Error correction

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Abstract

This paper outlines some of the approaches to error correction which have been in vogue over the years, before asking some key questions: why do students make errors, should errors be corrected, which errors require correction, when should correction be undertaken, and how should corrective feedback be carried out? Possible answers are suggested for these important questions, and a sample error correction task is provided which teachers might use as a model for corrective feedback in their own classrooms.

Over the years, there have been a range of approaches to error correction in language teaching and learning. According to the behaviourists, untreated errors would lead to fossilisation and therefore required rigid and immediate correction if bad habits were to be avoided (Skinner, 1957). Chomsky (1959) however, approached error from a cognitive point of view, according to which errors are the result of the learner thinking through the process of rule formation. According to Corder (1967), errors provide evidence of progress, while Selinker (1972) argued that errors are a natural part of the learner's developing interlanguage. Krashen and Terrell (1983) proscribed error correction, since they believed it had no place in a Natural Approach to learning language which should be developed in the same way as children learn their first language. As the Communicative Approach came into vogue, a common position was that errors were not important as long as they did not affect communication (Littlewood, 1981). On a pragmatic level, Long (1977) suggested that much corrective feedback is erratic, ambiguous, ill-timed and ineffective, while Truscott (1998) maintained that error correction is ineffective and even harmful.

Given such lack of consensus over the issues involved with error correction, many questions remain. Are grammar and vocabulary errors due to the influence of the learner's first language? Do the 'unnecessary' articles, auxiliary verbs, and verb or noun endings in English cause errors? Are errors caused by misunderstandings during class? Are pronunciation errors due to not being able to hear or make a sound? Are they due to using the 'nearest' sound from the first language, or even deleting difficult sounds completely? Does a student repeatedly make the same mistake, or was it just a one-off slip? While it may be difficult to say why a learner makes a particular error, teachers need to be aware of their students' errors and develop an approach to error correction in their lessons.

Why correct errors?
Students naturally want the English they produce to be understood, and they usually expect to be corrected (Ur, 2000). Grammar and vocabulary errors, as well as consistently mispronounced sounds may affect their ability to be understood. Students are often aware of the importance of feeling confident that they will be understood, and believe it is the teachers' job to provide for their communicative needs. Students often don't know they are making errors, and require feedback from teachers to raise their awareness. According to this view, focus on errors is a good use of some class time as those errors may hinder the successful completion of a classroom task.

Which errors should I correct?
According to a communicative philosophy, errors that detract from successful completion of a task or which could lead to misunderstanding should probably be dealt with. Repeated or shared errors are also ones that teachers should consider correcting.

When should I correct errors?
One approach is to correct an error at the time of production. However, teachers may want to note errors and deal with them later, either at the end of the task, lesson, day, or in a following lesson. This non-immediate correction can also provide time for the teacher to research efficient and effective practice tasks, and is better than ignoring the error. A key skill is to anticipate possible errors and be prepared. There is also the issue of one student making an error, and whether to stop the class and drill everyone

(after all, this could be beneficial to all). This might depend on the task. For instance, in a mix and mingle interaction pattern, the teacher may deal with the one student, or alternatively decide not to interfere, particularly if fluency rather than accuracy is the goal of the task. Again, the decision of whether to correct immediately or not may depend on whether the error is causing a misunderstanding. There is no one simple answer to the question of when to correct: it will depend on many interrelated factors including learner sensitivities, learning situation, learning purpose or task type. It is essential for teachers to exercise careful judgement with these factors in mind if error correction is to be useful.

How should I correct errors?
When repeated or shared errors occur, teachers need to provide a model of the correct language to students. Grammar errors might require a review of rules and extra practice exercises, or a variation of the sample task below. Dealing with pronunciation errors might involve minimal pairs, drilling, beating out word or sentence stress, or referring to the phonemic chart. Students may be able to imitate with success, or the teacher may need to provide knowledge of how to make sounds through learner friendly explanations of how the sound is made. The main point here is that teachers don't need to reinvent the wheel as there are plenty of resources available. They might want to give them to students as references for self-study, or adapt them to suit their particular situation and use them in class. However correction is carried out, it needs to be done with sensitivity to avoid embarrassment and demotivation (Ur, 1996)
Sample Error Correction Task

Procedure

> Keep a note of grammar errors made during the task (see examples below).
> Write a suitable number of examples on the board.
> Ask pairs to start correcting the sentences.
> After just a minute or so, put hints on the board (see the example hints below), and point out to the students that these will help them if they are unsure.
> Choose three of the structures and ask students to make up their own correct examples and share with their partner. Repeat this step with three different structures each time. Provide examples for each structure.

1. He spends a lot of money for gifts.
2. I like to listen to music during I am studying.
3. The police made everyone to leave the building immediately.
4. They were sitting in the café, waiting their friend.
5. The main purpose to have a teacher is to assist students.
6. In a hospital everything have to be clean.
7. There has been an increase of students coming to class late.
8. The boss will inform us his decision on Friday morning.
9. You should avoid to speak your native language in class.
10. My parents often blame me about their problems.
11. My teacher discourages me to use a dictionary too much.

Hints
1. spend money/time **on** something/someone
2. during + noun phrase/while + verb phrase e.g. during lunchtime/ while eating

3. make someone **do** something (NOT to do)
4. wait **for** someone/something
5. the purpose **of** do**ing**/hav**ing** etc.
6. everything / everyone / nothing / no-one **is/has** etc.
7. an increase **in** something
8. inform someone **of**/**about** something
9. avoid do**ing** something (NOT to do)
10. blame someone **for** something
11. discourage someone **from**/ encourage someone **to**

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