An Analysis of College Students' Attitudes towards Error Correction in EFL Context

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Abstract
This article is based on a survey on the attitudes towards the error correction by their teachers in the process of teaching and learning and it is intended to improve the language teachers' understanding of the nature of error correction. Based on the analysis, the article expounds some principles and techniques that can be applied in the process of EFL teaching.

Keywords: Attitudes, Mistakes and errors, EFL teaching

Introduction

There has always been much concern and discussion on errors and error correction in foreign language learning and teaching. It also has been a controversial issue because teachers' and learners' attitudes towards error and error correction differ depending on the teaching and learning approach they adopt. Some researches follow logically from the shift in emphasis from contrastive analysis to error analysis. Indeed, this shift has changed the entire look to errors and it has influenced the teachers' and the researchers' attitudes towards errors to a very great extent. However, according to Ellis (1985), the most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process. In this sense, researchers view errors as evidence of the learner's positive contribution to foreign language learning rather than as a sign of learner's inability to master the new language as many teachers view it. In this article, the author will first focus on both teachers' and students' attitudes towards errors and error correction since these attitudes have a great impact on the entire learning process, and then suggest some techniques for error correction.

1. The significance of making errors in EFL context

It has been accepted that errors play an important role in the learning process. To language learners, language learning is not so much a question of acquiring a set of automatic habits, but rather a process of discovering the underlying rules, categories and systems of choice in the language by some sort of processing by the learner of the data of the language presented to him by the teacher (Corder, 1973). In order for this discovery to take place, learners have to go through several stages and processes. One of the most important factors included in almost all the stages and processes of language learning is error making. Dulay and Burt (1974) stated that error making is inevitable and that it would appear necessary and crucial to language learning. In fact, it

is a clear sign to show language learner actually develop and internalize the rules of the language.

While the errors a learner makes provide no direct measure of his knowledge of the language, it is probably the most important source of information about the nature of his knowledge. From the analysis of the learner's errors, teachers are able to infer the nature of his knowledge at that point in his learning and discover what he still has to learn. By describing and classifying his errors, teachers may build up a picture of the features of the language which cause him learning problems. A learner's errors, therefore, are significant to the teacher, in that they tell him if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn (Corder, 1981). On the other hand, learner's errors provide to researchers evidence of how language is learnt and acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner employ in his discovery of the language. In fact, errors are essential to the learner himself and it is a method the learner uses to test his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.

In fact, Teachers can gain much benefit from error analysis and description because errors provide them with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching materials and their teaching techniques. In addition, errors enable teachers to decide whether they can move on to the next item they have been teaching and they provide the information for designing an improved syllabus or a plan of improved teaching. Therefore, errors made by students are major elements in the feedback system of the process of language teaching and learning. It is on the basis of the

information the teacher gets from errors that he modifies his teaching procedures or materials, the pace of the progress, and the amount of practice that he plans at any point of time. In view of this, Corder claims that teachers should be able not only to detect and describe errors linguistically but also understand the psychological reasons for their occurrence. He also claims that for teacher, being aware of the diagnosis and correction skills for errors is fundamental as it might help them understand why and how they can interfere to help their students.

2. Learners' attitudes towards errors and error correction

Teachers and students have different attitudes toward errors and error correction. Teachers, as Pit Corder put it, are more concerned with how to deal with errors than with what causes them. Some of them think " if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and that therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques" (Corder, 1967). Therefore, such teachers try every means to prevent their students from making errors by constant correction which they believe, would help students recognize their errors and not repeat them. On the other hand, some other teachers believe that the learning of the foreign language may be discouraged by the teacher who insists upon correction and grammatical accuracy. They also believe that continuous correction can raise learners' level of anxiety, and that this impedes learning (Krashen, 1982).

Like teachers, it is not surprising to see that some students like to be corrected every now and then by their teachers because they believe that frequent correction would improve the language they are learning. Cathcart and Olsen (1979) show that students want their oral errors to be corrected. In a study on EL2 student writers, Leki (1991) likewise finds that 100 per cent of these students wanted all their written errors corrected. On the other hand, some students find continuous correction very annoying, distracting and discouraging. They do not mind being corrected if the error is really conspicuous but they hate it whenever they make it. They do not like being corrected whenever they are speaking and some of them would even stop participating in the classroom interaction just because they do not want to be corrected. Due to these different attitudes, both teachers and students should adopt a reasonable approach to handle the error-correction problem effectively and appropriately in order to adapt to their preferences in learning and teaching.

For this reason, the author of this article once conducted a survey to find out how Chinese college students feel about English teachers' error correction practice in oral and written work. It is hoped that the information from this study may be useful in evaluating the teachers' practice in the area of error correction and may be of pedagogic importance to Chinese college English teachers about how they should treat their students' errors.

Method

The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire. The population for the study consisted of students at a Polytechnic University and the participants in the study were 58 students. The subjects were two classes of students in the Mechanical Engineering Department at the Polytechnic University. They are in the same class taught by the same English teacher, and therefore, comparable attitudes among the test subjects were ensured towards the teachers' commonly-used error correction methods. The assumption is made that the subjects represent a sample of college students. Therefore, the findings and implications of the study should be generalized to the extent that other students are similar to the subjects.

A questionnaire was devised to see how the students react to their teacher's error-correction practice. It consists of a list of 14 methods which the teacher normally uses to correct the students' mistakes in oral and written work. They can be divided into three parts: self correction, peer correction and teacher correction. The list was followed by three questions. The students were asked to choose which method they like most and which they like the least and give reasons respectively. They were also asked to decide whether they prefer the teacher to correct every mistake or have only the important mistakes corrected and give reasons. The results are shown as follows.

Results

The following table presents the data for students' preferences for correction method.

Insert Table 1 Here

1) Teacher correction (63.3%): Students entered the following items: "say something good and then point out the mistakes" (40%). They thought they could feel confident in this way; "tell the student what area the mistakes is in" (10%); use gestures (6.7%); "tell the student he has made a mistake" (3.3%); "give the student the correct answer directly" (3.3%).

2) Peer correction (16.7). Under this heading were "the teacher's asking another student if what has been said is correct" (10%); "asking the whole class to correct the mistakes" (6.7%).

3) Self correction (20%). It consisted "the teacher's repeating the student's answer until the mistake occurs" (10%) and "asking the students to repeat" (10%).

The survey reveals that the Chinese college students are accustomed to teacher correction. This may be due to the deep-rooted teacher-centered teaching approach in China. Also the students would like the teacher to appreciate their progress and make some positive comment on their performance.

As for which methods they prefer the least, 50% of students don't like the teacher to correct the mistakes by exaggerating his voice. Their reason is that they are afraid of being laughed at by others and it can make them lose their confidence; 20% of students dislike self-correction and 30% of students dislike saying nothing about their mistakes.

As far as the students' preference for teacher's correction is concerned, 70% of students prefer the teacher to correct every mistake. They explain that if the teacher were strict with them, they would make greater progress in their future language learning. In contrast, 30% students prefer the teacher have only the serious mistakes corrected for the reason that they might lose confidence and interest in learning English if the teacher were too particular about the mistakes they made.

3. Implications

This section will focus on some of the techniques for error correction. These techniques are meant to help teachers eliminate the problems of error correction and to help them provide their students with effective strategies to overcome this problem.

Take the students' preferences into consideration

It is very clear that individual students differ from each other in their attitudes towards errors and error correction. Before starting the process of correction and ensure that students are receptive to error correction, it is necessary to find out their preferences and attitudes towards correction and feedback. Being aware of these preferences and attitudes will help teachers to choose the appropriate way of correction and will help them serve their learners' needs by distributing a questionnaire or a survey on their students (Fantozzi, 1998). These questionnaires should include statements and questions that are carefully prepared to get the students' attitudes towards correction and feedback. Based on the findings of the questionnaires, teachers can then choose the appropriate correcting strategy or they may even decide to use more than one strategy at a time according to their students' demands. These kinds of questionnaires could be used at later stages as well to plan remedial work and to modify the teaching techniques (McKeating, 1981).

Know what errors to correct and when to correct

Instead of correcting errors randomly, teachers should correct them systematically. They should concentrate on errors that hinder communication. If an error is likely to hinder comprehension or lead students into further errors, then it should be corrected. Besides, teachers should correct those errors which are regularly repeated by students and those they consider to be the most serious. They should not correct every now and then in a way that affects learners' confidence or interest in learning. Teachers should be able to differentiate between "mistakes" and "errors". Mistakes can probably be self-corrected if the student's attention is drawn to them. With errors "the teacher must decide whether an indication of error is likely to provide useful feedback which can help the individual and others in the class to progress in their understanding of the language" (Hedge, 2000). Another important aspect that should be taken into consideration is the context in which the error has occurred. Being aware of the context leads teachers either to correct immediately when an error is made, postpone the correction until the end of the activity or ignore the error. With regard to speaking activities (a context where the focus is on fluency), the usual advice is to delay feedback until the end of the activity so as to avoid interrupting the student's flow of speech. While in a pronunciation activity (a context where focus is on accuracy), students should be stopped immediately when they make a mistake, otherwise they will continue repeating it. In conclusion, teachers should be careful with regard to what error to correct and when should it be corrected and they should consider the nature of the activity (context) being undertaken.

Encourage students to use self-correction techniques

Error correction should not always be the responsibility of teachers. Teachers should train their students to correct their own errors and give them the chance to do so. Actually, there are so many ways to help students correct by themselves. For instance, while correcting errors in writing, teachers can use some correction codes to indicate to students that there is an error instead of giving them the correction directly (e.g. writing the letter 'T' to indicate that the tense being used is wrong). Of course, these correction codes should be explained to students in advance so that students are familiar with them. An example of this coding system is given in Hedge (2000:319). Teachers can also

encourage students to use discovery techniques. For example, if a student makes an error while speaking, the teacher could say: "Excuse me?", "Sorry, could you say that again?" or he could repeat the student's sentence and stress the error to indicate that it is not correct. By doing so, the student will try to correct himself and as a result, would be more confident when dealing with errors and less dependent on the teacher. Actually, there is much evidence that a self-discovery approach reduces the likelihood of students' dependence on external assistance.

Make better use of peer correction technique

One of the disadvantages of peer correction is that it deprives the student of the opportunity to correct the error himself. Moreover, some students hate to be corrected by their peers although they do not mind being corrected by the teacher. In spite of this, there is evidence that error correction by peers may be more likely to lead students to learning. Block (1996: 170) suggests that "…it would appear that teacher-generated discourse is less memorable than learner-generated discourse". However, if teachers intend to use this technique, they should bear in mind that it should be carefully planned in advance in order for it to be successful.

Use a wide range of feedback alternatives

Teachers can create the desire in students to accept and appreciate feedback to show that their performance is flawed. However, the repetitive use of the same type of feedback could be boring and may cause students lose interest in finding out the reasons for their errors. In fact, there are several alternatives of feedback that can be adopted by teachers in correcting errors. Diane and Barbara (1998) put forward the following types of feedback:

1) Explicit correction**:** indicate clearly that the students answer is incorrect and provide the answer.

2) Recast: indicate directly that the student's answer was incorrect; the teacher implicitly reformulates the student's error, or provides the answer.

3) Clarification: by using expressions like "Excuse me?" or "Sorry, I don't understand", the teacher indicates that the message has not been understood or that the student's answer contained some kind of mistake and repetition or reformulation is required.

4) Elicitation: the teacher elicits the correct form from the student by asking questions or by allowing the student to complete the teacher's utterance (e.g. "This is a…"), or by asking student to reformulate the answer (e.g. "say it again").

5) Repetition: The teacher repeats the student's mistake and adjusts intonation to draw student's attention.

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