

Effectiveness of Error Correction in a University EFL Discussion Class

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Abstract

The use of error correction strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has always been controversial. There are theorists who insist that error correction is effective for EFL learners while there are those who assert that this method does not provide any benefits. Proponents of error correction explain that the only way through which learners could learn foreign language more effectively is through corrective feedback, and that this method facilitates communication development, among other things. On the other hand, those who reject error correction note that this method is not effective in improving a student's ability to speak grammatically, and also causes affective problems that lead to issues like learner anxiety. Meanwhile, a related concept is self-correction, which states that it is effective if EFL learners correct themselves immediately after hearing themselves commit errors. Self-correction is also closely associated with motivation that springs from learner autonomy. Using a qualitative approach and basing on principles of error analysis, this study seeks to determine whether error correction is, indeed, beneficial in terms of language development. Moreover, this research endeavor also explores the impacts of error correction on learner motivation.

Key Words

Error Correction Method, EFL, Speaking Class, Motivation

Introduction

For the past three decades, there has been a debate pertaining to the effectiveness of explicit grammar teaching as well as corrective feedback in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009). Along with evolving teaching styles for language subjects, many began to accept that error correction is essential in second language acquisition (Dabaghi, 2006). On the other hand, there are those who continue to question the effectiveness of error correction due to the observation that only a few teachers really know about error analysis and its related theories (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009 and Xie & Jing, 2007). For example, an objection to the practice of error correction — particularly oral grammar correction — is based on the belief that it does not improve the “ability of the learner to speak grammatically” (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009, p. 103). Therefore, teachers must not undertake any form of oral error correction at all. Ming-chu and Hung-chun (2009) point out that the Input Hypothesis explains how error correction causes affective problems (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009). Specifically, the authors note that the correction process heightens the risk of learner anxiety that could ultimately lead to poor learner performance (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum are theorists and teachers who believe that error correction is beneficial (Dabaghi, 2006). For instance, studies confirms that error correction “facilitates the de-

velopment of communicative skills” because it raises the consciousness of the learner (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009, p. 103). Moreover, error correction enables a learner to change his inter-language grammar. In addition to these, there are theorists who believe that the only way language students can learn is through corrective feedback (Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009). More recently, there are researchers who propose that self-correction is a more effective strategy (Pishghadam, Hashemi & Kermanshahi, 2011 and Ibarrola, 2009). For example, Pishghadam, Hashemi and Kermanshahi (2011) explain that when learners are able to perform self-correction, this means that they actually know the correction form or that they already have this as an alternative in mind. By virtue of this debate, this study attempts to determine the effectiveness of error correction, while at the same time, discern the impact of error correction on learner motivation.

This study seeks to answer these research questions:

Q 1 . Is error correction beneficial in terms of language development?

Q 2 . What are the impacts of error correction on learner motivation?

In order to address these research questions, the following theoretical questions need to be measured:

Q 1 . Is error correction by the teacher appreciated by students?

Q 2 . What effect does error correction have on the students’ learning achievement?

Q 3 . Under what conditions does self-correction occur?

Q 4 . What specific activity motivates students?

This study was conducted using error analysis principles. A majority of the difficulties that EFL learners encounter may be attributed to errors in the process of using language (Bett, 2010). Numerous studies have shown that for new EFL students, there is a tendency for interference from their first language (Bett, 2010 : Al-Khresheh, 2010 and Luo, 2010). One way of discovering this transfer is through error analysis (Bett, 2010). It is important to point out first the difference between “error” and “mistake” (Xie & Jing, 2007). Xie and Jing (2007) explain that a mistake refers to a “performance error that is a failure to utilize a known system correctly” (p. 11). On the other hand, an error is a “noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the inter-language competence of the learner” (Xie & Jing, 2007). This recognition process is succeeded by the error description process. In other words, mistakes are similar to slips of the tongue, or one time only events. Errors, however, are systematic. The speaker making the errors will not realize that they erred.

The early stages of learning a second language may be described as having a considerable amount of interlingual transfer from the native language (Kafipour & Khojasteh, 2012 and Al-Khresheh, 2010). At first, it is the original language that is the only linguistic system upon which the learner may draw. This phenomenon is very common in every aspect of language learning (Xie & Jing, 2007). Another significant influence is intralingual transfer within the target language itself (Guillot, 2005). At the intermediate level, previous experiences of the learner as well as “existing subsumes begin to influence structures within the target language itself” (Xie & Jing, 2007, p. 11). Sometimes, negative intralingual transfer or over-generalization happen and these are referred to as developmental errors. It is also important to take into consideration cultural interferences that could either result in linguistic errors or unsuitability in the context (Kehinde, 2009). There are also instances when cultural interference could be so significant that it could potentially hinder effective communication. Because language learners still have insufficient linguistic knowledge, they have to express

themselves using different communication strategies, such as avoidance, language switch and prefabricated patterns (Xie & Jing, 2007). Meanwhile, the students' errors fall under different categories, namely, global and local errors. Global errors are those that hinder communication thereby preventing the learner from understanding certain portions of the message (Zheng, 2007). In contrast, local errors impact only a single factor in a sentence and do not really prevent the comprehension (Brown, 2007). Xie and Jing (2007) explain that global errors do not have to be corrected and they are generally held true. However, expressions such as "an advice" or "a news" are systematic errors and they have to be corrected (Xie & Jing, 2007, p. 11). On the other hand, pre-systematic errors that learners make may be corrected by the teacher by supplying the correct term.

Methods

This study used the qualitative approach, specifically, the semi-structured interview method. The qualitative approach is commonly used for studies that intend to explore a topic or phenomenon in a more in-depth manner (Creswell, 2005). In order to select the participants for this study, homogenous sampling was used. In homogenous sampling, the researcher chooses participants based on their membership to a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2005).

The participants in this study were 57 Japanese university students aged 20 to 22 years old, who are all English majors. The students met over the course of 15 weeks, with one meeting each week lasting for 90 minutes. Classes were held purely in English and although the participants' English ability varied, the majority of them were at intermediate level.

The students were separated into two groups. Group A, which had 28 members, was the correction group while Group B, which had 29 members, was the self-correction group. For Group A, all of the students were regularly corrected each time they made errors. Group B members were allowed to continue even if they committed errors, as long as the mistakes were local errors instead of global ones. The only times they were corrected was when they specifically asked if they had erred or if they asked about their global errors and therefore had somehow not been effective in their communication. Nevertheless, the number of mistakes each participant made was individually recorded. The interview method addresses these questions:

Q 2. What effect does error correction have on the students' learning achievement?

Q 4. What specific activity motivates students?

This study supplemented the interview method with a structured observation design (Kothari, 2009). In a structured observation, significant pre-coding is done by the researcher and the observation is in the form of documenting how often the pre-coded behaviors occur. The observation method addresses these theoretical questions:

Q 1. Is error correction by the teacher appreciated by students, or not?

Q 3. Under what conditions does self-correction occur?

The specific activities that were observed for scoring were common errors made by both Groups A and B members and initial reactions made by Group A members after they have been corrected. The scores for common errors were based on specific grammatical errors identified in a study conducted by Barker (2008). Initial reactions were scored according to manifestations of stress and appreciation.

After the study period of 15 weeks, each of the participants was interviewed regarding their perceptions

on error correction, as well as the motivation that they felt in relation with error correction. Five semi-structured questions were asked of the participants. All of the interviews were recorded, after the participants gave their informed consent. The responses were transcribed, and then analyzed so that it would be possible to identify themes from them. These themes were then analyzed in relation with the research questions. The five semi-structured questions asked of the participants are:

- Do you appreciate being corrected by the teacher when you make local errors? Why, or why not?
- Do you appreciate being corrected by the teacher when you make global errors? Why, or why not?
- Do you enjoy your class discussions when there is error correction? Why, or why not?
- What specific activity motivates you in class? Why?
- What is the impact of error correction on your learning?

Results

The participants committed common errors that are classified under Adjective Order, Almost, Already / Yet / Still, Ever / Never and Since / For. The results of the observation reveal that from Group A, at least 71% of the students did not seem to appreciate being corrected. Moreover, at least 79% of the students preferred to keep quiet when the researcher was listening in on their discussions. About 29% of the participants showed appreciation whenever they were corrected. On the other hand, 92% of Group B members disclosed that they felt motivated to correct themselves when given the autonomy to do so. About 88% were also more eager to help each other out - more than in the case of Group A. Depending on the topic, the majority of Group B members (84%) revealed that they were enjoying class discussions. In comparison, 68% of Group A members disclosed that they felt stressed whenever they were corrected and 71% disclosed that they felt embarrassed when discussions were halted so that corrections may be made whenever they committed errors. A summary of the study results is as follows:

Common Errors Combined Summary for Groups A and B

No. Of Days	Common Errors (Daily Record, Times Committed)				
	Adjective Order	Almost	Already/ Yet/ Still	Ever	Since/ For
1	1	0	3	1	2
2	2	0	4	1	3
3	0	2	2	2	2
4	3	0	3	1	3
5	2	0	5	1	1
6	1	0	5	0	2
7	2	1	2	0	2
8	2	1	2	0	3
9	1	3	1	0	4
10	1	0	1	0	1

11	0	0	2	2	1
12	0	2	2	0	1
13	1	0	1	0	0
14	0	0	1	1	1
15	0	0	1	0	1

Summary for Interview Responses

Interview Questions	Group A		Group B	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you appreciate being corrected by the teacher when you make local errors?	17	40	n/ a	n/ a
Do you appreciate being corrected by the teacher when you make global errors?	21	36	45	12
Do you enjoy your class discussions when There is error correction?	16	21	47	9

Discussion

The following are the basic principles for the common errors that the participants made. This information intends to supplement the qualitative data derived from the interview of the participants.

1. Adjective order - The maximum number of adjectives that may be used for a single noun is usually three, although there could be occasional exceptions. However, all adjectives denoting amount or number must be placed before all other adjectives (Barker, 2008).
2. Almost - The participants sometimes interchanged “almost” and “most” because both have the Japanese equivalent of *hotondo* (Barker, 2008, p. 41). “Almost” is only used with phrases or words that express a quantity or number (Barker, 2008, p. 41).
3. Already / Yet / Still- “Already” and “yet” are similar in meaning to the Japanese terms “mo” and “mada” but they are used differently (Barker, 2008, p. 42). In English, these words change depending on the sentence, so the only way to master their usage is to understand how they are used in English. On the other hand, the word “yet” is used in questions and negative sentences (Barker, 2008, p. 43).
4. Ever / Never - are typically used with the present perfect tense. Moreover, “ever” means “in someone’s lifetime” or “since the beginning of time” (Barker, 2008, p. 92). The word “never” is used in negative sentences and its Japanese translation is *ichido mo nai* (Barker, 2008, p. 92).
5. Since / For - the word “since” is used with the present perfect tense while “for” may be used with different tenses (Barker, 2008, p. 210). The basic difference between the two words is that “since” is followed by a point in time while “for” is followed by a period of time (Barker, 2008, p. 210). Hence, the correct usage would be “since last week” and “for five days.”

In response to the first research question, it is apparent that error correction is not that effective a strategy for addressing errors of participants. In this study, self-correction was more effective in language develop-

ment. Apparently, self-correction is more effective because the students catch themselves making errors when they hear themselves speak these errors aloud and then *immediately* corrects the error (Pishghadam, et al., 2011). Closely related to self-correction is the concept of motivation that stems from learner autonomy such as when the student is encouraged to correct his or her own error. Not only does the learner become more independent but they are also “given an opportunity to consider and activate their linguistic competence, so that they can be active participants” (Pishghadam, et al., 2011, p. 958). Hence, to answer the second research question, it is self-correction that is positively associated with learner motivation rather than error correction that comes from the teacher.

Conclusion

The efficacy of error correction has been debated about for decades. There are those who believe that error correction is an essential strategy for EFL learners while there are those who insist that error correction has a number of adverse impacts, such as heightening learner anxiety that could ultimately lead to poor learner performance. This study of 57 Japanese students majoring in English confirms that error correction coming from the teacher is not as effective as self-correction. Self-correction is also positively associated with motivation which springs from learner autonomy such as when the student is encouraged to correct his or her own error. This study also confirms that error correction causes affective problems such as those manifested by Group A members.

This is not to say that error correction does not have advantages. Instead of focusing on only one technique, teachers can perhaps integrate various feedback mechanisms, such as self-correction to allow room for improvement in the most considerate and effective manner. The teacher should adapt a flexible correction method that will depend on the group of students. It may even work if the teacher will first ask the student if error correction is an acceptable method for them or if they would prefer a combination of self-correction and error correction.

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