



## Accuracy & Fluency – Inspiration from Error-correction of Interlanguage Theory

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### Abstract

Relation between accuracy and fluency has always been an endless topic in foreign language teaching. Their relation is the most essential linguistic behavior in classroom teaching --- error-correction being connected together. Traditional behaviorist teaching and communicative approach can not resolve this issue. Interlanguage theory proposed in 1970s provides strong theoretical direction. In this text, the author looks back to history of error-correction concept, illustrates interlanguage theory, and reveals value of interlanguage theory in accuracy and fluency.

**Keywords:** Error-correction, Interlanguage theory, Foreign language teaching

### 1. Introduction

In language teaching, linguistic mistakes are unavoidable, and how to deal with these mistakes is the first issue for a teacher to face. Chinese traditional English teaching paid special attention on linguistic accuracy. That is, whenever a mistake is discovered, it should be corrected immediately. The attitude of “error-correcting wrong once discovered” results in the fact that students lose opportunities for learning and utilizing a language, and their linguistic creative capacity is seriously restrained, which brings about the so-called “Deaf-mute English” phenomenon. Under such a circumstance, voice for teaching revolution constantly, and a new teaching approach targeting at cultivating students’ communicative capacity ---communicative approach comes into being. Due to the fact that communicative approach is introduced based on the denial at traditional teaching approach, quite lots of hypercorrection phenomena appear: in order that students could more speak and practice, teachers usually ignore their mistakes. Although they can run off at the mouth, mistakes flow. It seems that they speak fluently, but not accurately, not able to achieve exactly communicative effect. A phenomenon of “Fluent fool” is resulted thereout. Either “Deaf-mute English” or “Fluent English” is what English teachers and students have expected. However, essential reason for the previous phenomena is unilateralism of foreign language teaching. While traditional English teaching concentrates on accuracy but ignoring fluency, communicative teaching approach focuses on fluency but ignoring accuracy, which put linguistic accuracy and fluency in a position of contradiction. Relationship between accuracy and fluency is the most essential linguistic behavior in classroom teaching -- error-correction being connected together. The following questions have remained an endless topic in foreign language teaching: whether a learner’s linguistic mistakes should be corrected? Which mistakes to correct? When to correct? How to correct and by whom? The interlanguage theory proposed in 1970s has, without doubt, brought instructive guide and god-given gospel either in theory or in practice. This theory tells us that, mistakes are a necessary objective phenomenon in the process of language learning, and are symbol of a learner acquiring a second language. Mistakes are not a manifest of low capacity on the part of a learner, and on the contrary, not making mistakes would not enable a learner to learn a foreign language well. Therefore, it can be said that, proposing of interlanguage theory has great theoretical and practical guiding significance in error-correction of college classroom English teaching.

### 2. Theoretical origins of error-correction concept

The reason for traditional English teaching to emphasize on accuracy has something direct to do with structuralism and behaviorism psychology. According to behaviorism, language is a kind of habit, a linguistic behavior formed by stimulus and response, and an aggregation formed by innumerable behaviors or linguistic habits. Accurate language

learning of learners is realized through stimulus – response –consolidation. The specific learning approach is as follows: simulation, memory and recitation. Only by means of repeatedly practicing, exercising, and utilizing language structural forms, can a learner finally be accustomed and achieve automatic response. In the process of learning, learners are factually regarded as passive information conveyors, and whatever information is input will be output correspondingly. Therefore, linguistic information of a learner must be accurate. Eventually, a teacher will determine what kind of feedback to give to a learner according to accuracy of linguistic output. Correct output deserves encouragement and commendation, while incorrect output should be corrected. Thereby, accuracy of linguistic input and output is a prerequisite for ensuring successful language learning. Based on this knowledge, it is obvious that false information is unallowed, since it is usually considered an unsuccessful symbol, caused due to the fact that students do not master what they have learned well or that teachers have not taught in an appropriate way. Therefore, teachers and students should try to prevent and avoid mistakes, and once discovered, they should be immediately corrected.

With deepening of study on second language acquisition and language teaching theory, people begin to switch their research focus from language learning environment to language learners themselves. Chomsky discovered language acquisition mechanism in the process of analyzing children acquiring mother tongue, and he put forward hypothesis of language acquisition mechanism. Enlightened by Chomsky's language acquisition, Corder proposed another second language acquisition mode. He held the view that, when learning a second language, learners do not respond to external linguistic stimulation blindly, but actively construct a rule system about target language through their mind: learners firstly analyze and generalize the language they learn. And on this basis, they make various hypotheses about target language rules. Then after (spoken and written) communication, they verify their hypotheses in the process of language utilization and understanding, in which correct hypotheses are accepted and intensified, while false hypotheses get improved by modification or error-correction. It is by means of this to-and-fro process of hypothesis →verification →re-hypothesis →re-verification that learners acquire a language.

Second language acquisition is a process of continual development of learners' cognitive capacity, in which there exist two courses: analysis and control (Johnson1996). Analysis is a transitional process of learners' knowledge from unapparent to apparent in the cognitive field; control is a process of arranging and synthesizing linguistic information on the part learners, until learners are proficient in the language. Therefore, second language acquisition can be generalized as a process of analysis, control and proficient utilization. This chain process is one in which learners' interlanguage come into being and develop. In 1972, the English linguist Larry Selinker put forward "Interlanguage theory".

### 3. Interlanguage theory and its error-correction attitude

As a branch of applied linguistics, the appearance of interlanguage is inherit and development of traditional foreign language teaching. It not only enables people to be accurately aware of students' mistakes, but makes them understand how the mother tongue and the second language are learned and acquired. Analysis of mistakes can reveal features of learners' interlanguage, so as to help them find out corresponding tactic, and develop the interlanguage better.

In Interlanguage theory, language learning is an extremely complicated psychological process of re-building and re-creating. Starting from mother tongue, a learner overcomes interference of mother tongue step by step, and finally masters a language totally, transiting from simplicity to complexity. During this far-flung internalization, the language used by a learner is neither a translation of his mother tongue, nor the target language he is learning, but a language called "interlanguage". Because interlanguage is between mother tongue and target language, it is unavoidable that quite a lot of mistakes will emerge. In Slinker's opinion, this inevitable inconsistency may interpret the natural property of foreign language mistakes, and this inconsistency may result from the fact a learner's mistakes have the tendency of "fossilixation". Fossilixation refers to a phenomenon as follows: a learner's interlanguage is closer to his target language with the improvement of his linguistic capacity and fewer and fewer linguistic mistakes, but some mistakes still remain not overcome, which are called "fossilixation". Interlanguage theory opposes taking mistakes in the process of foreign language learning for simple right and wrong questions. And it refers to these mistakes as differences between mother tongue and target language of learners, and as objective existence that differs from various standards of their target language, but approaches gradually. From the perspective of practice teaching, interlanguage theory includes such a series of theoretical and practical subjects as why error-correcting, what to correct, when to correct and how to correct, etc.. For instance, Corder classifies linguistic mistakes as those before the formation of the system, those of the system, and those afterwards. For mistakes of different phases, we may adopt diverse tactics of teacher error-correcting, self-error-correcting of students, and mutual error-correcting between students. And for each tactic, attention should be paid to property of mistakes. Just as Tomas (1983) pointed out, in speech communication, if a speak does not code a mode and make wording and phrasing according to standard grammar, he might be said to speak badly at most; but if he does not process a discourse according to pragmatic principles, he will be said to behave badly, and to be a dishonest and evilly motivated. Therefore, teachers should treat with students' linguistic mistakes in a correct way. Either error-correction once discovered or no error-correction at all is unfeasible, and error-correction should be pertinent.

Error-correction theory tells us that error-correcting should take learners' affective factors into consideration. Inappropriate error-correction approach would frustrate students' self-confidence and enthusiasm, especially for students with bad English foundation and introverted characteristics. Then creation of enjoyable linguistic environment on the part of teachers is particularly important. Creating a healthy, relaxed and lively classroom atmosphere and forming harmonious relationships between teachers and students can help students overcome their feeling of pudency. They should be encouraged to make mistakes, and communicate with the language they have learned, so as to improve proficiency of their utilizing the language. Hence, we get a conclusion that interlanguage theory is really an instructive guide for error-correction in classroom teaching.

#### **4. Conclusion**

English teaching practice indicates that, error-correction once discovered and over-correction may result in a psychology of "being scared to make mistakes" on the part of students, so they do not dare to try to communicate with the target language, which goes extremely against developing their capacity of communicating in the target language; while "encouraging students to speak English, and avoiding error-correction so as not to affect their enthusiasm of speaking English" will cause "Mute English" to go towards another extremity. According to interlanguage theory, linguistic mistake of a learner is a normal phenomenon in the learning process for "fluent fools". In linguistic communication, what a learner considers in the first place is the expressing of meaning. Before the internalization of their linguistic rules, mistakes of linguistic forms are inevitable, and furthermore, some mistakes are a necessary phase for language learning. Therefore, teachers should intensify their tolerance towards mistakes, learn and acquaint themselves with some theories related to error-correction, replace pure teaching standards of linguistic behavior with acceptability of language, and meanwhile, give overall consideration to linguistic accuracy and fluency. In classroom teaching, a teacher should emphasize tactics in error-correction, and should by no means show any impatience. Otherwise, students' self-esteem and self-confidence will be frustrated, and they will lose interest in foreign language learning, which will just backfire.

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