The Effect of Dutch Student Errors in German Business Letters on German Professionals

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Abstract

Two studies investigated the effects of errors in German business letters written by Dutch students. Gaining insight into these effects is important since Germany and the Netherlands are one of the largest economically interdependent partnerships. One hundred and fifty-six German professionals rated letters with errors and letters without errors on comprehensibility, attitude toward text, writer organization, and behavioral intention. Errors negatively affected attitude toward text, writer, and organization. The second study investigated whether pragmatic, syntactical, lexical, and morphological errors elicited different effects on the same variables. Pragmatic and syntactical errors aroused negative effects and, therefore, deserve extra attention in class.

On July 23, 2016, a German opinion weekly, *Der Spiegel*, published an interview with the director of the Institute for German Language (Institut für Deutsche Sprache) featuring error perception. The interview itself was the result of an error: *Mit freundlichen Gruß*, used instead of *mit freundlichem Gruß* (kind regards), was found in an official letter from the Federal Constitutional Court to the government. In the interview, the

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director of the Institute for German Language said the error was not that bad because, nowadays, German people are more tolerant of errors ("Sind jetzt alle Fehler," 2016).

We were intrigued by this statement because most sociolinguistic and psychological research on the effect on native speakers of texts with errors of natives (referred to as L1) shows the opposite—namely, that errors negatively affect the reader's attitude toward the text (Burgoon & Miller, 1985; Figueredo & Varnhagen, 2005; Jansen & Janssen, 2016) and toward the writer (Beason, 2001; Burgoon & Miller, 1985; Jansen & Janssen, 2016; Kreiner, Schnakenberg, Green, Costello, & McClin, 2002; Martin-Lacroux, 2017; Schloneger, 2016). Even the behavior of the reader can be affected by an error; for example, Martin-Lacroux (2017) found that errors in application forms were a reason for recruiters not to select the applicant. Although an application for a job is not the same as a business deal, we expect that such an error might become a *deal breaker* in a business context.

The question arises whether such grammatical errors also have a negative effect when the error is made by a nonnative speaker in an international business context. Language proficiency is, after all, an important part of intercultural business negotiation. Proficiency in foreign languages may facilitate a "more general cultural sensitivity" and a reduction in psychological distance from business partners (Williams & Chaston, 2004, p. 464). It is, therefore, rather surprising that, according to Harzing and Pudelko (2013), international business researchers largely ignore language proficiency, or subsume it under cultural differences rather than investigate it in its own right.

Most studies focus on English as a second language, which seems like a logical choice since English is the lingua franca in international business encounters. Still, if a nonnative speaker of English negotiates with another nonnative speaker of English (e.g., an Italian native speaker with a French native speaker), languages other than English are used. One of the few studies that concentrates on language competences other than English and the economic consequences, or, in other words, deal breakers, is the study of Bel Habib (2011). She investigated the effects of second language (referred to as L2) proficiency on the export performance of German, Danish, French, and Swedish small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and found that English is not sufficient in economic relations: 27% of Swedish SMEs used a multilingual export strategy (Bel Habib, 2011). This was also true for 68% of Danish SMEs, 63% of German SMEs, and 40% of French SMEs. The percentage of companies that declared they have missed out on exportation contracts due to a language barrier were much higher in Sweden (20%) than in Denmark (4%), Germany (8%), and France (13%; Bel Habib, 2011).

This study shows it is important to speak the language of the destination export country to gain business. A study by CILT, the National Centre for Languages and the European Commission confirms this. In a sample of nearly 2,000 businesses in Europe, 11% of respondents said they had lost contracts—worth millions of euros in many cases—as a result of a lack of foreign language skills (CILT, the National Centre for Languages, 2006). Rather striking in this study was the outcome in the Netherlands. This country, which is known for speaking multiple languages, lost—according to the

respondents—25% of their business contracts due to a language barrier (CILT, the National Centre for Languages, 2006). In a second study of how Dutch SMEs experienced the influence of their German language competency on collaboration with Germany, 87% of the participants stated their turnover would increase if their employees spoke better German (Duits-Nederlandse Handelskamer, 2018). A large number of Dutch entrepreneurs also reported that the use of English is not sufficient to successfully cooperate with German businesses (Duits-Nederlandse Handelskamer, 2018). This is in line with Vollstedt (2005, p. 271), who found that German remains an important trading language for Germany.

Because of the large economic interdependence between the Netherlands and Germany, we would like to explore how the German language proficiency of business partners in the Netherlands affects business relationships with Germans. We will, therefore, first describe the Dutch-German economic relationship of these two countries.

Germany and the Netherlands are neighboring countries situated in the western part of Europe. The western border of the Netherlands is the sea that holds the most important harbor in Europe, Rotterdam (Van der Lugt, Witte, De Jong, & Streng, 2016). The eastern border of the Netherlands is shared with Germany, its main trading partner for both import and export (Statistics Netherlands, 2018). For Germany, the Netherlands is fourth on the list of export countries and their second most important import country (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019). In 2018, Germany exported goods and services worth €91 billion to the Netherlands while importing €98 billion worth of goods and services from the Netherlands (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019). From a global perspective, the economic interdependence of the United States and Canada is the only one that is stronger (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018).

Because language proficiency starts with language education, a second reason to investigate the effect of errors in Dutch-German writing is that this knowledge might help improve German language education in the Netherlands and avoid deal-breaker situations in the future. Of course, there are more types of errors than just morphological ones like *mit freundlichem Gruß*; others include syntactical, lexical, and pragmatic errors (we will explain the difference later in this study). Although pragmatic errors such as impoliteness due to a lack of intercultural competence may result in a misunderstanding or even a complete breakdown of communication (House, 2012), traditional second language (L2) courses often pay more attention to grammatical rules than to pragmatic conventions (Rose, 2005). For teachers of German business communication, it would be interesting to know how different types of errors affect German business professionals in international business encounters, and if they pay attention to the appropriate elements of the German language. Therefore, this article reports on two studies of the effect of errors in German business letters—written by Dutch students of business communication—on German business professionals.

We are aware that simply referring to the Dutch and the German business professional is not entirely correct; much variation within each group exists, so one could never refer to the Dutch as if all Dutch persons have similar beliefs and cultural norms or assume that all German business professionals would share the same opinion.

However, for reasons of convenience, we choose to speak of Dutch and German business professionals in this study. We will first explore whether an error in German made by a Dutch business partner actually affects the comprehension and attitude of German business professionals toward the text, writer, organization, and behavioral intention. A logical continuance of the first study is to explore which types of error most affect the text, writer, organization, and behavioral intention. These results would enable us to advise business German teachers in the Netherlands as to which aspects of German language acquisition they should pay the most attention to prepare their students for Dutch-German business encounters.

Only a few studies have investigated the effect of L2 errors on attitude toward the writer and on the behavioral intention—the intention of individuals to perform a certain behavior, such as to accept or reject a business deal (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2008)—of the reader (Hendriks, 2010; Planken, Van Meurs, & Maria, 2019; Wolfe, Shanmugaraj, & Sipe, 2016). We will start by discussing these studies in the introduction of our first study.

Study 1: The Effect of L2 Errors

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted on the effect of L2 errors on Germans. Studies on these errors have only been conducted for English (Boettger & Moore, 2018; Hendriks, 2010; Planken et al., 2019; Wolfe et al., 2016). We will first discuss these studies below.

Planken et al. (2019) investigated the effect of L2 grammatical errors in English persuasive texts on both native (British English) and nonnative English speakers (German) regarding comprehensibility, attitude toward the text, the evaluation of the writer, and the behavioral intention of the reader. Here, we will only report their results of the effect on native speakers. The experimental version of the text included five types of errors (11 instances): verb tense, use of preposition, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary errors. Planken et al. (2019) found no effect on the comprehensibility of the text, author evaluation, or behavioral intention. If, however, the readers thought the text actually contained an error, this had a significant negative effect on the text attractiveness and the perception of the writer's trustworthiness, friendliness, and competence.

Hendriks (2010) investigated the effect of L2 pragmatic English errors made by Dutch writers on English native speakers' perception of the personality of the writer. Using email requests, native speakers of British English were asked to rate the comprehensibility and the personality. Four versions of each email were developed to reflect a gradual increase in the level of politeness: can you/can you possibly/I was wondering if you could/I was wondering if you could possibly. Variation in request modification seemed to have little effect on how participants evaluated the personality of the sender of the email and their ratings of the comprehensibility of the request. Only the inclusion of the modifier "I was wondering if" positively affected participants' judgments of the sender's agreeableness. Hendriks concluded that underuse of request modification in emails had a negative effect on participants' evaluation of the personality of the writer.

In both studies, some methodological aspects can be discussed. First, they did not test the effect of errors on businesspeople, who judge errors differently from students or teachers (Beason, 2001; Boettger & Moore, 2018; Gilsdorf & Leonard, 2001). Business professionals judge the writers as if they were members of their own company and believe they should be able to represent the company to customers in a professional way (Beason, 2001). Second, in the study of Planken et al. (2019), the errors might not always have been perceived, as they were not marked in the texts. If a reader does not notice and indicate an error, no error effect can be measured (Brandenburg, 2015). Third, echoing Planken et al. (2019), the errors might not have been considered to be serious enough. We can imagine that an error in the use of a preposition has a different effect on the reader than a punctuation error does; however, Planken et al. (2019) did not study the effect of different types of errors. Finally, the two studies investigated British English. We cannot assume that the results of the studies of effects on attitude in L2 English automatically hold for L2 errors in German (see also Kameda, 2014). Due to some notorious differences between Germany and the United Kingdom, we may expect that Germans and British differ in attitude toward errors made by L2 speakers of their native language. First, it is more common for native speakers of English to encounter L2 errors in business communication. Since English is a business lingua franca, native English speakers are more often used to communicate with L2 speakers than German ones are. Second, attitudes toward language can be determined by cultural values and social norms. According to the language expectancy theory of Burgoon and Miller (1985), readers have certain expectancies that stem from social and cultural norms and are perceived as appropriate for a given situation. When an expectancy of the reader is violated, it may lead to a negative attitude toward the writer. A difference in culture between the United Kingdom and Germany is that the United Kingdom has a much lower uncertainty avoidance than Germany does (Hofstede, 2001, p. 151). Thesing (2016), in his study on Dutch-German intercultural communication, coupled this uncertainty avoidance dimension in Germany with a fear of losing control (pp. 58-59) and, therefore, a strong appreciation for rules, structures, and regulations. Of course, cultural differences are formed out of more aspects than nationality and language alone. For example, aspects of our cultural identity are class, vocation, religion, and gender (Jameson, 2007), and there is individual variation within a culture. Still, we think that the higher uncertainty avoidance and fear of losing control among German people compared with British people might lead to a difference in attitude toward errors, because, on average, German people consider it more important than British people that a text does not contain violations against rules and conventions. German people, on average, appreciate the sense of control and certainty that ensues from following regulations and guidelines more than British people do.

Wolfe et al. (2016) also focused on English and investigated how businesspeople react toward grammatical error in nonnative English speakers' writing. They asked participants to comment on versions of an email with different types of errors. Each email contained five errors that previous research has suggested range from *highly bothersome* to *slightly bothersome*. Wolfe et al. chose errors that, while noticeable, do not substantially interfere with comprehension. They found that businesspeople are

more lenient toward nonnative English speakers, perceiving their errors as less bothersome than those made by native speakers. They also found that businesspeople perceive pragmatic failures as more bothersome than grammatical errors.

Finally, Boettger and Moore (2018) investigated the perception and recognition of errors by businesspeople and academics. Specifically, they measured to what extent participants were bothered by a set of grammatical errors and then correlated these results with their ability to recognize the errors. Results indicated that businesspeople were often more bothered by errors than academics. The ability to identify an error correlated with the degree to which a participant was bothered by an error.

On the basis on these studies, we were eager to learn to what extent German businesspeople were bothered by errors made by nonnative writers of German. Our first study aimed to explore whether errors made by Dutch writers in German business letters influence German business professionals' attitude toward the text, writer, and organization; comprehensibility of the text; and behavioral intention. Our first hypothesis is as follows:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Texts with errors negatively affect a reader's attitude toward the text, writer, and organization; comprehensibility of the text; and behavioral intention, when compared with texts without errors.

Method and Design

In order to test this hypothesis, we decided to compare the judgments of a group of German native readers who read letters without errors to a group of German native readers who read letters that contained errors. We designed an experiment with a between-subject design and invited German business professionals to participate.

Stimuli. In a prestudy, 25 business communication students at a university of applied sciences, who had attended a German language course for 2 years (at a B2[1] level), were asked to compose a business letter. On the basis of this corpus, 16 new letters were designed by the first author, containing a sample of pragmatic and grammatical errors made in the prestudy.

Most of the studies we discussed chose not to mark the errors in the text. Wolfe et al. (2016), for example, did not mark the errors; they were quite sure the respondents would find them since they used ones that had been shown in previous research to be noticeable and to differ in how bothersome they were. For the Germans, no current research exists that gives information on how bothersome an error is and/or whether an error is noticeable. As the effect of errors was to be measured, we wanted to be sure participants did not miss an error because of their own inability to identify errors, as was found by Boettger and Moore (2018) and Planken et al. (2019). We, therefore, decided to put the errors in italics (following Beason, 2001, and Planken et al., 2019). In the Method section of the second study, we will explain the nature of the errors.

Table 1. Examples of Errors in the Letters.

Error category	Letters with errors	Letters without errors
Morphological error	mit *die* Hochschule	mit *die* Hochschule [with the university]
Syntactical error	wenn Sie neugierig *sind geworden*	wenn Sie neugierig *geworden sind* [if this has made you curious]
Lexical error	*auf* dem 11. Juni	*am* 11. Juni [on the 11th of June]
Pragmatic error	*Hey* Frau Müller	*Sehr geehrte* Frau Müller [Dear Mrs. Müller]

Each letter with errors held four italicized errors of the same category (syntactical, lexical, morphological, and pragmatic). The letter was an invitation to attend an information evening or to take part in a brainstorming session or network. Examples are given in Table 1. Appendix A provides a list of all errors.

Participants. The recipients of the business letters were 156 German native speakers who worked in either a business environment, for the government, or for a nongovernmental organization. We chose them to participate because we believed they would normally be the first to receive an invitation letter of this kind. In addition, they would be in a position to make decisions regarding further cooperation with a company abroad. Of the participants, 48% were male and 52% female. The average age was 50 years (the age range was 20-69 years). To check whether older people judge errors differently than younger people (Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984), we formed two age groups: 20 to 45 and 46 to 69. Participants were generally well educated: 75% had a university degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate) and the other 25% had less education. An independent *t* test showed no significant difference for any of the variables between men and women, the two age groups, and the two educational levels.

Procedure. Participants were recruited via German university networks, networks on Xing (the German version of LinkedIn), and German Rotary Club networks. To avoid bias based on the email's country of origin, the Netherlands, we created a German email address and asked German students to send emails to German contact people who worked in a business environment. We asked the German contacts to spread the link for the online questionnaire to other businesspersons.

One group of the participants (98) was invited to judge four letters with errors. A second group of 58 participants judged the letters without errors; they read and evaluated eight letters instead of four. All participants knew the questionnaire was about evaluating letters from abroad written by nonnative, international business partners (see Appendix B for the introductions).

Measuring Instruments. After reading each text, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*) the following questions in German.

Table 2. Hypothesis 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Letters With and Without Errors.

	Letters with errors (n = 40), M (SD)	Letters without errors (n = 56), M (SD)	p
Comprehensibility	2.57 (0.98)	2.45 (0.78)	ns
Attitude toward text			
• Attractiveness	3.76 (1.13)	3.35 (0.78)	.037
Attitude toward writer's			
• Trustworthiness	4.37 (1.14)	4.26 (0.73)	.013
• Friendliness	3.31 (1.03)	(0.66)	ns
• Intelligence	4.36 (1.00)	3.95 (0.82)	.039
Attitude toward organization's			
• Trustworthiness	4.46 (1.04)	4.01 (0.77)	.019
• Professionality	4.83 (1.23)	4.23 (0.80)	.006
Behavioral intention	3.98 (1.23)	3.90 (0.86)	ns

Note. 1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*.

To what extent do you agree with the following utterances?

- The text is easy to understand.
- The text is attractive.
- The writer is trustworthy.
- The writer is friendly.
- The writer is intelligent.
- The organization is trustworthy.
- The organization is professional (imagine the invitation would fit your company).
- I would accept the invitation.

Variables were based on Planken et al. (2019) and the study of Nejjari, Gerritsen, Van der Haagen, and Korzilius (2012) on attitudes toward Dutch-accented English. At the end of the online questionnaire, multiple-choice and open-ended questions were used to collect background data on age, gender, and highest education level.

Statistical Methods. We used independent sample *t* tests to analyze the difference in effect between letters with and letters without errors[2] for all dependent variables. Participants who failed to complete the questionnaire were removed from the data set. This resulted in 56 participants who judged letters with errors and 40 participants who judged the letters without errors.

Results

To test the hypothesis that business letters with errors more negatively affect the reader's attitude toward the letter, writer, organization, and behavioral intention than business

letters without errors, we performed several independent sample *t* tests. See Table 2 for means, standard deviations, and significance.

Text comprehensibility, writer's friendliness, and behavioral intention showed no significant difference between letters with and letters without errors. The letters with errors were judged significantly more negatively than the letters without the errors based on text attractiveness, $t(93.92) = 2.11$, $p = .037$, writer's trustworthiness, $t(93) = 2.52$, $p = .013$, writer's intelligence, $t(92.20) = 2.160$, $p = .039$, organization's trustworthiness, $t(93.83) = 2.93$, $p = .019$, and organization's professionality, $t(93.25) = 2.81$, $p = .006$.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our first hypothesis that texts with errors negatively affect the reader's attitude toward the text, writer, organization, and behavioral intention—when compared with texts without errors—can be confirmed for text attractiveness, writer's trustworthiness and intelligence, organization's trustworthiness, and professionality. This is in contrast to the statement of the director of the Institute for German Language in *Der Spiegel* but in line with the studies of Planken et al. (2019) and Hendriks (2010). The negative effect of errors on perceived professionality might have an impact on the relationship with the other company.

However, the results show no significant difference between letters with and without errors in the letter's comprehensibility, writer's friendliness, and the behavioral intention. The outcome on writer's friendliness shows errors do not always lead to a negative attitude toward the writer. This is especially true for a personal trait like friendliness. Surprisingly, errors did not prevent businesspeople from accepting the invitation, so one could say the aim of the company (gathering new business contacts) was reached. This could mean that because L2 errors were expected (language expectancy theory), businesspeople were more lenient in their behavioral intention. Our results suggest the director of the Institute for German Language was wrong with regard to his stance on the Germans' lenient attitude toward errors.

In our first study, the effect of errors in general was studied. But, according to Delisle's (1982) study on error judgment of L2 errors in German, not every type of error is judged the same way. Also, the study of Wolfe et al. (2016) showed grammatical errors are judged differently from pragmatic errors. Therefore, we assume the attitude of the reader may be influenced by the type of error. For business communication teachers, it would be interesting to know if, for example, comprehensibility, writer's friendliness, or behavioral intention is more negatively or positively influenced by different error types. To measure the attitude toward different error types, we conducted a second study that we describe in the following section.

Study 2: The Effect of Type of Error

Language-processing research shows that different types of errors (lexical, syntactical, morphological, and pragmatic) are processed in a different way and in a different pace

in the brain (see Friederici & Weissenborn, 2007, for a review). These findings lead us to suspect that different error categories could influence the comprehensibility and attitude toward text, writer, and organization in different ways because they are differently processed in the brain. We, therefore, distinguished the following four error categories. Appendix A provides a list of all errors.

- *Morphological errors* involve the word structure of the noun, verb, adjective, adverb, or preposition. An example of a morphological error is *Ich wille* (cf. I wants), where the correct form is *Ich will* (I want).
- *Syntactical errors* involve structures larger than a single word (i.e., phrases, clauses, and sentences). An example of a syntactical error is *Sie nicht kann fliegen* (She no can fly), which should be *Sie kann nicht fliegen* (She cannot/can't fly).
- *Lexical errors* involve the incorrect usage of a word or fixed expression due to a lack of language knowledge. In the case of an L2 learner, a lexical error can also be caused by influences from the learner's mother tongue. For instance, the learner may use a word that exists in both languages but has different meanings. Dutch and German both have the verb *bellen*, but it means *to call* in Dutch and *to bark* in German.
- *A pragmatic error* can occur in the first language as a misunderstanding of the intended illocutionary force, or the pragmatic force of an utterance (Holmes & Brown, 1987). It is caused by a difference in what is believed to be a correct behavior. For example, to address an unknown person by their first name (*Dieter*) instead of their surname (*Herr Müller*), which in Germany could be seen as impolite, is common in the Netherlands.

Technically speaking, according to James (2013), a pragmatic failure is not an error, in the sense that it is not wrong according to the grammatical rules of the language. Although we agree with James, we will use the term *error* throughout this article for convenience.

Few studies have compared the effect of different types of errors. Delisle's (1982) study is the only one we found that evaluates the different types of errors in written German. In her study, 193 German pupils (aged 10-17 years) were asked to choose the worse error out of two. Delisle measured the effect of different morphological, syntactical, and lexical errors (gender, verb morphology, word order, vocabulary, case endings, and spelling). The pupils ranked gender errors as the worst and spelling errors as the least serious. Unfortunately, Delisle did not include pragmatic failures in her study, and she did not measure comprehensibility, the effect on the readers' attitude toward the text or writer. Since she used young native speakers of German, it is uncertain whether her results would also hold for adult native speakers.

Wolfe et al. (2016) compared the effect of L2 grammatical errors and the effect of pragmatic errors on native speakers of American English. They asked 169 native-speaking American businesspeople to comment on grammatical errors in an email

from a native writer, an email from a nonnative writer, and an email with pragmatic failures that, contrary to the other stimuli, did not mention whether the writer was a native or a nonnative speaker. Wolfe et al. (2016) found that the participants were most lenient with the nonnative writer of the email with grammatical errors and perceived the letter with severe pragmatic errors of politeness and tone as the most bothersome.

Some methodological differences from our study can be found in the nature of the email; because it was written to a future employer, a higher power distance might be suggested, which may have caused the emails with pragmatic errors to be judged more bothersome than those with grammatical errors. Second, the participants thought of the writer as a possible future employee or colleague who would represent the company.

Unfortunately, Wolfe et al. (2016) did not make a distinction between a native and nonnative writer in the case of the email with pragmatic errors, and therefore we do not know whether Americans react differently to pragmatic errors made by native speakers than to pragmatic errors made by nonnative speakers. Finally, the cultural differences between Germany and the United Kingdom mentioned above also hold for Germany and the United States and, for that reason, American businesspeople may judge errors in their native language differently from German businesspeople.

The purpose of our second study was to investigate whether type of error affects German readers' attitude toward comprehensibility, text, writer, organization, and behavioral intention. Based on the results of Wolfe et al. (2016) that show native speakers judge pragmatic errors more negatively than grammatical errors, our second hypothesis is as follows:

> **Hypothesis 2:** The reader's attitude toward the text, writer, organization, comprehensibility of the text, and behavioral intention will be more negatively influenced by pragmatic errors than by lexical, syntactical, and morphological errors.

Method and Design

In order to test Hypothesis 2, we used a within-subject design to measure the variables with the error category as a within-subject factor.

Stimuli. We used the same items and measuring instruments from our first study to measure the effect of letters with errors. Only the data from the letters with the errors were analyzed. We distinguished between four types of errors: morphological, syntactical, lexical, and pragmatic. Table 1 shows examples of these errors. Appendix A provides a list of all errors.

Participants. Of the 68 participants, 50% were male and 50% female. The average age of the respondents was 49 years (the age range was 20-69 years). Seventy-one

percent had a university degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate), and the other 29% had less education. An independent *t* test showed no significant difference for any of the variables between men and women, the two age groups, and the two education levels.

Statistical Methods. We conducted separate repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests for all the dependent variables to determine whether there were statistically significant differences. No outliers were found using boxplot, and visual inspection of the Q-Q plot showed the data were normally distributed. Then, the repeated measures ANOVA was performed. Finally, to determine the source of the interaction where the *F* test was significant, we did post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni procedure. Unless reported otherwise, Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was met.

Results

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the four error categories of pragmatic, morphological, syntactical, and lexical errors in terms of comprehensibility; attitude toward text, writer, and organization; and behavioral intention. It also shows the significance of the differences between these four error categories.

The repeated measures ANOVA showed significant differences between the error categories on text comprehensibility, $F(3, 201) = 9.171$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$. The effect of pragmatic errors was significantly more negative than the effect of the morphological errors but significantly less negative than the effect of the syntactical errors ($p = .016$). The effect of morphological errors was significantly less negative than the effect of lexical errors ($p = .002$) and syntactical errors ($p < .001$). No significant differences were found between the error categories and the effect of text attractiveness, $F(3, 201) = 0.386$, $p = .763$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

Significant differences between the error categories were found in attitude toward writer's trustworthiness, $F(3, 201) = 8,627$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. The effect of pragmatic errors was significantly more negative than the effect of the lexical errors ($p = .009$) and morphological errors ($p < .001$). The effect of morphological errors on the reader's attitude toward the writer's trustworthiness was significantly less negative than the effect of lexical ($p = .027$) and syntactical ($p = .001$) errors.

For the differences between the four error categories and writer's friendliness, assumption of sphericity was violated, Mauchly's test of sphericity $\chi^2(5) = 2.743$, $p = .740$; therefore, Greenhouse-Geisser correction tests are reported ($\varepsilon = .71$). The results show that writer's friendliness was significantly affected by error category, $F(2.143, 143.605) = 25,198$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .27$. The effect of pragmatic errors was significantly more negative than the effect of morphological ($p < .001$), syntactical ($p < .001$), and lexical ($p < .001$) errors. The effect of the

Table 3. Hypothesis 2 Means and Standard Deviations of Error Categories and Significant Difference Between Pragmatic Errors and Morphological, Syntactical, and Lexical Errors.

	Pragmatic errors, M (SD)	Morphological errors, M (SD)	Syntactical errors, M (SD)	Lexical errors, M (SD)	Significance of pragmatic errors versus		
					Morphological errors	Syntactical errors	Lexical errors
Comprehensibility	2.53 (1.44)[b]	2.06 (1.08)[a]	3.04 (1.52)[c]	2.69 (1.36)[b]	.13	.16	ns
Attitude toward text							
• Attractiveness	3.76 (1.54)	3.63 (1.39)	3.81 (1.44)	3.79 (1.57)	ns	ns	ns
Attitude toward writer's							
• Trustworthiness	4,79 (1.32)[c]	4,01 (1.39)[a]	4,50 (1.29)[b]	4.34 (1.35)[b]	<.001	.009	ns
• Friendliness	4.40 (1.45)[c]	3.01 (1.23)[a]	3.47 (1.26)[b]	3.47 (1.31)[b]	<.001	<.001	<.001
• Intelligence	4.93 (1.24)[c]	3.99 (1.28)[a]	4.43 (1.31)[b]	4.43 (1.42)[b]	<.001	.003	.002
Attitude toward organization's							
• Trustworthiness	4.96 (1.31)[c]	4.22 (1.22)[a]	4.51 (1.32)[b]	4.49 (1.46)	<.001	.013	.006
• Professionality	5.41 (1.27)[b]	4.66 (1.56)[a]	4.82 (1.41)	4.74 (1.50)	<.001	.001	<.001
• Behavioral intention	4.87 (1.61)[d]	3.61 (1.52)[a]	4.18 (1.54)[c]	3.99 (1.73)[b]	<.001	.002	<.001

Note. $N = 68$. 1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*. Means with differing superscripts within rows are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level. For example, in the first row of comprehensibility, pragmatic errors and lexical errors have the same superscript *b*. This means pragmatic and lexical errors are not significantly different. Pragmatic errors and lexical errors are significantly different from morphological (superscript a) and syntactical errors (superscript c). Morphological errors also are significantly different from syntactical and lexical errors.

morphological errors on the reader's attitude toward the writer's friendliness was significantly less negative than the effect of lexical ($p = .001$) and syntactical ($p < .001$) errors.

Significant differences between the error categories were found with attitude toward writer's intelligence, $F(2.697, 180.719) = 14,460, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. The effect of pragmatic errors on the reader's attitude toward the writer's intelligence was significantly more negative than the effect of morphological ($p < .001$), syntactical ($p = .003$), and lexical ($p = .002$) errors. The effect of the morphological errors on the reader's attitude toward the writer's intelligence was less negative than the effect of the lexical ($p = .002$) and syntactical ($p < .002$) errors.

A repeated measures ANOVA showed significant differences between the error categories and organization's trustworthiness, $F(3, 201) = 7.855, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. The effect of pragmatic errors on the reader's attitude toward the organization's trustworthiness was significantly more negative than the effect of morphological ($p < .001$), syntactical ($p = .013$), and lexical ($p = .006$) errors. The effect of the morphological errors on the reader's attitude toward the organization's trustworthiness was significantly less negative than the effect of syntactical errors ($p = .042$).

For the differences between the four error categories and organization's professionality, the assumption of sphericity was violated, $\chi^2(5) = 11.637, p = .040$; therefore, Greenhouse-Geisser correction tests are reported ($\varepsilon = .90$). The results show that an organization's professionality was significantly affected by pragmatic error category, $F(2.690, 180.201) = 9.453, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$. The effect of pragmatic errors on a reader's attitude toward the organization's professionality was significantly more negative than the effect of morphological ($p < .001$), syntactical ($p = .001$), and lexical ($p < .001$) errors.

The results show that behavioral intention was significantly affected by pragmatic error category, $F(3, 201) = 13.915, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$. Pragmatic errors affected the reader's behavioral intention significantly more negatively than morphological ($p < .001$), syntactical ($p = .002$), and lexical ($p < .001$) errors. Morphological errors affected the reader's behavioral intention significantly less negatively than lexical ($p = .045$), syntactical ($p = .006$), and pragmatic ($p < .001$) errors.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our second study confirmed our second hypothesis that morphological, syntactical, and lexical errors affect the reader's attitude less negatively than pragmatic errors for writer's trustworthiness, intelligence, and friendliness and organization's trustworthiness, professionality, and behavioral intention.

We also found, in line with Wolfe et al. (2016), that text comprehension is most negatively influenced by syntactical errors. This outcome is corroborated by Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001), who found that syntactical errors are more distracting

than other grammatical errors. Furthermore, text attractiveness was influenced in the same way by all four error categories. Every kind of error makes a text less attractive.

Our second study also showed that the effect of morphological errors is significantly less negative than lexical, syntactical, and pragmatic errors regarding attitude toward text comprehension, writer's trustworthiness, writer's intelligence, writer's friendliness, and behavioral intention. This relatively lenient attitude toward morphological errors is probably due to the fact that they are also often made by the Germans themselves, and that Germans, therefore, realize that morphology must be difficult for foreign learners of German. To our mind, no scientific studies on this topic can be found but reference works like Steinhauer's (2015) *Duden. Erste Hilfe: Die 100 Häufigsten Fehler* (Duden, *The 100 Most Common Errors*). Based on the famous German dictionary, *Duden* discusses 38 commonly made morphological errors. Also, publications like the best-selling book *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* (*The Dative Is the Death of the Genitive*; Sick, 2009), which had success that resulted in five sequels, indicate that German people also sometimes find the morphological grammar of the German language challenging.

The statement of the director of the Institute for German Language that Germans are more tolerant toward language errors contained a morphological error (mit freundlichen Gruß). We can now say that tolerance toward language errors holds true for morphological errors. Morphological errors do not affect the attitude toward the writer, and, even more interesting for German business communication teachers, the behavioral intention of the reader is not influenced by morphological errors. German business communication teachers can pay less attention to morphological errors and more to pragmatic and syntactical errors to prepare their students for effective German-Dutch business encounters.

The finding that the attitude toward writer, organization, and behavioral intention is influenced more negatively by pragmatic errors than by grammatical errors could be explained by cultural preferences of German readers. According to Thesing (2016), German businesspeople generally value a strict separation between professional and private lives more than most Dutch businesspeople. To ensure a professional distance, colleagues in Germany generally prefer to address one another in a more formal way. Pragmatic errors such as addressing a person by their first name instead of their surname—that contravene this cultural value—might influence one's attitude toward the writer and organization. Considering that every letter with pragmatic errors included an error of informal address, German participants may have experienced this as very inappropriate.

Pragmatic errors not only have a negative effect on the attitude toward text and writer but also on the organization, and this might affect successful intercultural business

communication. Since pragmatic and syntactical errors have the most negative impact on readers, we suggest that special attention be paid to both pragmatic and syntactical errors in German business communication courses. Previous studies of Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), Cohen (2010), and Betz and Huth (2014) give us more insight on how to teach pragmatics.

General Discussion

Our studies provide insight regarding the effect of L2 errors in German on the attitude of business professionals toward text, writer, organization, text comprehensibility, and behavioral intention. Some limitations of our studies should be taken into consideration. We opted for the use of requests in the form of an invitation letter as a stimulus. In hindsight, we could imagine that this was the reason the behavioral intention of the reader was still very positive. A business deal/offer may have given a different outcome on behavioral intention. Future research should investigate whether our results also hold for other genres.

We collected data via the Internet, which allowed us to reach businesspersons who generally have little time to fill out surveys. However, a disadvantage of this method is that the researcher loses control of many aspects related to filling out the questionnaire (e.g., circumstances, seriousness). According to Wright (2005), participants can also misrepresent their age, gender, or level of education; therefore, like Hendriks (2010), we recommend that future studies use a combination of data collection methods.

The studies revealed the need to distinguish types of errors when learning German. Since pragmatics are usually given less attention in the classroom (Rose, 2005), teachers should first explore how to best incorporate pragmatics into their lessons. This is not an easy task, and more research should be done to support teachers in ways to fulfil this task. Further research could reveal how pragmatics are accounted for in German teaching methods and how teachers are trained to teach pragmatics in class.

Our study also tried to gain more insight into the effect of errors in international business communication in a language other than English: German.

Speaking the language of the export/import country and economic gain are closely linked (Bel Habib, 2011); for that reason, it seems important to pay more attention to the effect of errors in business encounters in foreign languages other than English. For example, in view of the growing economic importance of China and Korea, it would be interesting to study the effect of different categories of errors in international business encounters when using the Chinese and Korean languages.

Appendix A

Errors in Business Letters.

Category	Error
Pragmatic errors (greeting, addressing with personal pronouns du/Sie, use of polite verb construction, closing greeting)	Hey Frau Müller [Hey Mrs Müller] Lieber Peter, [Dear Peter,] Hallo Anja, [Hello Anja,] Hey Herr Müller [Hey Mr Müller] Sie und Ihre Kollegen sollen teilnehmen [You and your colleagues should attend] denn wir sollen eine Subvention mit Ihrer Hilfe beantragen. [because we are going to apply for a subsidy with your help.] Um dieses Netzwerk aufzubauen müssen wir mehrere Partner haben [To build this network we need several partners.] Anmelden muss hier! [Apply here!] denn du wirst auch Vorteile [because there are benefits for you too] Würdest du . . . den Unternehmensplan [Would you . . . the business plan] Bist du daran interessiert [If you are interested] Möchtest du teilnehmen [If you would like to participate] Viele Grüße [Kind regards] Tschüß [Bye] Viele Grüße [Best wishes] Gruß [Greetings]
Grammatical errors (lexical: preposition verb construction, false translation of preposition, false friends verb/noun/adjective)	von denen ich Sie gern informieren möchte [of which I would like to inform you] mit einer Strategie *auf* dem Markt auftritt [with a strategy to enter the market] *vor* dieser Veranstaltung gewinnen [to obtain for this meeting] sich einsetzen würden *vor* unserem Team [to support our team] zu einer Besprechung *auf* Mittwoch [to a meeting on Wednesday] Workshops *vor* dem Erfahrungsaustausch eingeplant [workshops to share experiences planned] *auf* dem 11. und dem 12. Juni [on the 11th and 12th of June] auf unsere *Unternehmung* [in our company] Das *meint*, dass Sie erfahren werden [This means you will learn] Bei Interesse *versuchen* wir Sie [If you are interested, please] das nötige Wissen *verkriegen* [to receive the necessary information] Das Projekt *befördert* die Kooperation [The project will stimulate cooperation] die künftige Zusammenwirkung möglichst reibungslos verläuft [future cooperation will be as smooth as possible] ein *geschicktes* Datum [a suitable date] die *Anleitung* unseres Schreibens ist [the reason for this letter]

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Appendix A (continued)

Category	Error
Grammatical errors (syntactical: verb order in clause, verb order in main clause with two infinitives, verb order in main clause with one infinitive, omission of an article)	wenn Sie neugierig *sind geworden* [if this has made you curious] der uns Ihr Unternehmen *hat empfohlen* [who has recommended your business to us] der als Erster am Nachhaltigkeitsprojekt *hat teilgenommen* [who was the first to participate in the sustainability project] die Sie sich *haben gewünscht* [that you have wished for] Zusammen mit . . . Landschaftsleitung [together with landscape management] immer mehr . . . Verantwortung [even more . . . responsibility] und fördert . . . Vernetzung [and encourages . . . networking] als Voraussetzung für u.a. . . . Klimaschutz [as a condition for, e.g., . . . climate protection] Wir würden uns freuen Sie am 14. Juni *zu dürfen begrüßen* [We hope to meet you on the 14th of June] Wäre es nicht schön um alle *zu können beitragen*? [Wouldn't it be great for everyone to be able to contribute?] die Kooperationen mit anderen Unternehmen *können herstellen* [to establish cooperation with other businesses] mit dem wir die Erstellung von einem Projekt *können durchführen* [with which we can set up a project] Für Rückfragen können Sie mich gerne *erreichen* unter die Nummer [If you have any questions, please contact me on the number] Möchten Sie mehr *erfahren* über unser Nachhaltigkeitsprojekt? [Want to learn more about our sustainability project?] Sie können mit den richtigen Partnern *beschreiten* neue Wege [You can forge new paths with the right partners] können wir *antworten* auf die ganz großen Herausforderungen [we can find an answer to the big challenges]
Grammatical errors (morphological: case flexion of an article, case flexion of an adjective, flexion of verb, flexion of personal pronoun)	mit *die* Hochschule [with the university] zu *ein* Maximum [to a maximum] mit *ein* Projekt [with a project] zu *der* Frühstück [at breakfast] mit *Sie* [with you] In der Anlage finden *Ihnen* [In the enclosure you will find] für *Ihnen* [for you] einen *erste* Informationsabend [a first information evening] mit den *andere* Betrieben [with the other companies] den *wirtschaftliche* Nutzen [the economic benefit] die *regionale* Unternehmen [local business] Sie *sein* [You are] Ich *möcht* [I would like to] Die Zusammenarbeit *verlauft* [The cooperation is] *wirden* wir [we will]

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Appendix B

Introductions A and B.

Introduction A: German	Introduction A: English
Die Kommunikation mit den Unternehmen im Ausland erfolgt oft auf Deutsch. Man bemerkt es natürlich, wenn die deutsche Sprache des internationalen Handelspartners nicht perfekt ist. Uns interessiert Ihre Meinung zu bestimmten Unvollkommenheiten in der schriftlichen Kommunikation. Welche Unvollkommenheiten sollten besser nicht gemacht werden? Die Ergebnisse werden genutzt, um den Sprachunterricht der Fachhochschulen und Hochschulen in Europa zu verbessern.	Communication with foreign organizations often occurs in German. Naturally, it does not go unnoticed when the language of the international business partner is not perfect. We are interested in your opinion on certain imperfections in written communication. Which errors should not be made? The results will be used to improve language classes at European universities.

Introduction B: German	Introduction B: English
Die Handelsbeziehungen zwischen Deutschland und den Niederlanden. Deutschland ist schon seit Jahren mit Abstand der wichtigste Handelspartner der Niederlande, sowohl was Import als Export betrifft. Wenn Sie mit Niederländern kommunizieren, bemerken Sie natürlich, dass die deutsche Sprache der niederländischen Handelspartner nicht perfekt ist. Uns interessiert Ihre Meinung zu bestimmten Unvollkommenheiten in der schriftlichen Kommunikation. Welche Unvollkommenheiten sollten besser nicht gemacht werden? Die Ergebnisse werden verwendet um den Sprachunterricht der Fachhochschulen und Hochschulen in den Niederlanden zu verbessern.	The business relationship between Germany and the Netherlands. For years now, Germany has been the Netherlands' most important business partner for imports and exports. When communicating with the Dutch, you may naturally notice that their German language use is not perfect. We are interested in your opinion on certain imperfections in written communication. Which errors should not be made? The results will be used to improve language classes at Dutch universities.

Authors' Note

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the faculty of Arts Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (www.ru.nl).

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Notes

1. Level according to the Common European Framework of Reference, a framework that describes six levels of language proficiency from basic (A1) to native (C2). This makes it possible for all teachers to offer a similar language level in all language courses. A B2 level learner is described as an independent user: "The learner can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24).
2. An analysis of the four letters with the pragmatic errors showed the results of Letter 15 deviated from the other letters. After inspection, Letter 15 is a fairly consistent informal letter, whereas all the other letters exhibited pragmatic inconsistency with regard to the level of informality. We, therefore, decided to leave Letter 15 out of the analyses. We performed another analysis of the smaller group of participants on age, sex, and level of education.

    This second analysis showed no difference from the original group.

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