

***Introducing Error-Treatment as Part of the
Teacher Training Programme
in the Department of English***

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The field of foreign language teaching has witnessed an outstanding shift of focus from the structure of the language i.e. the product to the complex mental abilities and the way they function i.e. the process. The origin of this shift could be traced back to the changes in linguistics and psychology in particular, and science methodology in general.

However, this change has not been accompanied with a serious re-evaluation in the 'licence' programmes in the departments of English throughout Algeria; a problem that stands to a far extent behind failure in learning English in Algerian universities and secondary schools as well.

In this respect, the present article is an attempt to show the importance of reinforcing some courses related to psycho-pedagogy. It is backed by a study undertaken in some secondary schools to show the drawbacks of the actual teaching practice and an attempt to find out what the reasons for failure to learn English in Algeria are.

This study is aimed at establishing the link between achievement and oral error-treatment in order to answer a few questions among which:

1- Are teachers interested in communication or formal accuracy?

2- Does error treatment put the learner on the defensive?

3- How does error treatment affect motivation?

4- Are teachers consistent in correcting oral errors?

Definition of terms

1- Feedback: it is a frequent term in the literature related to errors. It comprises reactions that a learner receives from his teacher or classmates. The information included in feedback is meant to help the learners test their hypotheses about the language in order to confirm, reject or modify them (Chaudron, 1988). The initial goal of feedback is not that of a judgment or criticism of a learner's product, rather it is the provision of information that a learner actively uses in modifying his behaviour (Chaudron, 1988).

2- Correction: Different researchers have suggested different definitions of this term. (Chaudron 1977) believes that correction occurs when a teacher is able to elicit a correct response from the maker of the error or from one or more of his classmates. Correctness was also considered as a negative feedback that needs to be discretely conveyed to the learner.

3- Treatment: This term is often used to refer to a cautiously carried out correction in an attempt to show the location of the error of his learners and guiding them towards avoiding these errors in their future performance.

4- Repair: this term was defined as the treatment of trouble occurring in interactive language use (Van Lier, 1983). It is, although not a sufficient condition, an important variable in language learning because it is one of the mechanisms of feedback on the interim system that is creatively constructed by the language learner. It can be 'overt' going straight forward to the trouble spot to repair it, as it can be 'covert'; that is urging the learner to do his self-monitoring and adjustment of his talk.

Research Methodology and Design

We opted for the descriptive design because it is the best way to uncover the complex mental processes by describing the apparent behaviour and then, try to introspect about what is cognitively oriented.

We have also chosen a sample of 120 pupils and 30 teachers to whom we have administered our questionnaires. We insisted to know about the experience of the teachers and ensured to them that our study has nothing to do with a judgment of their performance, but only an attempt to gain information about the teaching practice in general and the obstacles teachers and pupils encounter in this operation.

Different views of errors

For the behaviourists, error has a negative connotation. It was considered like a sin, the effect of which must be overcome (Brooks, 1964). The occurrence of error was directly linked to the inadequacy of the teaching techniques (Corder, 1967).

Later on, errors were seen through a more positive view and regarded as inevitable since they are indicators

of the learner's progress through the Interlanguage by formulating and testing hypotheses about the nature of the new language system.

Corder (1974) distinguished between 'overt' and 'covert' errors. While 'overt' errors are ungrammatical utterances at the level of sentence, 'covert' errors refer to the ungrammatically well-formed, but interpretable within the context of communication.

More recently, Lennon (1991) used two dimensions for identifying errors: 'domain' and 'extent'. The 'domain' of an error refers to "the rank of linguistic unit which must be taken as context in order for the error to become apparent". 'The extent' refers to "how far up the hierarchy of linguistic unit in which the text is organised the error has permeated, it also delineates the rank of the unit which has to be deleted, replaced, added or re-ordered".

For Example when a learner says 'he goed' the domain of the error is the word and the extent is the morpheme "ed".

Contrastive Analysis

Fries(1945) believes the problems of language learners to be caused by the different structures of the native and target language. For that reason, he maintained that Contrastive Analysis would predict areas of difficulty in order to design appropriate language teaching materials. Lado (1957) who based his studies on the structuralists' findings said:

"We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple and those elements that are different will be difficult".

(Lado, 1957:59)

Contrastive analysts, on the whole, agreed that the source of error in language learning was the negative transfer or the language interference. Later on, it was discovered that it was an oversimplification to say that differences cause errors while similarities do not. Many problems predicted by Contrastive Analysis did not occur and many unpredicted problems occurred. Thus, Contrastive Analysis in its strong version claiming to solve language teaching problems by predicting the errors and establishing similarities and differences between languages, was abandoned in favour of Error Analysis.

Error Analysis

Error Analysts said that we have to deal with errors after they occur. They claimed that when studying the product we are only making guesses without any evidence that they could be faithful. What needs to be studied is the process of learning.

Richards distinguished between: 'Intralingual' and 'Developmental' errors. Intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply. Developmental errors show how a learner starts from his limited knowledge and experience in the language to build hypotheses about it.

Errors and Interlanguage

Errors show how a system works and how a learner progresses through the Interlanguage. This latter refers to the language variety standing between the learner's mother tongue and the target language.

(Corder, 1974) claims that a learner's sentences may be deviant, ill-formed, incorrect or erroneous only in the sense that they are not fully describable in terms of the grammar of his mother tongue or the target language. They are, however, presumably well formed in terms of the grammar of his own transitional idiolect at that point in time.

This is to say that a learner's language during a certain period of the development is neither his mother tongue nor the target language but a variety standing between the two. This variety is likely to contain many errors that delineate the learner's hypothetical stage about the language (Selinker, 1972)

The learner makes different errors during the different stages of Interlanguage that are:

a- The Random-Error stage: because of his limited language of the target language, the learner may produce errors of the order of:

He cans sings

He can sings

After being taught that verbs in the simple present take an "S" with the third person singular.

b- The Emergent Stage: where a certain consistency in the learner's production appears. The learner, may internalise some rules, although incorrect, but thought to be correct because the learner is unable to correct them.

c- The Systematic Stage: where the rules, although not well formed, become more closely approximating the language system and the learner becomes able to correct his errors if pointed out to him by someone else.

d- The Stabilisation Stage: where the errors become fewer and the learner is able to self-correct, but some errors remain undetected and get fossilised.

What to Correct ?

The task of finding out what errors to correct is not an easy one. The requirements of acceptability and appropriateness should be judged by the teacher with reference to clearly specified criteria. While acceptability is much related to competence because it is dependent on the structure's well formedness, appropriateness is related to performance because it shows whether the utterance was produced in its right context or not (Corder, 1981).

Because appropriateness is usually judged subjectively, two dimensions were identified; the referential appropriateness related to the material truth value of the utterance, and the social appropriateness having to do with the proper style or register to use in

different situations as shown in the following diagram from (Corder, 1981:41):

	Acceptable	Appropriate	Free
from error	Acceptable	inappropriate	erroneous
	Unacceptable	appropriate	
erroneous	Unacceptable	inappropriate	
	erroneous		

But in practice, not all errors should be corrected. Correction should be limited to 'global' errors that affect the communicativeness of the utterance, while 'local' errors should be tolerated in order to encourage the learner to communicate freely in the foreign language (Burt and Kiparsky, 1974).

V- When to correct ?

V-1 Immediate Correction:

It is usually preferable to provide correct feedback just after the detection of the error in the learner's utterance. Its value is likely to decrease if the time between performance and error correction is greater (Mackworth, 1950). There is, however, the problem of the bad effect correction could have on the learner. It can represent a real inhibition for him because he feels he is interrupted and deprived from communicating what he believed was true.

V-2 Delayed and Postponed Correction.

Delaying correction may enable the learner to produce longer utterances, to show the product of his thinking process, and involve other learners in the discussion. For that reason a 'wait-time' of a few seconds before providing correction is likely to be of a positive effect on learners' progress.

VI- Who Should Correct the Errors ?

VI-1 Self Correction

A learner needs to be urged to rely on his own to correct the errors he made. The teacher's role would be limited to mentioning that an error occurred. He may supply the learner with some clues about the location and identity of the error, and leave him with sufficient time to self correct.

VI-2 Peer Correction.

This technique has the advantage of allowing the teacher to get the whole classroom involved in the correction of errors. Nonetheless, it is usually less accepted by pupils because they believe that the classmate does not have the authority of correcting them, and the teacher, for them is the only one who has the status of evaluator.

VI-3 Teacher Correction.

Teacher correction of oral errors may be helpful if the teacher knows how to proceed in the correction. He can according to Bartram and Walton (1991) use a gesture, pretend to misunderstand the learner's response,

or repeat in context the learner's utterance containing error. He can equally reformulate what a learner says in a correct form, or repeat the answer in context adding stress on the trouble spot.

VII- The Results of the Study

When asked if they had received any formal training about error treatment, the majority of teachers answered negatively, and they asserted that they faced the problem of error treatment only as they became teachers.

Most of them agreed that oral errors should be corrected, but few of them had a precise idea about correction. As for the appropriate time of correction 66% of the teachers were of the view that correction should be done immediately after error occurrence.

On the whole, most teachers claimed that errors treatment is likely to provide better results in the learning process, but few could match learners' interests in the classroom since things are not clear in their minds and due to learners differences, they cannot opt for a standard method that could work with all their pupils.

As for the pupils, most of them were of the view that the teacher is the only one who has the right to correct their errors. The great majority of them said that they generally think in Arabic when they come to answer questions in English. This could stand as a major source of errors (the negative transfer). They were in favour of a teacher's explanation of the causes of the errors, and how to avoid them before providing correction.

Conclusion

We may conclude by saying that language teaching is a very delicate enterprise. Unfortunately, the “Licence” students, who are teachers to be, have not received the adequate training that would enable them to carry on their task in the right way. The complexity of the task of dealing with pupils who are different in terms of motivation, readiness and aptitude to learn the foreign language obliges us to think of a serious re-evaluation of the programmes of the “Licence”.

We can, consequently, safely say that the introduction of a module of assessment and feedback is a necessity to end up with the queries of the actual teaching practice. The modules of phonetics and grammar should be reinforced since many learners' errors are teacher-induced.

Pupils usually tend to be more interested in written work because they are exclusively judged through their written performance. The oral practice is, then, undermined in the time where many language learning problems could be dealt with during the oral exchange.

Teachers should also be trained to create a pleasant atmosphere in the language classroom where learners are motivated to learn English and the barriers to learning are easy to transcend.

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