



ERROR CORRECTION CRITERIA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NOTICING

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Annotation

The author of this article discusses the significance of error correction and the criteria which have been put in order to correct students in more positive way rather than discouraging them from making one. Additionally, both teachers and students should understand the importance of corrective feedback and noticing mistakes.

Keywords: Error correction, noticing hypothesis, English as L2, open-class discussions, fluently-based tasks, sociocultural theory.

Error correction is one of the most delicate aspects of foreign language teaching but one that can hardly be avoided. The process of mastering a foreign language involves making lots of errors; hence errors and error correction are an integral part of any foreign language lesson. However, many teachers feel rather uncomfortable correcting their learners, especially when oral feedback is concerned, as they believe “overt correction can harm learners’ self-confidence as well as heighten their anxiety levels to an extent that is detrimental to language learning”. Making errors in a foreign language classroom can sometimes be an embarrassing experience and can cause the learner to prevent from saying anything in the target language so as to avoid making any further errors. However, it is often not the error correction itself that induces this feeling, but the general idea that errors are something bad, something that should be avoided at any cost. A confirmation of this idea can be found at school, where it is easy to notice that primary school learners usually tend to be less afraid of making errors and being corrected as opposed to high school or university learners. This might suggest that, in the process of growing up, one learns to interpret errors as a negative occurrence because the word *error* has connotations of somebody having done something wrong, and nobody likes doing things wrong. While there are also old methods of approaching lessons which created an atmosphere where



it rather prefers to avoid making mistakes, but now a new look on teaching involves a creative way of lessons which are based on trial and making mistakes, as it has been found that “errors enhance later memory for and generation of the correct responses, facilitate active learning, stimulate the learner to direct attention appropriately, and inform the teacher of where to focus teaching”. However, practice is very often not in line with theory, and many foreign language learners and teachers do not perceive errors and the ensuing error correction as a means of making progress in the foreign language acquisition process. It can be argued that errors and error correction are an opportunity for the learners to develop their interlanguages. On the other hand, refraining from making any errors and simplifying one’s sentences so as to say only what one is sure is correct or refraining from producing any sentences in the foreign language in question is usually nothing but counterproductive. It is therefore indispensable for foreign language teachers to discuss with learners the importance of making errors and being corrected, to create an atmosphere where errors are accepted as an integral part of learning and to develop a sense of how to apply corrective feedback so as not to make the learners feel uncomfortable. This may eliminate negative feelings surrounding errors for both the teacher and the learners and make the learners value errors and corrective feedback and start seeing them as an effective and efficient way to acquire a non-native language.

Apart from making sure that their learners understand the importance of corrective feedback, it is important for teachers to establish a set of principles that will help them decide on the types of errors and situations that require corrective feedback as well as on the techniques they are going to use. One of the authors concerned with error correction mentions certain principles that should guide error correction and highlights the importance not only of the teacher’s intuition when dealing with errors, but also of the learners’ feedback. This means that teachers should also consider the learners’ preferences when it comes to corrective feedback and not rely solely on their own knowledge. Some other principles introduced by James include using corrective techniques that are aimed at enhancing the learners’ accuracy in expression. Moreover, error correction should not be face-threatening to learners, and their affective factors should be taken into consideration. The most common criterion when it comes to deciding whether to correct an error or not seems to be the “seriousness” of the error, that is, its appropriateness for the proficiency level of the learners. If the error is something the learners at a particular level of language acquisition are



definitely supposed to have acquired, then the teacher usually reacts to the error to avoid the fossilization of an incorrect form. However, if the error is something that is not expected from the learners at that level of proficiency, the teachers tend to ignore the error.

The second criterion that teachers commonly use when deciding whether to correct or not is the kind of situation or the task the error was made in. Teachers usually do not correct errors in fluency-based tasks, such as open-class discussions, when learners are expected to make longer and more complex statements or when the content of their speech is more complex and requires more concentration. On the other hand, if the focus of the activity is on practicing a particular language area, then the teacher tends to give corrective feedback. In general, the teachers observed during teacher training usually use negotiation of meaning instead of correcting the learners' errors. Comparing the techniques of error correction used in elementary school and in high school or at the university level, a few differences can be noticed. However, what was most interesting was the fact that some of the observed teachers in elementary school often used implicit techniques of error correction, such as echoing or recast, which often went unnoticed by the learners. They decided to correct the learner's error based on the aforementioned criteria, but the technique they used was not effective. The reason why these instances failed is well explained by the Noticing Hypothesis. The Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Richard Schmidt, suggests that noticing grammatical details is a necessary condition for learning because only that part of input which is consciously noticed can become intake and be used in acquisition. To understand the Noticing Hypothesis, it is important to be aware of the distinction between input and intake. While input refers to the language that learners are exposed to in its entirety, it is only intake, the part of input that is internalized by the learner, that leads to acquisition. This suggests that learners need to be aware of their own errors and notice the corrective feedback used by the teacher for language acquisition to take place. According to the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers, different groups of learners react differently to various techniques of error correction, so it might be useful to talk to learners about corrective feedback and reach a common decision about the technique the teacher is going to use. Otherwise, there is a great risk that it goes unnoticed, which means that it does not serve its sole purpose of becoming part of learner intake. However, teachers should be careful not to react to their learners' errors too often and not to interrupt the flow of communication in the



classroom, as, after all, it is communication that is the ultimate goal of foreign language learning.

One of the theories that is often used in the area of early language learning is sociocultural theory. Even though this theory can be applied to any age group of learners, it is especially beneficial when working with young learners, as it strives to explain (early) human development and the learning processes. With young learners we tend to use less explicit error correction methods, not only because of their lack of metalinguistic knowledge, but also because we do not want to discourage them from the learning process. This group of learners acquires language through play, and keeping the corrective feedback implicit and casual helps maintain this learning atmosphere. This is where sociocultural theory comes into play. One of the main concepts of sociocultural theory is scaffolding, i.e., giving learners the *exact* amount of help they need in accordance with their developmental level, and this also includes giving feedback and error correction. In this equation, the distance between the actual developmental level (*what learners can do on their own*) and the potential developmental level (*what learners can do with guidance*) is then called the zone of proximal development, as defined by Vygotsky himself. Teachers should provide support and guidance to assist the learner, and the learning process should be a collaborative one which includes both the teacher and the learner. This means that different means should be used to elicit the correct form from learners, helping them only as much as they need. Environment can be very difficult, especially with young learners, since they have limited metalinguistic knowledge, not to mention very short attention spans. As teacher trainees, we desperately lack instruction in working with very young learners, even though many of us end up working with them at some point during our careers. We are not trained in how to get our young learners' attention, how to keep it, or how to get it back after losing it just seconds later. In other words, the collaborative aspect and the constant negotiations which are crucial in contemporary applications of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development are very difficult to persist in when it comes to teaching (young) children. It has been said earlier that, as teachers, we should strive to use various methods of error correction depending on our students' needs; however, research has also shown that different types of feedback have different success rates with young children's language acquisition. For example, a study by Chapman et al. published in 1986 compared three types of feedback – acceptance, correction with joint labelling, and correction with explanation. Even though correction with joint



labelling may seem as a good feedback strategy (*That's not a car. That's a truck.*), it may lead to acceptance of both terms as signifiers for the same toy. The same applies to young learners of English as L2 who do not comprehend negative forms of sentences yet. This study found the third type of feedback to be the most successful in helping children learn labels. It not only provides the child with the appropriate label but also gives additional information about the target word (description of the object, relationship with other objects, etc.), which shifts the attention from the wrong label to the correct one and makes children more interested in the target word. This method is very useful with young children, as repetition of the wrong word in any way will often be understood as confirmation. Recast can also be very effective, especially with a change of intonation, or again in combination with additional questions and information about the target word. As with any other age group of learners, it is important to see which methods work best for our learners, but with young learners, learning how to improvise during lessons is crucial, and trying new methods and strategies is a must to keep the lesson dynamic and interesting. It has already been said that the form of error correction as well as its frequency highly depends on the context and should always be adapted to the learners, and this is exactly what the sociocultural theory strives to do, arguing that the corrective feedback should be attuned to the learner's needs and his/her zone of proximal development.

When discussing error correction, the main focus, naturally, is on the learners, who can be observed both as a group and as individuals. In order to get behind error correction and how it affects learners, it is also necessary to take into account individual differences such as intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, risk taking, beliefs, age, proficiency, and memory. Individual differences affect the way a person notices error correction, and subsequently, they affect how a person benefit from it. Individual differences also encompass learners' attitudes towards error correction. The occurrence of self-correction may point to positive attitudes towards error correction. However, as has been argued above, since numerous factors, including individual differences, affect the way one notices and uses error correction, the topic is open for debate and further research.



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