they do open space to discuss connotation and association. With the *manor* error above, we might imagine a filibustering senator creating an elaborate mansion of words full of rooms made ornate by metaphor, or ask how we might expect one *from the manor born* to speak. In doing so, we can envision a lesson that differentiates homonyms while building on the sudden opportunities the error has revealed. Similarly, the new meaning created by a writer inadvertently ending up *defiantly* agreeing might lead into a brief discussion about tone, voice, and audience. In this case it's a mistake, but what contexts might call for such a bold adverb? When would it be appropriate to take such a linguistic stand, Nathan Hale style?

Obviously not all spellchecking errors lend themselves to rich exploration; there may not be much informing, accidentally or otherwise, a student's use of *form* throughout an essay when *from* is the intended word. But such errors still carry potential for practical minilessons dealing with critical evaluation. A spellchecking program, after all, is little more than a software algorithm designed to apply a given set of rules to writing regardless of

FIGURE 2. Eggcorn Analysis

CORRECT WORD OR PHRASE	EGGCORN	ERROR EXPLANATION
Alzheimer's disease	"old timers disease"	An illness often associated with the elderly; "Alzheimer" might not be recognized as a proper noun; it is also not a common name and so it's more susceptible to mishearing and misinterpretation
prima donna	"pre-Madonna"	"Prima donna" is Italian and was initially used in a field unfamiliar to most young people (opera); Madonna is a pop icon viewed as a role model for girls aspiring to fame; those affecting such a pose (wannabe glamorous) might be labeled "pre-Madonnas," as might young female pop singers
a long row to hoe	"a long road to haul"	Farming activity ("Hoeing rows") is less familiar to some modern audiences; a trucking metaphor may be more common and carry a similar meaning
A dog-eat-dog world	"a doggie dog world"	The phrase "dog-eat-dog" may have fallen out of usage; rapper Snoop Dogg's fame gives the eggcorn a new kind of meaning, perhaps related to a tough pose
toe the line	"tow the line"	"Toe the line" is a specific military reference that uses a verb more commonly employed as a noun; the eggcorn uses a more familiar verb that connotes laborious effort instead of discipline
shudder at the thought	"shutter at the thought"	The "dd" and "tt" sounds are the same; shutters are common house components and more familiar than the verb "shudder"; shutters can be closed when danger approaches, or may flap wildly in a storm; maybe the eggcorn means something like "shut down at the thought"
bled like a stuck pig	"bled like a stuffed pig"	This definition of "stuck" (stabbed with a knife) may be unfamiliar to non-farm-familiar students; "stuffed" is familiar as a descriptor of feeling full, or of Thanksgiving turkeys
pastime	"past time"	Unfamiliarity with the word "pastime"; idea of nostalgia associated with certain activities (fishing, baseball, etc.) that originated long ago
baking powder	"bacon powder"	The idea of a powder to help baked items rise may be unfamiliar; baking is more familiar as a verb/gerund than an adjective; "bacon powder" might be logically imagined as a bouillon-type additive; may reflect less awareness of traditionally domestic tasks
patent leather	"Patton leather"	"Patent" may be unfamiliar as an adjective; students may have heard of General George Patton and so associate the term with military gear; similar to the eggcorn "chester drawers" for chest of drawers
laptop	"labtop"	The portable computer as defined more by what it can do—i.e., its techno-scientific mini-laboratory character—than where it sits. As portability becomes standard it becomes less remarkable in the name
obscenity	"upsinity"	Obscene behavior might be interpreted as "sin rising up" (i.e., "up-sin-ity") in a person
for all intents and purposes	"for all intensive purposes"	The "and" is not fully articulated; "intensive" is a common adjective (e.g., intensive care); may be interpreted as "for all the important reasons"; similar to students mishearing "have" as "of" ("I would of come but I was grounded."), a mistake exacerbated by the common pronunciation of contractions such as "would've," "could've," and "should've"
per se	"per say"	The Latin of "per se" is unfamiliar, yet "per" is fairly common (miles per hour/gallon); might be interpreted as meaning what is literally "said" is not the full meaning
poor diet stunts growth	"poor diet stuns growth"	"Stunt" is more familiar as a noun; "stun" is a more common verb and makes sense as a partly paralyzing effect
a long spiel about rules	"a long spill about rules"	"Spill" is much more familiar than "spiel"; someone making a spiel might be figuratively "spilling out" many words

context (the same goes for grammar-checking programs). This makes them quite useful, but only to the extent that the user recognizes their arbitrary nature and corresponding limits. A computer does not know what word a writer intends; it can only make a suggestion based on its programming.

In these respects, such programs are quite similar to conventional grammar and spelling rules. Established conventions will be appropriate for many writing contexts, but at times alternative grammar and spelling may be just as appropriate, if not necessary. We want our students to be able to move beyond blind obedience to rules and an unquestioning use of tools toward a more critical and evaluative stance. Even when confronted by recommended changes from authorities (in this case in the form of a computer program), writers must ultimately make their own context-aware choices about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Patricia J. McAlexander's article "Checking the Grammar Checker: Integrating Grammar Instruction with Writing"—which details a project leading students to consider both the benefits and drawbacks of a spell-checking program—argues that this kind of awareness can be developed through constructed classroom experiences. In a recent *English Journal* article, Reva Potter and Dorothy Fuller report that engaging high school students in discussions about grammar checkers may increase their confidence and understanding of grammar. Our discussions with students might ask them to extrapolate on this theme. Does a given set of rules apply in all circumstances? How do we know when it is appropriate to ignore a rule or a set of rules? Would we place our complete trust in a machine or a robot just because it's been programmed with the "correct" rules? These questions evoke larger issues of authority, obedience, morality, individuality, and the role of thinking people within systems. Crossover points for classic and contemporary texts are numerous: surely science fiction and Hollywood have suggested some of the problems involved in placing too much faith in technology.

Turning the Lens Inward: Pronunciation

Aside from adjusting our perspective about these kinds of errors and considering the practical possibilities with students, we might benefit from reflecting on our own frailties with language. Most English teachers I've known have found their way into the field through their love of reading and the written word. Where their students struggle with spelling, grammar, and making sense of unfamiliar words or phrases they've heard, it's my experience that avid readers have their own analogous weakness: attempting to successfully pronounce words they've only ever encountered in print. I suspect that all bookworms have a secret list of words whose definitions they understand but that present persistent problems rolling off the tongue, if we dare utter them at all.

For me, one of these troublesome words is *cumulative.* This is obviously not some esoteric or specialized term, yet I have to consciously force myself to pronounce this word with the correct stress on the first syllable. Unfortunately for me, it more often emerges as "ka-MYOOL-a-tiv," which has earned me my share of strange looks from colleagues. English teachers are naturally sensitive to such a faux pas (itself a term that most of us have stumbled over at some point, I'd bet). We're supposed to be the experts, after all, and yet all of us have been—and will be—exposed as human by our own tongue. Like eggcorns, many such pronunciation errors likely arise from logical-but-incorrect conclusions that have become stubbornly lodged in our minds despite our knowing better.

A closer look at my *cumulative* issues might reveal an interesting pattern. First, I've noticed a similar mistake in how I want to pronounce the word *sedentary* (that is, "se-DENT-a-ree" instead of the correct "SED-n-ter-ee"), and this gives me a clue as to common origins. I likely learned the meaning of both words during my early teen years, not through conversation but through encountering them in the books I read. By the time I tried out these words in my own speech, however, I'd probably over-generalized a mispronunciation from the structure of similar words. *Inquisitive, alternative, definitive, conservative*—all are similar in form to *cumulative,* but with the stress on the second syllable (and I was certainly familiar with the verb *accumulate,* which is similarly stressed). Meanwhile, other four-syllable words were creeping into my vocabulary, probably from fantasy and sci-fi novels—*leviathan, gargantuan, tyrannical.* In graduate school, my misspeaking of *cumulative* even jumped like a virus to a strange new word with an identical second syllable, *simulacrum* (which I proceeded to pronounce painfully as "sigh-MYOOL-a-crumb"). Regarding *sedentary,* I suspect

1. **Construct a more interesting (i.e., more complex) sentence from a basic sentence.**
   Rather than an error-riddled example, students get a simple correct sentence and work to make it more detailed and engaging. (See Harry Noden's *Image Grammar,* Boynton/Cook, 1999.)

   Simple sentence: *Ryan looked at the dog.*

   Interesting sentence: *Ryan stared at the growling Rottweiler—its scarred jaws flecked with foam, its coat streaked with mud—and slowly, his eyes never leaving the animal, he eased himself backward as sweat began to prickle his skin.*

2. **Discuss contextual differences between similar statements with different registers.**
   Students articulate situations that might appropriately call for either sentence.

   Sentence A: *I am going to buy one of those boats.*

   Sentence B: *I'ma get me one of them boats.*

3. **Transform a sentence to make it appropriate to other contexts.**
   Students recast sentences according to specific contexts that they then must explain.

   Starter sentence: *You're fired.*

   Possible transformations:
   a. *We regret to inform you that your professional services are no longer required.*
   b. *Sorry, Bob, but with the poor economy we have to let you go.*
   c. *Get out now and don't come back!*
   d. *I'm breaking up with you.*

4. **Discuss a sentence that is technically correct but practically inappropriate.**
   Students consider "appropriateness" as a more useful criterion than "correctness."

   Teenager, invited to a party, knocks on the front door. A voice from inside calls out, "Who is it?" Teen replies, "It is I."

5. **Practice sentence combining.**
   Research suggests that sentence combining activities may help students develop more sophisticated structures in their writing. (See William Strong's *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book,* McGraw, 1994.)

   Stem sentences:
   a. The lawyer was in the courtroom.
   b. The lawyer turned.
   c. The turning movement was sudden.
   d. The lawyer pointed at the defendant.
   e. The lawyer shouted while pointing.
   f. The lawyer shouted that "this man is a murderer!"

   Possible sentence combination (among many):

   The lawyer turned suddenly in the courtroom, pointed at the defendant, and shouted, "This man is a murderer!"

6. **Conduct a sentence dictation activity.**
   Slowly read a sentence written by a published writer to students (preferably one with interesting punctuation choices). Students write down what they hear and attempt to punctuate the sentence as appropriately as possible. Follow-up discussion examines student choices, emphasizing the effect of different options. Possible mistakes—in both student and professional examples—are considered for their rhetorical impact.

   Example: *Wry and cranky, droll and cantankerous— that's the Mark Twain we think we know, thanks to reading "Huck Finn" and "Tom Sawyer" in high school.* (Rhoter)

7. **Examine and imitate the text from a product package or commercial website.**
   Many packages and commercial websites feature narrative, exposition, rhetorical flourishes, and creative sentence structure worth analyzing and imitating.

   Example (from a Lindor Truffles package): *Inspired by our secret recipe, our Master Chocolatiers have created a chocolate masterpiece: Lindor Truffles. This delicious Lindt Chocolate Shell enrobes an irresistibly smooth filling. Once you break its shell, the filling will start to melt, and so will you.*

8. **Examine a corporate slogan or brand that uses grammar/spelling in an interesting way.**
   Ask students to adopt the role of marketing analysts to explain or justify the use of "incorrect" grammar, spelling, and punctuation in advertising and branding.

   Examples: "We Do Chicken Right" (KFC), "Think Different" (Apple), Krispee Kreme Doughnuts

9. **Examine "folk etymologies," regional neologisms, and "backronyms," and perhaps create their own.**
   - Folk etymologies are seemingly logical but incorrect explanations (of which eggcorns are an example) that shift the origin and spelling of words or phrases: Asparagus becomes "sparrow grass," history ("his-story") yields the intentional "herstory" as a response.
   - Regional neologisms originate from local idiom: a *windalight* is a window that admits sunlight, a *mashtogo* is a standard-transmission car, and so on.
   - Backronyms are invented phrases to turn a word into an acronym, sometimes for humorous purposes: FORD (First On Race Days, *or* Fix Or Repair Daily), WIKI (What I Know Is), NAVY (Never Again Volunteer Yourself), etc.

10. **Examine real examples of passive voice for their audience impact, and consider other examples of how language can be used to obscure as well as to clarify.**
    Writers and speakers use passive voice and similar structures for genre-specific reasons (emphasizing events over identity) and for rhetorical purposes (such as avoiding fault, blame, or suspicion).

    Examples: Newspaper reports ("Two men were killed today in an apparent robbery"); Ronald Reagan on the Iran/Contra scandal ("Mistakes were made"); singer Chris Brown's carefully worded public statement following his arrest for assault ("Words cannot begin to express how sorry and sad I am for what transpired")

my mispronunciation was also reinforced from the stressed syllable in the earth science term *sedimentary* (and given how such rocks are formed, there was likely an eggcorn, or at least a malapropism, waiting to happen here as well). There are understandable reasons behind my goofy mistakes in stressed syllables, reasons that when brought out into daylight have the positive effect of demystifying how language learning (and mis-learning) sometimes happens. Frankly, I'm far less interested in learning the rule for stresses in four-syllable words with certain suffixes—is the solution really a DOL exercise addressing such a topic?—than I am in the way that individuals make logical and systematic language conclusions based on their unique experiences.

Language and Class

On a related note, Lisa Delpit has written about the powerful dynamics of race and class that often lurk beneath pronunciation, focusing in particular on how dominant Anglo norms of speech act within a self-reinforcing system to place certain students at fundamental disadvantages (24–26). A similar gate-keeping function likely underlies the use of certain words and phrases borrowed from other languages that sometimes operate as class-signifying emblems. It is one thing to know what *bon mot, deus ex machina,* and *sine qua non* mean, and quite another to demonstrate a verbal fluency with these and similar terms. How many of us—especially those of us without a classical education in French and Latin—are entirely comfortable uttering such terms, at least the first few times? The ability to correctly voice such language options has served historically to indicate a level of education available to a privileged few while not accidentally acting as a sifting mechanism to identify bourgeois and lower-class

"pretenders" (perhaps most familiarly depicted in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* and its Broadway and film adaptation, *My Fair Lady*).

The relatively rare and fleeting discomfort I might experience in feeling uncultured or ignorant in my failure to accurately pronounce *l'enfant terrible* or *hegemony* or *oeuvre* or *Goethe* might offer a taste of what many students feel regularly as they struggle with everyday written language. When students write *very close veins* instead of *varicose veins* or *amplitheatre* instead of *amphitheatre,* a little transparency with our own language errors might go a long way in helping them grapple with their own. 🔠

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Choosing the Best Verb: An Active and Passive Voice Minilesson" explores verb choice in a variety of online resources and then encourages students to draw conclusions about verb use. Students then explore the pieces they are writing, check for active and passive voice, and make necessary revisions. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/choosing-best-verb-active-280.html