

**Learners' Perceptions of Teacher's Correction
And of their Self-Correction of Written Performances**

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ملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء نظرة المتعلم لتفويم الاستاد له، وتفويمه الذاتي لكفائه الكتابيه وبذلك نحاول تحديد وتحليل بعض المعوقات التي تحول دون تحقيق الاهداف المرجوة في مجال الاداء الكتابي وللحصول على نظرة واضحة و افتراح طرائق حديثة للتدريس و تصحيح ورفه المتعلم.

إن نتائج هذه الدراسة اثبتت عدم وجود توافق على الطريقتين. حيث ان النتائج ملها تنقسم إلى فئتين، فنه ترى في تصحيح الاستاد لكل الاخطاء تاتيرا على التفه بالنفس والدافعيه للمتعم. اما الفئه الثانيه فترى في التصحيح الكلي للاخطاء عاملا لتحسين مستوى المتعلم لتعلم اللغة الاجنبيه.

Abstract:

The present research work attempts to shed some light on the learners' perceptions of the teacher's correction and their self-correction of written performances.

Trying to investigate this issue is of paramount importance. The findings might provide some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in eliminating, or at least, reducing learners' fear of being mistaken so that to facilitate the process of learning by developing language awareness.

The outcomes of this investigation proved that there is no consensus in the tefl/tesl field about error correction, and the most frequent reasons for not wanting correction is the great negative impact on the learners' confidence and motivation whereas, the most frequent reasons for wanting correction is the objective of the learners to better their learning of the foreign language.

Introduction

Evaluation obviously implies assigning values to given performances in accordance with defined objectives, but many teachers tend to evaluate without clearly defining them, as they feel frustrated because they cannot quantify the value they hold. Without clearly defined values, it is impossible to make consistent judgements. Lacking a set of values, teachers, tend to deal only with particular flaws, not knowing what else to do, teachers proofread instead of reading critically. Thus, "*error-free writing becomes synonymous in the minds of students with good writing, but of course it is not necessarily*". (Irmscher, 1979: 142-143; in Perkins 1983: 666).

As teachers how best can we respond to our students' written work? Best for us, as teachers, as far as our time and energy as well as being pedagogically appropriate and helpful; and best for our students as far as a response that is helpful, encouraging and challenging them. Developing an approach to error correction and feedback on written performances surely requires from teachers to have a clear picture of their teaching objectives. One thing is clear, not only do students need, value, and expect a teacher's feedback on their written work, but "*teachers themselves feel that their response to students' work is a critical part of their job requiring an investment of both time and effort*" (Ferris 1995 – Spring: 34)."

Error correction remains one of the most complex and misunderstood issue in the second and foreign language teaching profession. Throughout my twenty six -year-long experience as a teacher and a supervisor, a constant challenge upset me. I have been trying to respond appropriately and effectively to students' written work by providing feedback that was pedagogically appropriate and beneficial to the teachers and the students. In my ex-position, as an "inspector", it became apparent for me that both teachers and their students need to move beyond the current error correction and feedback techniques in use which is, according to me, no longer valuable for both teachers and learners.

For many teachers, the act of correction tends to be a heavy burden on their shoulders; one has to get rid of it as quickly as possible. Therefore, there is a lack of consistency and often of accuracy in the error correction and feedback the teachers are providing. Most of them use only one way

in providing feedback in error correction; it is simply marking every mistake and usually providing the students with the corrected form either at the margin or just below the mistake whereas others just assign a grade. When learners receive back their work they only have a look at their grades. Most of them do not try to read or have, at least, a glance at the corrections brought by their teachers and are never required to go back, revise, and learn from their mistakes; simply because the job is, somehow, done by the teacher. On longer written assignments, few teachers ventured beyond comments such as "good", "well done", "weak" known as a one-word comment.

Statement of the problem

For the above reasons and some other ones, we have to re-see and reconsider our approach to error correction and at the same time try to answer the following questions:

1. *What are the current error correction and feedback techniques used by the teachers for marking students' written work?*
2. *What is the rationale behind these techniques?*
3. *Are these techniques beneficial to both the students and teachers?*
4. *Are there other techniques that could/should be used?*

Trying to answer the above questions I probably try finding an alternative to the current techniques to error correction and feedback on pupils' written performances, and inviting teacher colleagues to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the type of error correction/feedback they are using presently.

Methodology

My research was conducted at Batna University just last year (2007/2008) with learners of the first, second and third year. From each level one group, ranging from 40 to 50 students, is chosen randomly. Learners were asked to fill in a questionnaire bearing only one question :

Should teachers correct every and each error learners make in writing? And were asked to answer by 'yes' or 'no' adding a brief justification for their choice.

Learning a foreign language is a gradual process during which mistakes are expected and above all tolerated in all stages of learning. Mistakes will not disappear because they have been pointed out to the learners, probably, the opposite might happen according to some teachers. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. Overcoming the fear of mistakes depends on the way mistakes are corrected and teacher proceed with that. Language acquisition does not happen unless the learner is relaxed and keen on learning.

In order to overcome learners' fear, it is essential to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in language classes, to encourage cooperation through peer work or small group work and apply techniques for language acquisition that suit and involve individual learners who display different mixed abilities and different strategies of learning.

Another aspect of overcoming fear of mistakes is the way mistakes can be remedied. A great number of the teachers assume an active role in error rectification, while learners prefer being passive and relying on their teachers to mention to them their mistakes. In the long run, this technique will be neither good nor efficient, particularly in treating and curing the so-called 'fossilized' errors.

Correction vs. Self-Correction

Hanner (2001) thinks that making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of the cognitive process. *"Mistakes that occur in the process of learning a foreign language are caused either by the interference of the mother tongue or developmental reasons, and are part of the students' interlanguage"* (Harmer, 2001:99). Mistakes are often a sign of learning and, as a result, must be viewed positively. Teachers have to recognize a well known fact that 'learnability (the process of learning) varies from person to person, and *'all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them'* (Bartram & Walton, 1991:97).

Late Theory on Error and Correction"

Recent theories on language acquisition and teaching methodologies claim the idea "...that not all errors should be corrected, and those that are corrected should usually not be "treated" immediately" (Krashen 1987:74–76, 116–119; Doff 1988:186–192; Lewis 1993:164–179; Nunan and Lamb 1996: 68–80; Ur 1996:246–249). This position is based on the fact that errors are normal and unavoidable during the learning process. Also, current theories of how we learn languages recognize that habit formation is only one part of the process. Errors occur for many reasons. One obvious cause is interference from the native language.

A learner may make errors because s/he assumes that:

- The target language and the native language are similar, when in fact they are different. This kind of overgeneralization is also the cause of many mistaken guesses.
- Another cause is simply an incomplete knowledge of the target language.
- A third common cause of errors is the complexity of the target language. Certain aspects of English (e.g., the 's' in the third person singular present tense) are difficult for all students, no matter what their native languages are.
- Spelling is also problematic for non-native speakers of English (and for many native speakers, too!).
- Finally, "fossilization occurs when an individual reaches a satisfactory level of competence in the L2 and does not worry about persistent mistakes s/he may make, which may not inhibit communication". (Brown 1994:203–225, and Ellis 1994:47–71.)

What is an Error/mistake/slip?

Brown (1994:205) offers the following distinctions. A *mistake*, he says, is "a performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip,' in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly." According to this definition, a native speaker could make a mistake in his native language. Errors, on the other hand, are problems that a native speaker would not have. Brown defines

an *error* as "noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner."

The key word in this definition is "interlanguage." When someone learns a foreign language, the errors he makes indicate his level of proficiency. Clearly, the errors of a beginner are different from the errors of an advanced student, and what were once errors can become mere mistakes. (Edge (1989:9–11) has a simple definition which is especially important for classroom teachers to keep in mind. He says "a *slip* is what a learner can self-correct, and an *error* is what a learner cannot self-correct". An attempt is a guess or when neither the intended meaning nor the structure is clear to the teacher.

This distinction between **error** and **mistake**, or between **error** and **slip**, is reason enough for teachers to stop and abandon the practice of immediately and urgently correcting students. Often, a brief pause or a sign (nonverbal cue) from a teacher is sufficient for the student to become able to recognize and then correct his mistakes. The teacher simply has to allow that pause to occur. Errors and attempts are different, of course, because students cannot correct themselves, but that does not mean the teacher must.

A survey of the question "Should teachers correct every and each error learners make when writing in English," covers responses from three levels (first, second and third year students) at the department of English at Batna University. The learners were asked to answer "yes" or "no" and adding a brief justification to their choice why or why not; 76 (out of 45) of first year students, 36 (out of 51) and 25 (out of 49) of students answered as such: see table below.

Table n: 1

Should teachers correct every and each error learners make when writing?			
	1st year students Students n°=45	2 nd year Students students n°=51	3rd years students Students n°=49
% yes answers	45	48	55
% no answers	55	52	45

Survey results

45% (out of 45) of learners first-year and 48% (out of 51) of second-year students support this viewpoint, while 55% of first year students ,52% of second year students, and 45% of the third year respectively, are against such correction. Interestingly, the justifications advocated are summed up as follows: the most frequent reason for “not wanting correction” was the negative impact on students' confidence and motivation, and the most frequent reason for “wanting correction was the importance of learning and bettering their writing skills.

Among the causes for errors, apart from the above-mentioned L1 interference, an incomplete knowledge of the target language, language complexity and error fossilization are mentioned. It is also pointed out that teacher's correction does not always work. Students often correct each other, which is very important because " *self-correction or peer correction help to focus student attention on errors and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy*" (Ancker, 2000:23). There are many factors to consider when, what and how to correct. Whatever the kind of error rectification a teacher deals with, s/he must remember Michael Lewis's message "**You never correct a mistake, you always correct a person**" (quoted in Bartram & Walton, 1991:93). *Moreover, there are three reasons why the active involvement of students in the process of dealing with mistakes is important:*

- *it stimulates active learning,*
- *induces cooperative atmosphere,*
- *and develops independent learners (Bartram & Walton, 1991:81).*

Edge (1989:20) says that teachers "*have to be sure that they are using correction positively to support learning*" (quoted in Ancker, 2000:20). According to Jeremy Harmer, "*correction is a very subtle matter. Gentle re-formulation is often useful, when the student has a chance of correcting himself in passing. The best time to correct is as late as possible'. Moreover, 'teachers have the problem of 'dominating students', and therefore such correction can be counter-productive. Correction is done appropriately if it is supportive, offers insights and does not interrupt the processor language learning*".

Specialists agree that error correction is an essential condition for successful acquisition of any language, although they hold different opinions and ways of conducting it. The prevailing opinion among some practitioners is that the primary teachers' task in initiating self-correction in written work is to indicate the mistakes, but not correct them. The indication can be performed either by underlining errors or coding them (T, for a wrong tense, SP, for a wrong spelling, WO, for a wrong word order), see correcting codes in the table below.

Table N° 2

code	Type of mistake
WF	Wrong Form
WW	Wrong Word
Sp	Spelling
T	Tense
WO	Word Order
‡	Word Missing
P	Punctuation
V	Wrong Verb Form
<>	Join the ideas, you don't need a new sentence
??	I'm not sure what you want to say
NN	Not necessary
//	New Paragraph needed

The reasons why teachers should correct every error and why teachers should not are also similar. The most frequent reason given for not wanting correction was the negative impact of correction on students' confidence and motivation (affective filter). The most frequent reason given for wanting correction was the importance of learning to speak English correctly.

Implications

The most important implication of this survey is that something should be done to rectify the opposing expectations of teachers and students about how errors (also mistakes and attempts) should be handled. Teachers may think they are doing the right thing by not correcting immediately and frequently, but students (and other teachers) may assume their teachers do not know English well enough to give

appropriate feedback and, even worse, that their teachers are unprofessional and do not care how well they learn English.

There are several steps we can take to correct this situation of differing expectations. First, we must establish “clear objectives” in our lesson plans. Next, we can discuss the “learning process” with our students. Finally, we should employ “alternative activities” that demonstrate other ways of giving feedback besides immediate correction by the teacher.

Establishing lesson objectives

a) The first and most important step a teacher must take is to determine the objective of an activity. If the objective is to develop accuracy, then of course correction is necessary. In this case, the best approach is to allow the student to self-correct first. If that does not work, allow for peer correction. If both failed, then the teacher can give the correction/ answer. Although this can seem time consuming, it helps to focus students' attention and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy.

b) If the objective of the activity is to develop fluency, then correction may not be necessary or desirable. Constantly interrupting students to correct them can be irritating and disruptive, especially when the lack of accuracy does not hinder communication. If there are frequent errors or mistakes, the teacher can make "a mental note" to provide feedback after the activity.

Discussion of the learning process

Not correcting errors sounds scandalous even irresponsible to some language educators and many students. However, not correcting an error is not the same as teaching incorrect forms. We, teachers, should explain our objectives for not correcting, even if it means using the native language, so that our students have a better understanding of what we do and why we do it, or in the case of correction, why we do not always do it.

Using an analogy when discussing errors with students, is in a way convincing for the students, who expect and request immediate and frequent correction by the teacher. For example, learning to speak another language is similar to learning to play a musical instrument. Both

are processes that require intellectual effort (e.g., studying new symbols, memorizing), new physical skills (e.g., manual dexterity to play an instrument, pronunciation of new sounds in the target language), and a tremendous amount of practice. No one in his mind would expect to learn to play music without making many mistakes in the process; why should anyone expect to learn a language without ever uttering a mistake? A brief explanation of interlanguage can be helpful, too. We expect beginning students to make certain kinds of errors and more advanced students to make other kinds of errors. For this reason, some authors maintain that correction is ineffective, even a waste of time (e.g., Krashen 1987 and Lewis 1993). "Although not all teachers take this extreme view, experience often shows that correcting what is beyond learners' current level of understanding can interrupt a lesson and result in more confusion than clarification "(Allwright and Bailey 1991:92, 100–104).

Finally, we need to draw our students' focus, and ours, to the positive aspects of errors. An error, or self-correction of a mistake, indicates what the learner can do in the target language. It is intellectually dishonest and counterproductive to ignore our students' success and exaggerate the seriousness of errors and mistakes.

Alternative activities

Of course, no one sets out to learn a foreign language incorrectly, so it is understandable that our students look to us to provide them with lots of feedback. However, as all experienced teachers know, correction does not always work. Students may repeat the same error or mistake only moments after being corrected. The frustration and futility can be demonstrated by tactfully pointing it out when it occurs and reiterating that when we focus on meaning we naturally tend to overlook minor problems with accuracy.

We can help our students develop their intuition about English by doing some contrastive analysis of L1 and L2 (especially phonology and syntax) if all students share a common language. If there is no common language, then we can highlight a few of the most difficult aspects of English grammar, pronunciation, or spelling, to reassure students that problems in these areas are to be expected.

Experienced teachers know that students will often correct each other without prompting. We can foster this type of cooperation by discussing and listing polite ways to offer feedback. At the same time, we can clarify what is considered impolite. By addressing the issue of appropriate responses, we help students develop their sociolinguistic competence in English.

Writing Comments

Comments made by teachers on the paper of their learners are normally meant to help students understand and be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and make them clear how their work has or has not achieved the goals set in the class. There are several ways in which you can make sure your comments are meaningful to students.

Think about the sorts of comments that you find helpful and unhelpful. For example, avoid one word comments such as "good" or "unclear." If you think that something is good or unclear, explain in concrete terms why you think so.

Don't overwhelm the student with comments. Approximately one or two comments per page is enough. Focus on a couple of major points rather than comment on everything.

Write specific comments in the margin and more general comments at the end of the paper. General comments give the students an overall sense of what went right or wrong in their papers and how they might improve their work in the future. Specific comments identify particular parts of the paper that are right or wrong and explain why.

Ask questions to point out something that is missing or to suggest improvements. Try to give the students a good overall sense of how they might improve their work.

Do not comment only on weaknesses. Identify strengths and explain them. This helps students know their progress, and build their skills. Write as many comments on good papers as on bad papers. In addition to commenting on things the student does well; think about how the student might work to improve their work even further.

Write legibly or type your comments.

Do not be sarcastic or make jokes. What seems funny to you may be hurtful and does not provide students with the guidance they need for improvement.

Keep a record of common problems and interesting ideas, and discuss them in class.

Make sure that you have explained each grade without being defensive.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Writing Comments

What were the strengths in this piece of work? What were the weaknesses? What stands out as memorable or interesting?

Does the work have a clear thesis or main point, either explicit or implicit? Is it clear what point the author is trying to make and why? Are the main points and ideas clear? Are they specific enough? Are they clearly related to the assignment?

Does the author provide sufficient evidence or argumentative support?

Is the writing clear, concise, coherent, and easy and interesting to read? Are the grammar and syntax acceptable? Is the writing style appropriate? Does the author understand all of the words and phrases that he or she is using?

Does the work have a clear, logical structure? Are the transitions clear? Is there one main point per paragraph?

Are the factual claims correct?

Does the author provide the appropriate citations and bibliographical references?

Conclusion

When it comes to error correction, we are dealing with one individual's reaction to a student's piece of writing or utterance. This inevitably means that there will be some disagreement among teachers about what, when, and how to correct. Attitudes to error correction vary not only among teachers but also among students. A teacher may be influenced by the fact that English is a foreign language of a great value; therefore, great emphasis is placed on correctness by this latter.

It can be difficult to decide on what and how much to correct a student's piece of writing. Students can develop a negative attitude towards writing because their teacher corrects all their errors or if the teacher only corrects a few, they might feel that the teacher has not spent sufficient time looking at their work. I think, it is better for learners to be involved and invited to take part in the process of self-correction of their own work, either individually or in pairs, but only if they prefer peer cooperation so that to avoid another trauma. I deeply think they need training in rectifying and correcting their mistakes independently; i.e. without teacher's help or interference. Left to their own devices, learners might be overwhelmed, lost or frustrated by the complexity of the task. At the end of error self-correction activity, teacher's feedback is crucial and must be performed in a way to have a long-term positive effect on students' ability to monitor their own performance.

Indeed, it is an oversimplification to say that there is any consensus in the TEFL/TESL field about error correction. Many teachers and their students still prefer immediate correction by the teacher. Mistakes will not disappear because they have been pointed out to the learners, probably; the opposite might happen according to some teachers. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. Overcoming the fear of mistakes depends on the way mistakes are corrected and teacher proceed with that. Language acquisition does not happen unless the learner is relaxed and keen on learning. Learning a foreign language is a step-by-step and a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected and above all tolerated in all stages of learning.

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