



# MULTILINGUA BULLETIN

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## ERROR DENSITY INDEX ANALYSIS: A Language Teaching Strategy

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When I was a young instructor, I had great difficulty adjusting to the task of teaching grammar for written compositions since I was a Comparative Literature major, trained to do aesthetic analysis of literary works. The chairman of the department then, Prof. Concepcion D. Dadufalza, took us newbies under her wings and for a whole summer made us go through several references for English grammar. She also taught us to mark compositions using numbers that indicate the chapter which the students have to study in order to correct their errors. But even after marking, I had problems giving grades for COE, i.e., Content, Organization, and Expression. Often the dilemma was how to grade an essay full of heartbreaking personal experiences but also full of errors, in contrast to an essay with trite and unexciting ideas, but almost devoid of errors. A workshop presenting such essays to the entire faculty resulted in mixed grades.

Later, concentrating only on content and organization for essay exams written by my social science students, I still was bothered by the errors in language since these prevented the smooth reading of the essays. A Supreme Court judge even told me that many bar exams are rated low because of errors in grammar, and some personnel managers confessed that they tend to ignore application letters with language errors.

So the question is what strategy to use in order to enable the students to "clean up" their essays.

### Definition

An error is a form or construction in a given language variety that differs from what is most frequently used by leading professional native or near-native speakers of the language variety. Linguistically the forms are simply variants which may be dialectal or idiolectal (an individual's own variant), such as the popular *cope up with* in Philippine English, or the insistence of the use of the term *birthday celebrator* by some teachers. But from the point of view of prescribing a language variety, such as formal, written, edited English for academic and professional purposes, such variants do not fit and as such are regarded as errors.

Thus, error analysis must always take into consideration the language variety, especially its degree of formality that is being prescribed for a written output.

Given the continuing need of companies, especially multinationals, to require their new hires to undergo an English language review course, especially in grammar, indicating that the English of college graduates is not acceptable for professional purposes, it is important that college English courses integrate a corrective approach to teaching the language.

### Procedure

1. Instruct the students to write an essay answering a particular question relevant to their studies. This ensures that the students will try to come up with a meaningful personal discourse, so that your marking can concentrate on their language. It is also possible to make the students who have low proficiency in English to write their drafts in their vernacular, and when they

are satisfied that the draft is a meaningful response to the question, then they translate it to English. You get only the English version.

2. Make the students write double-space on ruled paper, preferably yellow sheet, with an ample left margin for your markings. Ultimately, the students may write using their laptops or PCs, in which case double spacing is not necessary.

3. Mark the beginning of each sentence as punctuated. For handwritten output, you can put a tally mark ( | ) on the left margin aligned with the beginning of each sentence. For Word documents, put a backslash ( \ ) before the beginning of the sentence. By marking each sentence beginning as you read, you can immediately count the number of tally marks or backslashes as soon as you reach the end of the composition, instead of having to re-read just to count the number of sentences.

End punctuation marks - period, question mark, exclamation point - clearly indicate the next word is the beginning of a sentence. A colon, semicolon, or dash may have a phrase or a complete sentence after it; mark only if what follows is a complete sentence, such as a quoted sentence but without quotation marks, or a closely related sentence.

Titles, subheadings, and long enumerated phrases may be marked separately. Quoted sentences are also marked, since the student may have inadvertently introduced errors in the process of quoting.

4. Mark each error as you encounter it, using a code for the type of error committed, such as using the first three letters, or first three consonants, of the category referred to, e.g., ADJ = adjective, AGR = agreement, SPE = spelling, CNJ = conjunction, SBJ = subject. The reason for marking the error category instead of proofreading and writing the correct form is that the latter offers elicits only a passive response from the learner. In effect, by proofreading, the teacher serves as the learner's editor. This is in line with the concept of the **teacher as coach** in that the coach does not take over the function of the player. If a basketball player has difficulty shooting three points, the coach does not take over and shoot the ball himself since he is not the one who will play; rather, he provides guidance to the player to enable the latter to successfully shoot his three points. Marking the error category challenges the student to consult his references and revise accordingly. In the course of consulting his references, he may also get to learn other details he was unaware of earlier. This is in line with the concept of **instrumented learning** and developing **learner autonomy** whereby learners use

reliable references to learn from as guided by the teacher's marks.

For handwritten outputs, underscore the error and write the code on top of the error. For Word documents, use the Review function: highlight the error, click "New Comment", and insert the code inside the balloon that appears on the right margin.

Make sure that your marks are based on reliable updated references, whether print or web-based. For problems with idioms, look up web-based dictionaries that have sample sentences to show you what the correct form of the idiom is. Further, to ensure the you learn the forms that are most frequently used in international media, use Google's Ngram Viewer to compare a suspicious phrase with what you think to be the correct phrase. At the early stage of this exercise, do not rely on your memory of English, since it is likely that you have been absorbing Philippine English forms instead of international ones.

One practical reminder: if the Filipino translation uses the particle *sa*, always check your references for the correct particle or preposition. Note the following translations:

Instruktor sa Ingles = Instructor in English

Eksperto sa Ingles = Expert in English

Awtoridad sa Ingles = Authority on English

Propesor sa Ingles = Professor of English

Nagsasaliksik sa Ingles = Researching on/into English

5. On the top margin of the composition, write in a column, the codes E: (for number of errors), S: (for number of sentences), EDI: (for Error Density Index). Count the total number of errors and put a number after code E. For a Word document, the number assigned to the last comment balloon is also the total number of comments on errors. Count the total number of sentences and put the number after code S. For handwritten outputs, this means counting the number of tally marks on the left margin. For a Word document, go to the top of the document then replace all backslashes with nothing; Word will indicate how many backslashes were replaced: this is the total number of sentences.

Compute for EDI by dividing E by S (dividing the total number of errors by the total number of sentences) and express the quotient with two decimal places. Put this number after the code EDI.

6. Return the compositions to the students with instructions to revise the composition thoroughly without limiting themselves to the items you marked. They should consult reliable references to correct their errors. They may consult their classmates especially if they have formed teams. This is in line with the concept of **team learning** which allows students to cover more

ground in a shorter period of time, and also reinforce each others' learning. After correcting all the marked errors, and possibly other errors that the teacher failed to see, they should submit the revised copy.

7. Mark the revised copy for error residues, but with full comments in which you indicate the correct form and the reason for such form. Compute and indicate the new EDI. Return the marked revised composition to the students for their final learning in this exercise. This completes one cycle. Have as many cycles within the semester as you can muster. The work may be laborious and time-consuming, especially in the early stages of your using this method, but it is certainly effective as it addresses the individual systematic errors of all students, ensuring that their written outputs will be a lot cleaner after they finish your course. This exercise may also develop their skills in **translating** from their vernacular to English and **editing**.

### Significance

The EDI informs the learner that, to get a better score (the best score being 0.00), he has to lessen the number of his errors or increase the number of his sentences. The latter strategy works only if he focuses on writing short, simple sentences he can fully control, instead of writing long compound and complex sentences that will make him have problems with conjoining, consistency of tense, required form for embedding, etc. A series of short, simple sentences meaningfully answering the question provided, but without or with few errors, is certainly a better composition.

Lessening the number of errors is a strategy he will have to apply to succeeding compositions by learning how to correct his errors in the earlier compositions. Referencing his correction enlarges his knowledge of the rules of the language, and working in teams, sharing learnings with each other will enable them to convert their time outside the classroom into genuine learning time. The greater burden for learning is imposed on the learner, and lessens the amount of information the teacher has to discuss in class. Again, as coach, the teacher explains how to correct the errors so that the learners get the correct forms for the right reason, ensuring the repetition of the correct forms and avoidance of the incorrect ones in future compositions. Also as coach, the teacher identifies the reliable print and web-based language references that the students can learn from to correct their errors. Further, as coach the teacher can show how to read international English

texts in order to learn current international English forms and rules.

The EDI may also be interpreted as a probability, in which an EDI of 0.20 means the probability of two errors for every 10 sentences, or an EDI of 0.50 means the probability of five errors in 10 sentences. The teacher, and the rest of the faculty, may then agree on what EDI number for a final composition will serve as the passing mark for a particular course. Thus, grade 11 teachers may target 0.60; grade 12 teachers may target 0.20; college teachers may then push the passing EDI closer to 0.00.

The reality is somewhat dire. From the data I have gathered from around 40 colleges and universities nationwide plus more than thirty companies, I have computed an average of 2.00 for freshmen of colleges and universities that do not have restricted admission policies, (believe it or not) an average of 1.29 for college teachers, and an average of 0.60 for new hires in multinational companies who underwent a series of tests and interviews to qualify as employees. A high average of 0.40 comes from those who have passed the foreign service exam, many of whom already have advanced degrees such as MA's and LIB's, and who have had a number of years working professionally.

Figures like these suggest that the usual training seminars and workshops conducted for faculty improvement only have an awareness effect on the participants and do not improve their language proficiency, especially their editing skills. As I argued in a paper presented at the first conference on Foreign Language Teaching in October 2017, the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are not as valuable for teaching as editing skills, simply because the teacher has to provide accurate, timely, and comprehensive feedback to the learners. Without such feedback, the learners will persist in using the forms they have picked up from their teachers and mass media, many of which are systematic errors. To put it bluntly, an error learned by a student will persist in his brain until death, unless corrected and drilled to correct such error. Age also matters in that the probability of systematic errors increases with each instance of use. This makes adult learners more difficult to train than young ones, especially English majors.

### Utility

A record of the EDIs of the learners may be made to show how the class progresses, from the original composition to the revised composition. The average of

the class for each exercise and revision may be computed, and succeeding scores and averages will indicate how the class "cleans up" its written compositions.

Confronting an odd form will challenge the teacher to research. Many theses on error analysis have residues, i.e., forms that the researchers felt to be nonstandard but could not be found in their references. One example is the phrase *consist in* which a researcher marked as a possible error since the researcher's dictionaries and idiom books carried only the form *consist of*. Though printed references have their limitations, many web-based references are now available that get updated continually. There are also researchable databases for English which are quite useful when checking for phrases. The form *consist in* is quite correct in a sentence like *Teamwork consists in trust*. In addition to references, the teacher may as well expose himself to various outputs in international media such as news magazines, digests, news channels, and documentary channels. In effect he has to do his own linguistic work, analyzing and learning from these current outputs in international media. Necessarily, he then expands his own knowledge of the language, and if he is diligent enough to take notes and compile his research notes, he may be able to produce his own teaching materials as an addendum to his school's chosen textbook.

Another example is the form *cannot help but do something* which references published in the 50's objected to as a mongrel, being a fusion of the forms *cannot but do something* and *cannot help doing something*. Current media outputs show that the mongrel has overtaken *cannot but do* and may be on its way to getting near the frequency of *cannot help doing*. A third example is the form *Are you finished?* which one reference book objected to as an incomplete passive construction, as if it came from *Are you finished by someone?* This same book suggests the use of *Have you finished?* The fact is this questioned phrase parallels *Are you done?* and *Are you through?* These and many more examples of so-called errors strongly suggest that teachers should not rely too much on their past college references. The English language is quite vigorous and new forms get born every year.

A review of the error categories will give the teacher a good sense of their frequencies; thus, he can prioritize discussing those that are more prevalent first and then move on to the next ones. This procedure should cause a marked difference between the first composition and subsequent ones. The error categories with very low

frequencies may just be targeted for individualized tutorials. The teacher may also try to do an EDI analysis of current printed English materials authorized by Filipino professionals. He will then be able to note which errors are still being propagated by the local media and can then sensitize and warn his students against using them. An example is the use of the word *routinary*, as the adjective form for *routine*. While this form existed in the English language, its last attested use was in 1911 and last appeared in the 1913 Webster's dictionary. Current dictionaries no longer list this form. Another example certainly comes from newspapers and propagated by teachers, the form *may it be*, which was popular in the 1800s but slid to near nonexistence by the 1980s, replaced by *whether it is*.

A collection of the students' and writers' errors provides the teacher with a database for producing tests, as well as expanding and refining his own knowledge of the language. Remember that a linguist studies both positive and negative data to ensure that his hypotheses explain the production of positive data without generating negative data.

### Extension

EDI analysis as detailed here, with the computation of errors over sentences, may be termed as the first cycle or Phase I. It applies to marking for basic forms and rules (errors in lexicon such as correct word use, preposition, and idiom; morphology such as errors in the formation, inflection, and derivation of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs; and syntax such as errors in sequence, agreement, case, conjoining, and embedding). The second cycle or Phase II may include rhetoric - noting errors in achieving sociolinguistic congruence (e.g., accuracy, appropriateness, directness, etc.) and language aesthetics (e.g., freshness, figures of speech, variety, etc.). These are just counted and their total may be placed in the upper corner of the composition after the code R. Further, a third cycle or Phase III may additionally cover logic, focusing on possible errors in wording assertions, forming generalizations and hypotheses, making deductions, and avoiding informal fallacies. As with rhetoric, these errors in logic may just be counted and their total listed in the upper corner of the composition after the code L. Necessarily the teacher must have already introduced the concepts of rhetoric and logic before marking for them. These two concepts form the essence of critical writing, which should be the target of collegiate English.

**MARKING FOR ERROR DENSITY INDEX**

Phase I

E: 9  
S: 11  
EDI: 0.81

A new hire at a multinational

The company's structure is made up of intricate designs on what we usually refer to as organizational charts. These series of tables converge and divide, creating a complex web that is very effective and cost-efficient. But there is always a negative counterpart to things. Complex structures such as these require a lot of expertise and, most of the time, create tremendous amount of headache for the company employees.

Comment [a1]: AGR

Comment [a2]: SPE

Comment [a3]: DET

Every time I am about to cross my head's threshold of pain I go out for a smoke. Lung break. It is during these breaks that I get to recapture my grasp of reality and align my perspective positively. I cherish all those times I go down and see all those buildings cramped at each other, lording over me. The massiveness of the entire structures thrilled me, gave me proportion, showed me my real size in the scale of things. Insignificance has its advantages – free will means nothing to a magnified world. Once I get back inside, I already have in me what I would want to get out of this work.

Comment [a4]: IDI

Comment [a5]: AGR

Comment [a6]: TEN

Comment [a7]: TEN

Comment [a8]: TEN

Comment [a9]: TEN/MOD

Feedback if marking a revised essay:

1. AGR: "series" here is singular, use "this"
2. SPE: compound adjective, "cost-efficient"
3. DET: insert "a" as required by "amount"
4. IDI: "crowding each other" or "cramped in a small space"
5. AGR: "entire" modifies a singular noun, thus "structure"
6. TEN: "thrills" since the time frame is set by "every time"
7. TEN: "gives"
8. TEN: "shows"
9. TEN/MOD: delete "would" to be consistent with the sense of "I already have in me"

**Table:** EDIs of the personnel of a multinational company

	NAME	ESSAY 1		ESSAY 2		ESSAY 3	
		Original	Revised	Original	Revised	Original	
		EDI	EDI	EDI	EDI	EDI	
1	ECP	0.38	0.10	0.44	0.00	0.18	
2	SAdG	0.92	0.08	0.70	0.10	0.43	
3	JA	0.67	0.00	1.60	0.00		
4	IB	1.09	0.18	0.09	0.00	0.67	
5	FB	0.17	0.08	0.20			
6	CC	0.86	0.14	1.00	0.50	1.00	
7	FC	0.08	0.00	0.35	0.00	0.13	
8	BC	1.14	0.29	0.75	0.25	0.35	
9	JdRG	1.00	0.30	1.00	0.67	1.00	
10	JF	0.86					
11	GF	3.78	0.44	1.17	0.17		
12	MO	2.25	1.14	0.89	0.22	1.00	
13	JR	0.78	0.00	2.00	0.75	0.51	
14	RS	1.64	0.27	0.65	0.30	0.67	
15	STdA	2.25		1.00			
16	NAT	0.43	0.29	0.27	0.00	0.35	
17	GMU	3.70	1.73	2.42	0.90	1.50	
18	JMV	0.24	0.12	0.14	0.14	0.13	
19	GCV						
20	EV	1.50	0.42	1.00	0.17	1.00	
21	RV	0.69	0.00	0.29	0.29	0.15	
	<b>AVG =</b>	<b>1.22</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>0.26</b>	<b>0.61</b>	
	<b>MAX =</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>2.42</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>1.50</b>	
	<b>MIN =</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.13</b>	
	<b>STD =</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.40</b>	
	<b>N =</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>15</b>	

To illustrate the application of EDI analysis to research, the weekly articles from January to October 2018, of a columnist in a national English newspaper were analyzed. The 39 articles with a total of 1451 sentences, yielded a total of 285 errors. The articles range from an EDI of 0.00 to 0.59 for an average of 0.20. This figure is not uncommon in local newspapers indicating that many local writers have unwittingly absorbed systematic errors and by using this in their writing, also infect the readers.

Essentially, these systematic errors are variants - the product of random mutations in spelling, word use, idioms, and grammatical rules (and pronunciation) by language influentials, spread by them through the school system and the media. Some examples are: pronouncing *advocacy* with the stress on the second syllable instead of the first, using the phrasal verb *cope \*up with* instead of *cope with*, using the preposition *on* after the noun *implication* instead of *for*, and using the construction *looking forward to \*meet you* - mistaking the word *to* as an infinitive marker - instead of *looking forward to meeting you*, since *to* is a particle to be followed by a noun or nominalized phrase.

Ironically, many education leaders and politicians have, time and again, pushed for the return of the educational system to the use of English as soul medium of instruction, thinking that this will raise the proficiency level of students, when in fact, the use of English in the past as soul medium of instruction helped propagate systematic errors, since all teachers using English for teaching acted as English teachers as well.

Data from around two decades of EDI analysis applied to essays written by teachers and professionals undergoing training, as well as college students, have yielded interesting averages: 0.4 for professionals who have passed regulatory exams, 0.7 for new hires at multinationals with stringent hiring procedures, 1.20 for college English teachers (many of whom were not English language majors), and 2.00 for freshmen in colleges that have an open admissions policy. These numbers make the 0.20 average EDI of the columnist understudy already at the high end.

The errors from the 39 articles were collected and classified as follows:

#### **Lexicon**

Diction = 20

Preposition = 6

Idiom = 69

#### **Grammar**

Core S

Adjective = 1

Agreement = 25

Aspect = 1

Auxiliary = 1

Case = 4

Determiner = 11

Incomplete = 2

Modal Verb = 2

Mood = 5

Negation = 1

Number = 6

Position = 2

Subject = 3

Tense = 18

Conjoined S

Comparison = 1

Conjunction = 8

Coordination = 1

Parallelism = 12

Complex S

Embedding = 24

#### **Rhetoric**

Rhetoric = 1

Consistency = 3

Redundancy = 4

Register = 8

#### **Discourse**

Reference = 9

#### **Orthography**

Spelling = 7

Punctuation = 16

Typo = 2

Collected in the sentences they appear in, and classified, these errors now form a database from which to select items for teaching. Obviously, errors in idiom dominate, and the only way to make the students learn the correct forms is through drills. By drawing lessons from such a database, the teacher sensitizes the students to wrong forms which they may have already adopted, or inoculates them to wrong forms, preventing them from picking this up.

Exercises can be made out of these data and presented in a two-option exercise with one option the error and the other option the correct form. Instead of using two more distractors, this two-option exercise tightens the contrast between systematic errors and correct form.

Following is an example of such an exercise which may be printed and distributed to students as homework. As suggested earlier, students may be organize into teams, and they may consult reliable print and Internet references. This may also be use in class as an oral exercise. Possibly as a game between teams.



### DICTION

1. Now, before I share the bishop's call for the public to be more prudent when it comes to digesting information they are exposed to, I cannot simply overlook the glaring \_\_\_\_\_ in his statements.

- a. loopholes
- b. holes

### PREPOSITION

2. Synergized efforts \_\_\_\_\_ different government agencies are not often seen in the previous administrations, but under PRRD's leadership, they made it a point to work together to achieve the goal of upholding and protecting the welfare of these OFWs in Kuwait.

- a. among
- b. between

### IDIOM

3. We must find out whether these outlets reported this alleged budding scandal in search \_\_\_\_\_ the truth or to merely propagate a lie.

- a. for
- b. of

### DETERMINER

4. Yet despite these, Alejandro intends to run for \_\_\_\_\_ Senate.

- a. the
- b. (no word)

### GRAMMATICAL NUMBER

5. It is too early to talk about the next \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. election
- b. elections

### CASE

6. We can consider the 2016 elections as another representation of people power since Filipinos gathered together to support the call for change – this time by using the right and real channel, the mandate to vote for \_\_\_\_\_ they deemed can provide real change

- a. whom
- b. who

### TENSE

7. Amid the issues surrounding the current passport appointment system, we were able to talk to Sec. Cayetano and give him a copy of the emails our office \_\_\_\_\_ been receiving from people who were complaining about the lack of available appointment slots.

- a. had
- b. has

### MODAL VERB

8. I hope that when the time to act comes, you are already done mocking and laughing, and \_\_\_\_\_ start helping.

- a. (no word)
- b. will

### CONJUNCTION

9. Even pro-Duterte supporters on social media are being tagged as mere "trolls" in their articles, \_\_\_\_\_ if these supporters are just stating their personal beliefs in public.

- a. even
- b. regardless

### EMBEDDING

10. It also tells us there is hope \_\_\_\_\_ good governance in the country, and it can be achieved by means of mutual trust between agencies and the people who manage them, as well as the trust in the leadership of President Duterte.

- a. in fostering
- b. to foster

\_\_\_\_\_

When this exercise was presented at the 13th Philippine Linguistics Congress in November 2018, the participants were asked to stand up and indicate their answer by facing left for number 1 or right for number 2, and to sit down if they chose the wrong option. The items were presented one-by-one. The first item alone cost about half of the participants to sit down. Those who remain standing answered the next items. After item 5, only one participant was left standing, and item 6 made him sit down. This is easy proof of how teachers have been influenced by the English of media.

Admittedly, EDI analysis is tedious but guarantees the comprehensive correction of systematic errors and the learning of international forms. It can be used as a feedback mechanism to a student or a class, and when used on a series of essays, it can indicate the learning curve of the students, towards producing original essays with zero or near-zero EDIs. Use on local media, EDI analysis can collect data that grounds teaching on actual language use, with such data useful for class exercises and homework.

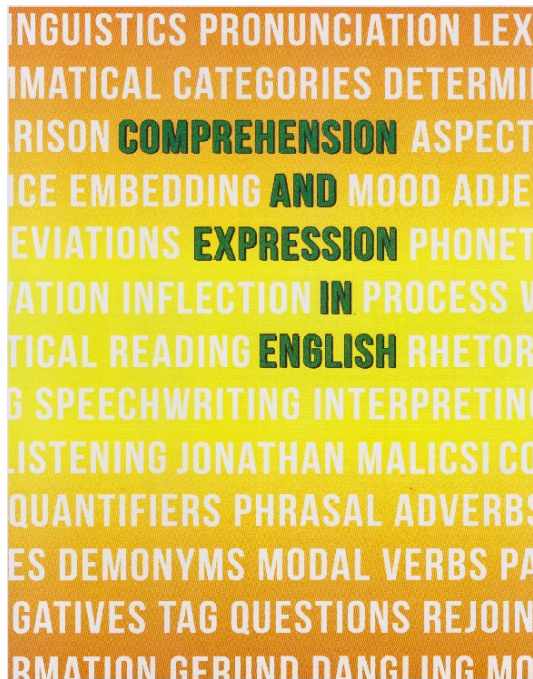
(The answer key is on the last page.)

Students should research their answers; thus, any wrong answer can only come from the students' relying on their memories, or consulting unreliable references or other learners. To this end, the *Comprehension and Expression in English* (CEE) can be quite useful. It is the only English language textbook in the country based on continuing comparative linguistic research started in 1991. The comparison between international English and Philippine English has yielded systematic errors that look and sound acceptable in Philippine English but which are not used in international English. This underscores Philippine English as a dialect, useful in the local setting especially in informal communications, but not acceptable in the international setting. The comparison between English and Philippine languages as yielded instances of interferences between these unrelated languages, such as the constraint on the progressive aspect in English, making *\*I am*

*understanding you* an unacceptable translation of *Naiintindihan kita*. The book also applies modern grammatical theories to current international English constructions, revising many traditional concepts still used by the traditional grammar in most books. Examples are the limitation of tense in English to only two forms - past and present; the reinterpretation of the subjunctive as the unusual deletion of tense or the unexpected use of the past tense such as *it's about time we learned international English*; the redefinition of the so-called parts of speech as distribution classes, etc. The CEE also presents many errors in word use and idioms, such as *\*buy one take one* instead of *buy one get one*, *\*riding in tandem* instead of *riding tandem*, *\*if worse comes to worst* instead of *if worst comes to worst*.



Answer Key: 1. b, 2. a, 3. b, 4. a, 5. b, 6. b, 7. a, 8. b, 9. a, 10. a



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14-17 May 2019, UP Diliman
- Critical Reading and Writing  
21-24 May 2019, UP Diliman

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Jonathan Malicsi (Professor Emeritus of Linguistics)  
Farah Cunanan & Mark de Chavez (Assistant Professors of Linguistics)

Department of Linguistics, CHED Center of Excellence in Foreign Languages  
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