

# Error Correction in Oral Classroom English Teaching

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## Abstract

As is known to all, errors are inevitable in the process of language learning for Chinese students. Should we ignore students' errors in learning English?

In common with other questions, different people hold different opinions. All teachers agree that errors students make in written English are not allowed. For the errors students make in oral English, opinions vary from person to person. Many teachers think we should mainly focus on fostering the students' competence of using the languages fluently, and errors the students make can be ignored. As far as I am concerned, we shouldn't teach students this way.

In theory, there is no doubt that students are allowed to make errors while learning English. As Li yang puts it, students should enjoy making mistakes. There is another saying that the more mistakes you make, the more you will learn. It shows that mistakes can unfold what students are poor in. The teacher can help them out in time. All students hope for teachers' help. They are willing to follow teachers' guidance when necessary. Only in this way can they improve their English little by little. On the other hand, if we ignore students' errors in spoken English, they will never be able to communicate well with other in English or do well in exams. In fact, the language error usually occurs in classroom English teaching at junior high school. This thesis will talk about language error correction in classroom teaching at junior high school through analyzing the types of errors and exploring the causes of errors. And it will put forward to some strategies to correct these errors.

**Keywords:** errors, error correction, oral classroom English teaching

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Definition of Errors

Error is defined as: (in the speech or writing of a second or foreign language learner) the use of a linguistic item, (e.g., a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning, according to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (Richards, J. Platt, & H. Platt, 1998).

Researchers offered different versions to the definition of the word error. While defining error, they often compare error and mistake. Corder (1967) who was regarded as the pioneer defining errors pointed out that an error is a systematic deviation made by learner who have yet grasped the use of the target language rules. He believed that the error should be distinguished from mistakes. Brown (1994) once gave examples to show the difficulty in telling the difference between error and mistake. Dulay (1982) defined errors as the deviation from a chosen norm of language performance, while Chun (1982) and Richard (1992) think error are mentioned as the use of the language a linguistic item in a way, according to native or fluent users of the language, suggested incorrect or incomplete language learning.

From the definition above, researches all believed an error is distinguished from a mistake. An error is a systematic deviation made by learner who are lack of knowledge of the correct rule of the target language. It shows a lack of language competence and it reflects a learner's current stage of L2 development. Therefore, a learner can hardly self-correct an error. Whereas a mistake is caused by the lack of performance attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspects of performance. A learner can self-correct it when a mistake is pointed out. In this paper, the author defined the term error as the form which is deviated from the norm which is regarded as the proper use of native speakers. However, the author thinks that in the real context of language learning, especial the classroom English teaching at junior high school, it is not easy and necessary to distinguish the errors and

mistakes. Thus, in this paper, error and mistake are considered as two interchangeable terms or synonyms.

### 1.2 The Current Condition of Language Errors in Classroom English at Junior High School

Nowadays, language error is an inevitable universal phenomenon which occurs in the process of learning English. How should we deal with students' errors. This is an important issue. When meeting the students' error, a teacher should find the causes of the errors. We usually find some unbelievable errors which occur in students' spoken English. Because students can't master the whole knowledge that teacher introduced. They must go through a long process to master the whole knowledge. So teachers should use right way to correct these errors of our students.

### 1.3 Types of Students' Errors

Type	Pronunciation errors	Grammatical errors	Communication strategy-based errors
Proportion	30%	50%	20%

#### 1.3.1 Pronunciation Errors

A student makes his daily report in class as follows: "I had a terrible dream last night. I was deserted [dezetid] in the desert [dezet] and felt very hungry. Suddenly I found some dessert [dizet] in my pocket. I was about to put it into my mouth when a deserted [dezetid] dog ran up and took it away." Actually, we know the story of the boy in the dream, the boy was deserted in the desert feeling hungry. A deserted dog took the dessert he found in his pocket before he put it into his mouth. Without doubt the boy failed to express himself. The example shows that pronunciation errors often make it hard for the speakers to make themselves understood or even make them misunderstood and listeners puzzled. So communicating in English seems to be more difficult.

#### 1.3.2 Grammatical Errors

We often hear some sentences like this "The problem will discuss tomorrow. I am get up at six in the morning. I am like watching TV." The first sentence is spoken by students who are influenced by the mother tongue-Chinese. The rest may be spoken by students whose teacher often reminds them that "I" should be followed by "am". If these errors don't get corrected in time, the students will keep them in mind and think they are right. The result will be very terrible. The three short sentences are enough to show us that it is necessary for the students to obey grammar rules when speaking English.

#### 1.3.3 Communication Strategy-Based Errors

A foreign teacher had her first class in a Chinese middle school. She asked the students to have a free talk—introduce themselves or ask her some questions. A boy was so excited that he stood up and blurted out "How old are you? Are you married? How much do you earn a year?" These questions made the teacher a bit embarrassed, but she just smiled and replied, "It is a secret." Then she told the class it is impolite to ask others such private questions. She is a patient teacher who can tolerate it. We are not sure whether everyone will accept it. If so, such students will not be welcome or be considered impolite. They may lose many friends and opportunities.

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Definition of Error Analysis

Richards et al. (2000) defines error analysis as "the study and analysis of the errors made by second and foreign language learners". This new movement tried to follow an inductive approach, that is, to draw inferences about difficult areas from studying actual errors.

Error analysis distinguishes mistakes and error. A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip", in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Mistakes are of no significance to language learning because they are made at random and non-systematic. An error is noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflection the limit of the the learner's competence in using the target language. It is just because that learners do make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors.

Compared with contrastive analysis, error analysis treats error in a more objective manner, it sets out to

- A. Identify strategies which learners use in language learning
- B. Try to identify the causes of learners use in language learning

C. Obtain information on common difficulties in language, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials

Generally, an error analysis follows five steps:

- A. A corpus of language is selected, which is to decide the size the medium of the sample.
- B. The errors in the corpus are identified
- C. The errors are classified
- D. The errors are explained
- E. The errors are evaluated

Different from contrastive analysis, error analysis provides information about learner's target language: psycholinguistic type of error. A study of errors reveals conclusively that there is no single or prime cause of errors and provides clues about the kinds of strategies learners employ. Wang (2005) summarizes five sources of errors. Interlingual errors reflect the learner's first language structure, which is commonly referred to as language transfer. Interlingual errors reveal the attempt that learners made to simplify the task of learning a second language. Other sources include errors of transfer of training, errors of communication and errors of inference.

Errors analysis indicated a shift in the pedagogical focus from preventing errors to learning from errors. It's most significant contribution lies in its re-evaluation of the status errors: from undesirable to significant. Errors were no longer seen as "unwanted form" but as evidence of the learner's active contribution to second language acquisition, as is noted by Corder (1981) that errors are significant to the teacher, to the researcher and to the learner.

The description of errors, the product aspect of learning, is the advantage of error analysis in comparison to contrastive analysis. While contrastive analysis is prescriptive in nature, the descriptive aspect of error analysis makes it more plausible as well as acceptable. Error analysis classifies errors according to directly observable characteristics that each error has. Errors are classified on the basis of the proper linguistic elements they lack; there are errors of addition, omission, mis-formation and mis-ordering.

### *2.2 Whether to Do Error Correction*

The necessity of doing error correction has been a controversial issue which is debated by researchers. The question of whether learners' errors should be corrected has no simple answer. In 1950s-1960s, according to behaviorists, language learning is a process of habits formation. So all errors in oral production which might affect learners' formation of correct habits were considered as negative and should be directly corrected at all costs. In 1970s—1980s, some specialists proposed a more relaxed approach that is no direct error correction at all. For Krashen and Terrell (1983), the persistent error correction is not only detrimental to the internalization of a language, but futile. They hold the view that a relaxed or anxiety-free language environment should be provided to learners, and learner should correct mistakes by themselves through self-monitoring rather than by teachers.

### *2.3 When to Do Error Correction*

Whether the teacher should do error correction immediately, or delay correction, which is a problem for teachers. If the teacher corrects students' errors immediately, many teachers think that it might interrupt the learners' conversation or performance and could finally inhibit the learner's willingness to speak in class. Thus the influence on students is negative. While if the teacher delays the time of error correction, it will much reduce the effect of correction just as Long (1977) points out, the psychology research literature shows that correction will become less effective if the time between the performance of the skill and the correction increases. Bai (2006) believes that interruption is not a preferable way to correct the students' language errors, for it might make students feel embarrassed and discouraged and lead to students' withdrawal from learning.

So as teachers, we must evaluate the results of using these different strategies in our classroom and then make our decision on when to do error correction. Teachers also have to consider the learner's different personality and study ability. Teachers should treat different students with different ways.

## **3. The Causes of Language Errors**

### *3.1 Language Transfer*

Mother tongue plays a very significance role in English learning and it has great influence on learners' language which is known as interlingual transfer. The influence from mother tongue can be both positive and negative, so there are positive transfer and negative transfer of mother tongue (e.g., I very like my teacher). In Chinese, we usually use the vocabulary “虽然.....但是.....”, “因为.....所以.....”. So the students often make sentences like

these follow sentences. “Although he is young, but he can look after himself.” “Because he was ill that day, so he didn’t go to the meeting.”

### 3.2 Intralingual Interference

Errors can also be caused by the training the learners received. It includes the textbook explanations and teacher’s instruction. Sometimes textbook writers fail to explain a language rule or phenomena clearly and comprehensively. And sometimes language teachers might give the implicit or imprecise explanation to language items or the use of a language rule. When learners are exposed to the new linguistic materials, they are likely to make incorrect or false induction or incomplete generalization and so errors caused by learning context occur. e.g., After studying the sentence “would like to do sth...”, the students often use the error sentence “feel like to do sth...”. And some students regard the follow words as adverb. “friendly, lovely, lonely”.

### 3.3 Communication Strategies

When existent precise language items are not available to the learners would consciously adopt some verbal or nonverbal mechanism for communication. The communication strategies contain using synonyms and opposites, switching to L1 or literally translating L1 items into L2. When some items are improperly used, error based on the use of communication strategies occur. Besides factors mentioned above, affective factors and social factors may also be the causes of errors in language learning (e.g. If you ask the question “How much do you earn every year?” to a foreigner, he will not answer you because this question offend his privacy).

## 4. The Strategies of Error Correction

When a teacher decides to correct an error, there are many ways or strategies he or she could adopt to do the correction. For the types of error correction, different classifications can be found in the field of SLA research by numerous researchers. Chaudron (1988) divides the types of feedback into nine kind kinds, of which the first seven are negative feedback and the last two are positive feedback: (1) fact of error feedback, (2) location of error feedback, (3) error type feedback, (4) correct form model feedback, (5) remedy feedback, (6) chance for new attempt feedback, (7) blame feedback, (8) improvement feedback, (9) praise feedback.

Schachter (1984) concludes the strategies of error correction:

(1) explicit correction, (2) implicit correction, (3) confirmation check and clarification requests, (4) indication of non-comprehension.

Doughty (1994) claims negative feedback types are:

(1) clarification request, (2) repetition, (3) recast, (4) expansion, (5) translation, (6) teacher English I will introduce four strategies of error correction.

### 4.1 Teachers’ Correction

#### 4.1.1 Explicit Correction

Explicit Correction refers to the explicit provision of the classroom. As the teacher provides the correct form, he or she clearly indicates that what the student had said was correct.

T: What did you have for breakfast this morning?

S: I have a glass of milk, an egg and some bread.

T: Oh, you should say: “I had a glass of milk...” Read after me, please.

S: Oh, sorry. I had a glass of milk, an egg and some bread.

T: That’s right.

#### 4.1.2 Implicit Correction

Requests indicate to the students either that their utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way and that a repetition or a reformulation is required. A clarification request includes phrases such as “pardon me ...” It may also include a repetition of the errors in “What do you mean by...?”

T: What is your mother?

S: My mother is Mrs. Wang.

T: What does your mother do?

S: She is a teacher.

T: Now I ask you the same question. What is your mother?

S: She is a teacher.

T: Good job.

#### 4.2 Students' Correction

##### 4.2.1 Lead Students to Correct Errors by Themselves

A teacher can't correct the errors directly all the time. Teacher can lead the students to correct errors by themselves. We can help students find their errors and the causes by themselves.

S: I go to a concert last weekend.

T: I go to ... ↗? Last weekend...↗? Go...↗?

S: Sorry, I went to a concert last weekend.

T: That's right. You are a clever boy.

##### 4.2.2 Errors Correction by Group

As we know, classmates study together every day. So, let their classmates point out the errors when a student occurs an error. The student receives the correction easier than that the teacher points out his error.

S1: We came here by the train?

T: (Ask whole students) By the train?

Whole S: No, by train.

S1: Sorry, we came here by train.

T: Good job.

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, when an error occurs, the teacher must decide firstly whether to correct the error. Interest is the best teacher and confidence is essential for students to do well in lessons. So when correcting students' errors, we teachers must pay much attention to the time, the way we use and our attitude. We can do it differently, sometimes during the event in class, sometimes after the event or after class. We must be friendly and patient. We can manage it by using body language, by rephrasing the students' words with right information, or by asking questions according to the students' errors etc. In all, we should try to avoid discouraging students while correcting errors. So, if the teacher thinks it is necessary to correct it, then he or she would make a decision on several question: when, how and who to do this error correction. Therefore, the issues described in this modal can raise a series of questions. Of course, the teacher should find the appropriate way to correct the error. Therefore we can help the students improve their English step by step without hurting them.

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