

The Influence of Educational Programme on Teachers' Error Correction Preferences in the Speaking Skill: Insights from English as a Foreign Language Context

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Abstract

In the area of language teaching, corrective feedback is one of the popular and hotly debated topics that have been widely explored to date. A considerable number of studies on students' preferences of error correction and the effects of error correction approaches on student achievement do exist. Moreover, much on teachers' preferences of error correction approaches has also been explored. However, less seems to be done with regard to teachers' practices of error correction approaches, especially in the area of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The present study explored EFL teacher's preferences of error correction approaches in the speaking skill, and further focused on whether the teachers were able to employ the approaches they preferred in their classrooms. Data were collected from a group of 17 EFL teachers, through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The findings revealed that although the teachers had clear preferences for error correction approaches, they could not employ them in their classrooms owing to the educational programme constraints. Furthermore, it was observed that they often had to adopt approaches that they were not actually in favour of. Implications for programme and curriculum designers are further discussed.

Keywords: corrective feedback, educational programme, EFL, error correction

1. Introduction

Research on error correction in language classrooms has added new approaches and techniques to the body of literature in the last four decades (Lee, 2007). Different approaches to error correction, types of errors made by language learners, and error correction techniques have been widely explored (Ferris, 2002; Tsang, 2004). These aspects were also evaluated in relation to specific skills of the English language (i.e. writing, speaking). Such exploration has shed light on the techniques and factors that play an important role in recognising errors, how they develop, and how they are reduced. Such research has then changed its direction to the preferences of the teachers in terms of what they actually want to employ in their classrooms (Chandler, 2003). Many have also noted findings with regard to what teachers prefer (i.e. type of corrective feedback or technique) when giving their students corrective feedback (Diab, 2007; Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2002). In this area, there seems to be a variety of approaches and more than a dozen techniques of error correction, with which the majority of the researchers seem to agree. Although the area is widely explored, we still know little about how the existing conceptions, or the set of approaches agreed on by the majority, relate to classroom practice, as well as how much consideration is given to the relevant theories when designing programme curricula and syllabi. The conviction here is that since some error correction approaches require plenty of time to apply in classrooms (i.e. self-correction), we see the need to question whether the programme syllabi offers adequate time for such applications. To put it differently, 'Can teachers employ the error correction approach that they think of as the most useful in their classrooms?' is the question that pops into our minds when we think about the programme curricula and syllabi in terms of their flexibility. More importantly, the majority of the existing studies (i.e., Yang, 2009) on teachers' preferences of error correction approaches seem to partly focus on what they prefer, and they mostly build assumptions on what teachers' classroom practices are like, based on those preferences. Studies which place equal emphasis on both the preference and classroom practice, with appropriate methodology, seem to be rare,

and deserve more attention (Lee, 2007). Thus, the scope of the present paper is to first explore the preferences of the approaches of the EFL teachers at the English Preparatory School (EPS) of the European University of Lefke, in Northern Cyprus, and then to look at whether these approaches can be employed in their current educational programme with regard to the programme flexibility and syllabi. Findings from such a study are expected to shed light on the programme and curriculum design and provide an authentic picture of what is preferred but what is put into practice, owing to institutional constraints (if any). We believe that such understanding is critical, as we do not see any point if the programme syllabi or nature does not allow the teachers to teach in the ways they prefer, who are responsible from teaching in the classrooms.

1.1 Error Correction Approaches in EFL Classrooms

Error is an undeniable dynamic of language classrooms, which every student is expected to make use of throughout the language learning process. In the literature, we frequently come across three different approaches that are used by teachers, namely: self-correction, peer-correction, and teacher correction (Gumbaridze, 2013; Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010; Hyland & Anan, 2006). Among these, the self-correction approach is often defined as students monitoring their own performance and correcting their errors themselves with some guidance from the teacher (Ferris, 2002). According to many (i.e. Gumbaridze, 2013; Li, 2013; Tsang, 2004), this is one of the best approaches in terms of improving learner's discovery and critical thinking skills, as well as contributing to their long-term learning. Peer-correction, on the other hand, is often defined as a peer correcting the learner's error in instances when the learner is not able to correct himself. This approach is valued with regard to bringing cooperative skills to the learners (Olajedo, 1993; Rollinson, 2005). It should, however, be acknowledged here that there is still an ongoing debate among the scholars about the definitions of self- and peer-correction approaches (Ferris, 2002). The third approach, teacher correction, on the other hand, is often defined as the teacher immediately and directly correcting the error without leaving any responsibility to the learner. This approach, however, is often viewed as an outdated one, and receives less attention from the teachers in terms of their preferences (Lewis & Hill, 1992).

All the above approaches consist of specific techniques when dealing with the errors, but with regard to the type of language skill error made. For example, in the writing skill, codes are often used for learner's self-correction (i.e. 'ww' standing for 'wrong word'). With regard to the speaking skill that the present study deals with, a variety of techniques are also used, which are discussed in the following section.

1.2 Verbal Error Correction Techniques Used in EFL Classrooms

In the literature, there are some specific techniques which are regarded as frequently used during oral interaction in language classrooms. The most popular of these are echoing, repetition up to the error, hinting/prompting, making a note of common errors, non-verbal methods (facial expressions), reformulation, and recording on tape (Gumbaridze, 2013, p. 663). Among these, however, echoing and repetition up to the error, and hinting/prompting are the ones that are mostly used and preferred by the teachers (ibid.). In addition to these techniques, Vilma (2009, p. 56) also offers some suggestions to language teachers with regard to how the errors should be corrected. These suggestions, which target verbal correction, are given as:

- correcting without laziness
- not working under the pressure of time
- giving the opportunity to the learners to overlook their work
- being positive and constructive while making comments
- planning to spend the necessary time in class for self-correction

1.3 Research on EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Error Correction Approaches in the Speaking Skill

Among the studies carried out to date, Lee (2007), Simard and Jean (2011), Tsang (2004) and Yang (2009) found that the EFL teachers preferred implicit error correction approaches such as self-correction and peer-correction. In Tsang's (2004) study, for example, teachers tended to use the recast technique the most, which is part of the implicit error correction approach. More recently, similar findings also emerged from Yoshida's (2008) study, where teachers opt for implicit error correction approaches, but could not do so because of time constraints. The interesting aspect in the literature, however, is that despite teachers having clear preferences about the error correction approaches, the current findings indicate that they are not able to put them into practice for a variety of reasons. Studies by Diab (2007), and Shelley and Jill (2010), showed that although the majority of the teachers preferred a self-correction approach and mentioned a variety of techniques that go along with the self-correction approach, they could not employ them in their classrooms owing to time constraints, and

sometimes due to the teacher's lack of skill. It is, however, worth noting that, no studies, to our knowledge, has focused on the preference and practice correlation at the same time, but provided findings from what the teachers dealt with proposed. Consequently, the majority of the studies in this area, including the aforementioned ones, often employed quantitative methodologies and used questionnaires as a data collection instrument, and neglected the use of an observational tool which would tell as also about the actions of the teachers in classrooms, instead of what they only propose. It is perhaps for this reason that they often fail to tell us the reasons for the match/mismatch between preference and practice, owing to the structured focus and data collection instruments used to gather data. It is our belief that research with a greater focus on preference-practice relationship, as well as research that adopts data collection instruments along with this purpose would explore the phenomenon in more depth and would tell us more about the reasons for the conflicts existing.

2. Method

The present study adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the phenomenon in depth, as it was believed that understanding teacher's perceptions in detail requires a descriptive methodology.

2.1 Research Questions

Of the several questions posed in the larger study, the following questions are explored in this paper:

- 1) Which error correction approaches do EFL teachers prefer to employ while correcting errors in the speaking skill?
- 2) Do the preferences of EFL teachers with regard to the error correction approaches in the speaking skill, match with their practices in their classrooms?
- 3) To what extent, the EFL teachers' preferences of error correction approaches in the speaking skill are affected (if so), in terms of their application in classrooms owing to the programme's syllabi?

2.2 Research Setting

The present study was conducted in one of the universities in Northern Cyprus, which is one part of the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean. In Northern Cyprus, all of the universities are recognised and accredited by the Higher Education Council in Turkey. The present study took place in the EPS of the European University of Lefke, which has also been accredited by Pearson-Edexcell in 2014 for its quality of organisation-management, teaching and learning, as well as assessment and evaluation. The aim of the EPS is to provide learners with English courses to increase their level of proficiency in order to cope with their undergraduate studies. The school offers students a proficient level of English throughout the two-semester course of study, with each semester divided into two modules. When the students complete the four modules given in two semesters successfully, and if they pass the English proficiency exam given at the end of the academic year, they can continue their studies in their chosen departments.

The English education in EPS is intensive. Students receive 25-hours of general English language education on a weekly basis, through using selected course books and a variety of supplementary materials. At the time of the present study, there were 25 teachers teaching at the EPS, who were guided by a curriculum and syllabus team in terms of what to teach. Since one of the prioritised aims of the school is to provide equal education to the 17 classrooms of equal language levels, providing a similar input to all classes and keeping all the classes on the same track is a serious concern. In order to achieve this, teachers are provided with a weekly syllabus, and are expected to follow this strictly, in order to avoid discrepancies between the classes throughout the academic year. The syllabus given to the teachers can be considered as strict, and the teachers should follow it step by step, and cover the topics and tasks as designated in the syllabi.

The approach of the institution to English education is clear. The main principle of the school is to provide communicative teaching and learning, and the school employs teaching philosophies based on communicative approaches. The patterns of the communicative philosophy can also be seen in the syllabi for each week, where a variety of group-work and discussion activities are included. Teachers of the institution are also expected to act accordingly, and use methods and techniques of English language teaching in their classrooms. There are no, however, specific sets of guidelines for the teachers indicating how to teach, which can be seen as a flexibility given to the teachers in terms of how to teach.

2.3 Participant Characteristics

Participants in the study included 17 teachers (12 female and 5 male), who were all Turkish Cypriot EFL teachers. Their ages ranged between 25–38 years. All of the participants had more than four years of teaching experience. Their mother tongue was Turkish, whereas two of them were bilinguals of Turkish and English

languages. Participants were selected based on volunteer criteria, and out of 25 teachers at the institution, 17 gave consent to take part in the study. All of these teachers were teaching in elementary language level classrooms, with classrooms consisting of approximately 23 students.

2.4 Data Collection Instruments

As part of the qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used to gather data. In the study, semi-structured interviews were considered to be well suited for the exploration of perceptions and opinions (Bryman, 2004). The main reason to select this instrument is its flexibility, as it allows both participants and the researcher to discuss issues that may not have previously been thought of (Kvale, 2007). Its question-answer-question nature is also said to help avoid misunderstandings and ensure clarification by asking follow-up questions.

Observations, moreover, were used to explore whether the approaches preferred by the teachers as revealed in the interviews, are employed in their classrooms. This strategy was believed to allow us to better understand teacher's preferences and their preference's applicability within the context, in its natural setting (Patton, 2002). Kawulich's (2005, p. 2) proposal on this idea, in which he mentions that 'observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a written photograph of the situation under study' is that in which the present study is interested.

2.5 Data Collection Procedures

Prior to the research, all the teachers who agreed to participate in the study were informed about the exact dates of the interviews and the observations to be held. The interviews were conducted in four days (four teachers in a day). During the interviews, questions with regard to teacher's preferences of error correction approaches and techniques were asked. Furthermore, probes were used to delve deeper into the answers of the participants.

On part of the observations, three observation sessions with each teacher were conducted. Throughout the fieldwork, a total of 48 observations were carried out. When undertaking the observations, a criterion was used, which allowed the researchers to fill in and take notes on it. These forms were the main data sources (see Appendix A for the observation form used).

2.6 Data Analysis

The interview data was first transcribed verbatim, and familiarised by repeated reading sessions (Bryman, 2004). The data were then divided into chunks to identify discrete parts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, codes were assigned to the data chunks, which lead to the formation of categories after combining the codes that went together (ibid.).

For the observations, instances of error correction attempts and types of error correction approaches were analysed in terms of their frequencies during the lesson. In addition, the comments made by the researcher during the observation of the classroom were also coded and linked with the frequencies for further interpretation.

3. Results

In this section, findings of the present study are presented. From the interviews and the observation data, two main categories, namely as: *teacher's preferences of error correction approaches*, and *classroom use of error correction approaches as preferred by the teachers*, emerged. When presenting the findings, the data from the interviews and the observations are given separately, although each section presents findings under the same categories.

3.1 Findings from the Interview Data

This section only presents findings from the interview data.

3.1.1 Teachers' Preferences of Error Correction Approaches

The majority of the teachers in the study clearly mentioned their positive views on using self-correction and peer-correction approaches, owing to their positive impact on student's learning. According to many, use of these approaches was effective in increasing student's motivation, and they provide students with a sense of responsibility, which is something good for their development. The following quotations given are representative of the overall cohort, which reflect teacher's preferences on the topic:

I prefer self-correction approach, and sometimes peer-correction approach, as to see they can correct themselves gives students the feeling that they are successful and this increases their motivation. When their motivation is high, they are more pleased in the classroom and they learn better.

T-7

The approach I prefer to use is strongly depended on my students and the activity to be done in class. I mostly like to prompt my students for self-correction to help them become more autonomous learners and also to give them some responsibilities.

T- 11

In my opinion, self-correction approach is difficult to apply but a beneficial one once you achieve it. Students desire to see they can do something on their own, and this approach enables them to do so.

T-14

A considerable number of the teachers also seemed to favour the peer-correction approach, mainly because peer-correction helped students to focus on activities and to learn from each other. The following comment echoes the majority of the teachers:

I believe students are competent and they like to see that they are good and also better than the others. For this reason, I mostly prefer to use peer-correction approach to make them correct other's errors. This is also helpful in taking classroom's attention to the activity, as in order to correct each other, they have to listen carefully, so that they do not lose the track. I believe peer-correction often leads to a healthy competition between the students.

T-8

The above quotations are likely to clarify that many of the teachers regarded self and peer-correction approaches as most effective and beneficial, and many seem to already apply them in their classrooms. In terms of the frequency of the responses, the self-correction approach was found to be cited more by the teachers, which perhaps suggests its broader preference. On the other hand, teacher-correction, which was cited only a few times, was often regarded as an ineffective approach to error correction, as it does not offer the students any opportunity for self-learning. The following quotation is explanatory in this regard, and represents the views of three of the teachers on this manner:

I prefer to use teacher correction approach, as it is easy to apply and the learners like to get the correct answer directly. As a teacher, my job is to provide students with correct input, so that they don't memorise the wrong structure.

T-3

3.1.2 Classroom Use of Error Correction Approaches as Preferred by the Teachers

Although the majority of the teachers appeared to prefer self and peer-correction approaches in their classrooms, when explored in depth, it was revealed that it was not often possible to employ it in their classrooms, owing to a variety of reasons. The most critical aspects that came from the data in this regard were the time constraints when employing these approaches, and the high number of students in the classrooms. The following quotations given are representative of the comments of the teachers who favoured self and peer-correction approaches:

Even though I really opt for self-correction approach and do my best to use it during my lessons, it seems that I don't have such a luxury, as it seriously slows down the flow of my program...Self-correction requires plenty of time; you have to give the students some time to think, retry, and mostly another chance to try again. And since our classrooms are crowded, it is very difficult to do this with every student. I mean, you still can do, but you cannot complete your pacing of that week.

T-15

Although I believe self and peer-correction approaches are far better and more effective, in my classrooms I usually employ teacher correction approach, as it is time saving and easier to use...It is impossible to employ it as we have a very structured lesson plan to follow and the time designated for each activity and task is given in the lesson plan, and we don't have much option to push it. Otherwise, we are not able to complete our program.

T-2

Waiting for each student to correct himself/herself is just a time taking issue. In the classrooms we have a pacing to complete in each week, so time is an important aspect that limits me in using the approach I prefer.

T-12

The above given quotations clearly implicate time and program structure as being strong factors in limiting teachers ability to employ the teaching approach they prefer. It seems that owing to the concerns teachers have in terms of achieving the lesson plan/pacing objectives, they tend perhaps to employ approaches that they favour the least.

In addition to the time constraints experienced, some of the teachers also mentioned other factors that inhibited them from using self and peer-correction approaches in their classrooms. These seem to be the student's lack of language proficiency in dealing with their own errors and student's own preferences of how to be corrected. The following quotations are clear indicators of this:

In contrast to my preferences, I often find myself adopting a different approach [teacher correction], as I teach in elementary level classrooms and my students language proficiency is quite low, and they are often not able to cope with their errors themselves, and you have to be more direct and clear to them.

T-9

When I try to employ peer-correction, my students want me to repeat the correct answer again, because they want to hear the answers from me. I think they feel safe this way. Therefore, instead of using the approach I favour and repeating the whole process again, I adopt teacher correction approach in order to easily complete the activity and respond my student's demands.

T-5

The data reflects that in addition to the constraints with regard to the program content that limit teachers from using their preferred approaches, some teachers also experience other difficulties which prevent them from using the preferred approach. This could perhaps be regarded as theory being irrelevant to practice, and teachers becoming aware of the difficulty of putting what are preferred into practice, which may also reflect a lack of skill.

3.2 Findings from the Observational Data

In this section, the data obtained from classroom observations is presented. Within this section, the data will be presented under one single category—classroom use of error correction approaches as preferred by the teachers, as only the practices of the teachers as observed in their classrooms are the focus.

3.2.1 Classroom Use of Error Correction Approaches as Preferred by the Teachers

The findings from the observation data indicated that there was an inconsistency between the teacher's preferences and classroom practices. Although the majority of the teachers previously mentioned that they prefer to adopt a self-correction approach, in only four teacher's classrooms were the patterns of such an approach observed. The data showed that in only one teacher's classroom, maximum effort was used in using self-correction by the teacher. Interestingly, although nine of the teachers initially stated that they were also in favour of the peer-correction approach, none of them seemed to employ this approach.

The most striking issue in the observation data was that although only three teachers mentioned preferences for teacher correction in the interviews, all of the teachers adopted the teacher correction technique in almost all of the classrooms that were observed. This could perhaps be linked to how teachers explained themselves during the interviews in terms of not being able to put what they prefer into practice. In the interviews, on most

occasions, teachers cited the number of students in the classrooms and the time constraints of self-correction as the most important factors inhibiting them from using this approach. However, exhibition of the self-correction approach by only one teacher and the absence of patterns of a peer-correction approach in any of the classrooms was not an expected issue.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal that there is a mismatch between EFL teacher's error correction preferences and their classroom practices. Although the teachers seem to have ideals on employing approaches whose benefits and effectiveness they believe in, the findings suggests that they usually tend to employ approaches other than what they actually prefer, and especially the ones that are direct and simpler. In other words, teacher's main concern seems to be on task completion, despite achieving the benefits and advantages of some approaches, as also preferred by them. This, however, seems to lead teachers not to adopt approaches that they actually prefer, but opt for the approaches that are likely to respond to program flexibility and student preferences.

In the study, in terms of frequency, the teachers mainly seemed to prefer the self-correction approach while correcting the errors (twelve of the seventeen), and a considerable number also preferred peer-correction (nine of them, three of whom favoured self-correction). Only a few (two teachers) seemed to be in favour of teacher correction. These findings seem to be consistent with that of Diab (2007), Lee (2007), Simard and Jean (2011), and Tsang (2004). The findings of the present study, however, extend the existing findings in the sense that they also provide the reasons for the mismatch occurring between teacher's preferences and classroom practices. It seems that teachers cannot employ the approaches they prefer because of the program syllabi not offering them sufficient time. Since the self-correction approach is known to be a time-taking approach when employed in classrooms (Ferris, 2002), this seems to become a serious concern for the teachers in terms of syllabus flexibility. That is to say, they are more focused on completing the syllabus objectives on time, and employing the approach they prefer becomes less important. If, however, they had a more flexible syllabus in terms of giving teachers freedom, the results would have been different.

Another concern of the teachers in addition to the strong structure of the syllabus is the crowded classrooms in terms of the student number. A similar finding also appeared in Yoshida's (2008) study, where teachers mentioned the difficulty of paying individual attention to learners in the classroom when waiting for them to correct themselves. This again seems to be related to self and peer-correction approaches taking more time, as the teachers believe that paying individual attention to each student in the classroom makes it very difficult to employ such approaches. This can also be interpreted, that even if the program syllabus had been more flexible, the teachers would still have found it difficult to employ such approaches owing to the crowded classrooms.

Finally to say, although a review of course documentation of the EPS dealt in this study seems to give the teachers flexibility in terms of teaching, the findings of the study suggest the opposite, as the teachers seem to be limited by time constraints in terms of the approaches they prefer to employ in their classrooms.

5. Implications

We, as teachers, are of the opinion that any teacher has a set of already developed conceptions and perceptions of several language teaching/learning approaches and methods. We believe that such conceptions and perceptions determine to a great extent how we teach. We are also aware that each teacher is different, and classrooms show variances between them. Therefore, we argue that it would be wrong to expect each teacher to teach in the same manner, and we see no point in structuring or limiting teachers in terms of their teaching repertoire, or to inhibit them directly or indirectly from serving in a way that they perceive to be effective. In this sense, the findings of the present study can be a matter of debate, and should be questioned. The teachers who participated in the present study seem to be greatly affected by the program structure, and an overall picture of teachers in a way being forced to adopt approaches they actually do not prefer, seems to be a prevalent finding of the present study. Thus, we believe that much needs to be done by program, curriculum and syllabus designers, as well as policy makers, in terms of considering the practical aspects of teaching when developing syllabi. We believe that a better functioning system, perhaps one considering teacher's views is a must. In this way, the views of the teachers, who are the active agents of the classrooms, can also be incorporated into the program syllabus, and an agreed set of principles be established, which would possibly lead to a healthier teaching and learning process.

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Appendix

Classroom Observation Form

Classroom Teacher: _____

Class: _____

No. of Sts: _____

Date: _____

Type of lesson: _____

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