

Abstract

**TO CORRECT OR NOT
TO CORRECT, THAT'S
THE QUESTION**

This article discusses one of the principal issues of language teaching: error correction. Many teachers may find themselves at a loss when their students commit errors mainly when not knowing whether to correct the error or leave it uncorrected. In fact, different viewpoints are recorded in research literature: while psychologists claim the necessity of error correction for a good and efficient language learning, linguists maintain that errors are an unavoidable step towards learning and their correction would only frustrate learners and prevent them from being fluent and creative in producing language. Therefore, The present work lists all those arguments for and against error correction based on research findings to permit to the language teacher to think about his own attitude towards mistakes and make the appropriate decision. Finally, it proposes a set of guiding lines to help teachers decide when, how, and what to correct.

Hafida Hamzaoui
Dpt. of Foreign languages
Faculty of Arts
And Social Sciences
University of
Abouhakim Belkaid -
Tlemcen

INTRODUCTION

«Should I correct my students' errors or not? Does error correction play any role in language learning?» Teachers are constantly asking themselves such questions and trying to find out an answer either through their own experience or in research findings.

In fact, whether learner errors should be corrected or not has been debated for a long time and is still a matter of discussion. The divergence of viewpoints concerning error correction is rendered to people's orientations, beliefs, and experience. Linguists, for example, claim the inefficiency of corrective feedback arguing that children do not need and cannot exploit any corrections during their mother tongue acquisition. Whereas, psychologists who consider concept learning with adults and children (from 5 to 9 years old) claim that these two groups of people make use of negative feedback and that error correction is necessary for language learning.

Thereafter, it seems useful to provide teachers with those arguments in favour of error correction as well as those which are against this procedure so that they can understand the position of each group and opt for their own position. The arguments presented below are varied and drawn not only from teachers' beliefs and experience but from research findings as well.

ARGUMENTS FOR ERROR CORRECTION

1. If errors are not corrected they will become habitual.

If a teacher does not correct the errors of his students, the latter will commit the same errors when using the second/ foreign language rules thinking that they are correct forms. This happens more frequently with those communicatively redundant features of language which do not impede comprehension, i.e. local errors, that is those errors that affect single elements in a sentence and which do not, generally, hinder communication significantly, such as the omission of the third person singular 's'.

2. Students like receiving corrective feedback.

Cathcart and Olsen (1976) submitted a questionnaire to English Second Language learners in their investigation which showed a strong preference of students for correction of all errors. Likewise McPherson (1995) discovered in her study that whichever their proficiency level learners like to receive corrective feedback.

In effect, if the learner wishes to experiment his second/ foreign language knowledge through writing or speech, he will like to receive some feedback about what he has experimented i. e. whether the language he used was correct or not. Therefore, if no feedback is provided, how can he learn from his experiment?

3. Error correction improves second/ foreign language learner proficiency.

When correcting their errors, students can activate their linguistic competence, i.e. the internalised knowledge of language, modify their wrong hypotheses about how the language works, and construct new ones. In sum validate their knowledge. This will allow them to improve their second/ foreign language proficiency.

4. If errors are not corrected in instructional settings they will serve as wrong input to learners.

One of the dangers of not correcting learners' errors in the classroom is that the production of an error by a learner may serve as an input to any other learner, who will think that it is a correct form and thus will internalise the error. Moreover, some learners may even modify their correct hypotheses to include the error (thinking that it is a correct form or function).

5. Error correction helps learners understand their weaknesses and overcome their problems.

If learners are asked to correct their errors and record them on a card after each composition for example, they will recognise their problematic areas and with the help of their teacher will try to interpret and understand them. Then, little by little they will attempt to solve their linguistic problems. Consequently, learners will do all their best to eradicate errors and change their learning behaviour. At length they may even be able to 'measure' their progress.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST ERROR CORRECTION

1. Learner errors do not need to be corrected because they are part of the learning process.

Many linguists and educationalists (e.g. Long (1977), Krashen (1982)) consider learner errors as part of the learning process indicating a certain stage in their interlanguage i.e. the type of language produced by second/ foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. They claim that these errors will develop naturally into more accurate and appropriate forms, and that the best way to treat them is to tolerate them. To support this idea the case of first language acquisition is displayed. Children are believed to use an innate linguistic knowledge to construct a grammar, therefore it is assumed that children neither need nor can exploit negative data during their language acquisition, in other words corrective feedback is inefficient during that phase. Consequently, these linguists agree that more exposure to the target language (i.e. the language learned) is more beneficial to language

learners than error correction.

2. Overcorrection hinders the learning process.

The correction of every single error is seen to have a bad effect on learners, in an oral activity for example. It renders communication impossible and at length destroys students' motivation. Moreover, whether in speech or writing overcorrection can lead learners to produce only simplistic sentences.

3. Error correction during class session is sometimes badly received by learners.

Frequent error correction in the presence of peers tends to embarrass learners. If the latter are frequently corrected they will become so obsessed by grammatical correctness and so afraid of producing errors that they will prefer not to take any risks with the language and will minimise their linguistic production, which will impede their language learning.

4. Direct error correction is useless.

If a teacher provides the correct form for learners when correcting errors, this will not really help them to enhance their learning. Many educationalists and teachers assert that the mechanical copying down of correct sentences has never been shown to have any lasting effect on learners.

5. Error correction kills creativity.

In effect, if the teacher gives his students a writing task asking them to speak about their feelings, for example, he will be more concerned in their writings with their ideas i.e. fluency than with grammatical correctness i. e. accuracy. Consequently, it would be inadequate to correct every single error because doing so, would impede students' linguistic production as well as their creativity.

CONCLUSION

Some teachers may find their opinions present in the first list of arguments, others in

the second, while a third group of teachers may realise that their viewpoints are expressed in both lists. In fact, many teachers find it difficult to make a decision on whether to correct their students' errors or not, and if they decide to correct how can this task be carried out successfully? One wise decision is not to abandon correction in formal instructional settings because it provides feedback for learners, helps them understand their weaknesses, overcome their learning problems and eventually eradicate their errors. Yet, this aim cannot be achieved unless error correction is conducted effectively. In other words, teachers are required to plan this task thoroughly they have to decide first on which errors to correct because it is both unwise and impractical to correct every mistake; second, on when to correct because in some instances error correction may prove to be destructive; and third, on how to correct in terms of which techniques to use because some correction techniques are more successful than others, and finally, who is to correct i.e. the teacher, the learner, or peers.

Some guidelines are suggested in order to conduct the task of correction effectively. Regarding which errors to correct the teacher can rely on the four following criteria:

1. *Comprehensibility*: errors which impede comprehension are to be given priority.
2. *Frequency*: errors common to many students in a class deserve more attention and treatment.
3. *Pedagogical focus*: errors in forms that students have recently learned in class need more attention.
4. *Individual student concerns*: the teacher will judge how much correction is needed according to the sensitivity of his students towards correctness.

Then, deciding on when to correct errors depends largely on the task given to learners. For example, if students are asked to express freely their emotions, it is unwise to correct their errors because the task focuses on fluency rather than accuracy. Likewise, in communication activities where students are asked to exchange information in order to complete a task, clarification can be looked for but not correction.

Finally, the way teachers correct their students errors is crucial for the success of this

remedial work. In fact, correction can be done at three levels:

1. *Teacher correction*: direct correction, i.e. providing the correct form for learners, is sharply criticised and rejected by many teachers. It is preferable to use a correction code which reveals the nature of the error in the margin and leave the responsibility of correction to learners and even detection if the latter are advanced. Below is an example of the use of a correction code:

SV	Alison <u>were</u> happy.
VT	She married and <u>leads a reach</u> life.
+Sp	

Key: SV: subject verb agreement.

VT: verb tense.

Sp: spelling.

One further recommendation is that when correcting, teachers are required to react not only to form but to content as well and not forget to praise positive points.

2. *Self-Correction*: active involvement of students in the process of error correction has proved to be effective mainly in the scope of nowadays' trend in second and foreign language teaching which is moving towards learner autonomy. In fact, learners cannot achieve autonomy unless they learn to take more responsibility for recognising and correcting their own errors, because the teacher will not be present eternally to correct errors. Yet, self-correction should be first guided. Then, in the light of either correcting codes or symbols used by the teacher or reference to errors with advanced learners, the latter will activate their linguistic competence and try to self-correct their errors. The teacher is also required to encourage revision in writing sessions and to train students to self-correct their sentences in oral activities just by giving a sign, for example.

3. *Peer correction*: it has been praised as a technique that saves the teacher time and

encourages communication and co-operation in the classroom. Different techniques are suggested. Exchanging compositions is one of them, learners are asked to exchange their writings and try to correct each other's mistakes, the teacher should be present in case of disagreement or clarification. The whole class correction is also a motivating and interesting technique, it is undertaken in two ways:

a) Listing of learners' errors on the board and all students participate their correction.

b) Provision of a sample composition produced by one student in order to be corrected by the whole classroom.

In conclusion, correction may be beneficial to language learners in formal instructional settings, only if carried out thoroughly because a bad error management is worse than none.

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