

The Effectiveness Of Error Correction In Efl Classroom Discussions At University Level

¹Walid Salameh

¹Hamdan Bin Mohamed Smart University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. E-mail: wsalameh@hbmsu.ac.ae

Abstract

As a rule, all the universities working in the UAE require that all students have either a TOEFL or an IELTS certificate as an admission requirement for any course to be taken. This research paper attempts to find out if language progress is a consequence of error correction and its impact on learner motivation, and to suggest ways of bridging the gap between the research and implementation of error correction in EFL classroom. The qualitative method was used in this research, the interview method which was conducted in this study was semi-structured in particular. The findings of this study reveal that the common errors that the students committed can be categorized under: subject-verb agreement, /prepositions, /articles / pronouns / verb tense / as per the observations results.

Key words: Correction- English as a Foreign Language (EFL) - Qualitative - Error

I- Introduction

I.1. Background of the Study

Through my experience as a teacher for more than 23 years, I have come to know that motivating students to participate in classroom discussions is a subject of seminal importance. The students who participate in classroom conversations often try to show that they know the answer very well and that they do not need any feedback on the grammatical accuracy of their utterances. Moreover, they find it embarrassing to them to be corrected in front of their classmates. On some occasions, however, the propositional content of their statements becomes unintelligible as a result of grammatical inaccuracy. For example, a student who says: *I am here for two hours* may mean *I have been here for two hours*, or *I will stay here for one more hour*. In this case, it is necessary to ask them to clarify their points of view, so that they can convey the meaning they wish to communicate.

Providing a model answer is an indirect way of providing corrective feedback. For example, if a student says: *Columbus found America in 1492*, an instructor could respond by saying: *Yes, you're right. That was when he discovered America*. As the debate about whether or not we should use this method is still going on among academicians, a minimal response would be to state that one should not overuse it.

I.2. Statement of the problem

As a rule, all the universities working in the UAE require that all students have either a TOEFL or an IELTS certificate as an admission requirement for any course to be taken. As a result of this decision which was made by the Ministry of Higher Education in UAE, schools have to adopt new English teaching strategies that would match the new decision. The main goal of the new strategies is to enable graduates to pass the TOEFL or IELTS exams as proficiency tests, particularly the speaking test which always has the lowest score due to the students' lack of performance in this respect.

I.3. Research objectives

This research paper attempts to:

1. Find out if language progress is a consequence of error correction and its impact on learner motivation.
2. Suggest ways of bridging the gap between the research and implementation of error correction in EFL classroom.

I.4. Research Questions

1. Can error correction be helpful for language growth?
2. How is learners' motivation affected by error correction?

To tackle these study questions, the researcher needs to measure the below mentioned theoretical questions:

1. Do students appreciate error correction by the teacher?
2. How is the students' learning achievement impacted by error correction?
3. How does self-correction occur, under what conditions?
4. What kind of activities are the students motivated by?

2- Literature review

2.1. Introduction

According to Ming-chu and Hung-chun (2009), since 1985, the debate regarding the efficiency of teaching grammar in addition to correction feedback in English as a Foreign Language classrooms is ongoing. Dabaghi (2006) stated that besides developing teaching styles for the subjects of a language, many started to acknowledge that error correction is important in ESL acquisition. Furthermore, the effectiveness of error correction is questioned by many researchers as a few teachers have a distinct idea regarding analyzing errors and their theories. In their articles, Hung-chun and Ming-chu (2009) as well as Xie and Jing (2007), they were against error correction on the whole and in particular grammar correction. They believed that by correcting the learners while speaking, this does not improve their “ability to speak grammatically”. They added that teachers should not carry out any type of oral error correction in any way. They pointed out that the Input Hypothesis clarifies to what extent error correction can lead to emotional problems, in this case, according to the two authors, the correction process increases the possibility of learner tenseness that may eventually result in the poor performance of the learner. On the other hand, some teachers believe in the necessity of correcting errors for its benefits. In this regard, Dabaghi (2006) confirms that error correction “facilitates the development of communication skills”, as it increases the awareness of the learner. Furthermore, error correction according to him helps a learner to adjust his foreign language syntax. Additionally, according to Hung-chun and Ming-chu (2009), corrective feedback is the best way students can learn a language. There are some researchers who believe that self-correction is the most efficient learning method (Pishghadam, Hashemi and Kermanshahi, 2011; Ibarrola, 2009). According to these researchers, when learners can correct themselves, this indicates that they are aware of

the correct form or they have this as an alternate in mind. Based on this debate, the current research seeks to find out the efficiency of error correction, and its impact on learner's motivation.

2.2- Errors in L2 learning

Despite the fact that there is a general belief that incorrect utterances should not be overlooked, but rather corrected, the subject seems to be more complicated due to many factors it involves, as shall be analyzed below.

We do believe that errors sometimes must be corrected while in others situations errors must not; the techniques used for correction do not always work. This is an intricate issue which depends on the learner's character and on some other factors related to his/her style of learning and how he/she likes to learn.

However, before further tackling more details regarding the debate if to correct the students' errors or not in English as a Foreign Language classrooms, I will first discuss the positive against the negative perception of errors. Therefore, when the word “error” is heard in language learning, it is always correlated with interference from the mother tongue language, something which must be definitely evaded. Anyway, despite the fact that the word “error” may have negative connotations, it also has positive ones, which stands as a proof or evidence of the ongoing learning process. Accordingly, Edge (1989) uses the word “learning steps” instead of the words “mistake” or “error”. Consequently, as viewed by instructors, errors are an indicator of the effectiveness of their teaching methodology and a determiner of whether to give additional explanations or to proceed to the next new item depending on the feedback they receive.

The difference between grammatical errors and communicative errors has been studied by many researchers in which they have come up with the conclusion that the former are local errors that do not affect comprehension while the later do as they are global ones. Despite the fact that our students misuse articles, such as mixing between definite and indefinite articles, using wrong verb formation, or using the wrong preposition, in clear deviation from the rules of English grammar, there are no effects on communication. Since communication has been considered the main target of language learning, it would be more essential to give emphasis to the communication of the intended meaning rather than to focus on inaccuracy.

This theory was supported by Edge who considers the major motivational factor in learning a second language is communication. They need to feel that people are listening to what they are saying, not to how they are saying it. [...] If learners can feel their own emotions being expressed in a language, this will build up a relationship with the language which will help them learn it" (Edge, 1989:37)

The value of correcting grammatical errors is highlighted by, Allright (1986) who sheds lights on the importance of grammatical errors and considers that it is not communication all that matters; he suggests that learners' interaction takes two steps: the first is receiving the message and understanding it, while using the interaction as a chance to construct the language is the second step. The former parallels the communication function while the latter parallels the function of learning. Therefore, the main function is getting the meaning of the message - though the received input is also important -so as to construct or re-construct the student's grammar. Accordingly, this theory will draw teachers' attention towards this difference. They should take into account the needs and expectations of the learners and take into consideration either of the two kinds of correction or even both of them whenever needed.

2.3- Arguments Against error correction

Despite the common principle that an incorrect word must be fixed, there are hypotheses in SLA which state that error correction is not needed. The theorists justify this by saying that learners pass through regular steps while they are learning and they absorb a structure not before the time they are ready for it. Krashen et al (1982), as well as Bailey et al. (1974) noted that the studies of the smallest meaningful language unit (Morpheme) and the Natural Order Hypothesis for Krashen indicate that the learners acquire the rules of a language in an expected way and not surprising no matter of the order teachers follow in teaching the rules in their classes. This is a very important thing that is disregarded by some instructors who carry on correcting students without successful results. Additionally, some researchers indicate that correcting errors can lead to negative consequences. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), Tuscott (1996, 1998, 1999), Young (1991) For example, Walker (1973) found that learners do not like to be interrupted for the sake of

correcting their writing or speaking mistakes for the reason that this practice may possibly weaken their self-assurance and force them to spend so much effort on things that affect their proper usage of the language. Consequently, correction becomes a means of breaking the smooth flow of thought in communication, mainly when an instructor stops a student in the middle of a conversation. It may also cause de-motivation for the student, in which he/she will never initiate or get involved in any discussion to avoid being embarrassed in class in the presence of his/her peers. In situations of this kind, the students' failures rather than their communicative goals are highlighted, which undoubtedly contradicts with our principal objective of helping students use L2 in classroom.

Literature reveals that negative consequences may result from the extreme feedback which will affect motivation negatively and may hinder the whole learning process, because when a teacher corrects every error, students will be reluctant to take part in the classroom discussion unless they are sure it is right. In his article, Edge (1989) criticizes the nonnative teacher whose interest and focus is on accuracy despite the fact that he/she always asks the learners to take part in the class discussion regardless to whether they do grammar mistakes, the learners find themselves being interrupted by the teacher many times with his/her grammar corrections and asking the students to take care of accuracy rather than fluency. This is reinforced by Norrish (1983) who second to Edge believe that language teachers are advised to shed light on the communicative aspect of the language and should maximize their students' motivation to enable them put the language in usage rather than caring about accuracy or inaccuracy. He adds that teachers should be more lenient with the students if they make errors while speaking so as to enable them construct, shape, guess and enjoy learning by providing them with a feeling of security while using second language in their daily-life situations.

2.4. Arguments For error correction

Undoubtedly, conversational interactions are very important; however, according to some theorists, it is dangerous to focus on what students say rather than on how they say it. If we focus only on what students say, this will create a situation where the students will provide each other with an incomplete and incorrect input, believing that the way they say it is accurate. This is a proof that both the focus on form and

error correction are of (and should be of) equal importance, bearing in mind that the latter has to be adopted in classroom so as to avoid misleading students and creating a false hypothesis that may be inculcated in the learners' minds. However, we should not over-emphasize error correction in classroom because this will prevent students from speaking in class and will rather make them reluctant to express their views fearing they would make mistakes. Therefore, the right balance is again required and we should remember that when we correct the students, we should consider their learning performances and their sense of achievement.

Corrective feedback has a positive impact on SLA which is supported by research conducted by Doughty and Varela (1998), Lyster and Ranta, (1997), Iwashita (2003), Carroll & Merrill (1993), Ortega (1998), White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta (1991), as well as Long, Shhunj, Lyster (2001). According to Watson (1924), Thorndike (1932) and Skinner (1957), the theory of SLA that accounts for error correction is a Behaviorist theory indicating that learning happens through reinforcement and repetition, in other words, when a student makes a mistake in the classroom, it is the role of the teacher to correct him/her immediately and say the correct answer more than once so as the rest of the class will learn the right form.

Generally speaking, the Students have a positive stand towards corrections mainly at advanced levels in which students prefer their teacher's correction to get the right form as they are keen on improving their language, and evade the fossilization of errors.

Furthermore, the positive effects of correction are highlighted by FLevine (1975) in his book about the negative impacts of non-correction. He points out to the impact of not providing feedback whether approval or disapproval to the learners' responses and considers that if teachers do not correct their students' errors, both the speaker and the listeners will consider it the right speech to be adopted. The experiment he carried proved the validity of his hypothesis that teachers' reaction to incorrect utterances is of high importance to the learning process.

In the light of what has been mentioned above, errors are considered as learning steps that have to be dealt with positively, so that we can prevent their occurrence and can reach our target, which is stepping ahead in the inter-language stage.

2.5- Recommending and Denying error correction

As per the analysis in the previous section, we found that correcting errors may sometimes prove to be important and constructive, however, it may sometimes have an unconstructive impact. However, by understanding the learning styles of our students and what they prefer, we can determine if it is advisable to correct them or not, and whether their communication competence could be improved by error correction or not.

The previous part has provided some perceptions on how to deal with error correction and on its constructive as well as unconstructive impact, allowing the instructors to implement the proper methods to ensure great outcomes.

The first step would be to distinguish the two forms of correction; implicit and explicit. In the implicit form, error correction feedback that will be through repetitions, could be understood by the students as a continuance of the conversation; thus, the other form which is explicit correction might also be required and it is sometimes more successful. Additionally, implicit correction can confuse learners who may not identify the locus of the error and may wrongly change a correct expression or formulation.

The common method of correcting the student is by interrupting him/her before he/she has conveyed a message. This might have a negative impact, particularly among worried learners as they usually get distracted and feel they are unable to proceed with what they are planning to say or talk about and become increasingly anxious.

At times, teachers do not give time enough to allow the student to assimilate the correction. Waiting is an extremely effective method, followed by writing down the correction and finding the right time to communicate it to the student. This issue can be explained using the Incubation Hypothesis which proposes that students are in need of enough time so as to perform the new structure rules in their conversation, which further proves that teachers need to correct a student's error after some time has passed.

Another problem faced by teachers at times is their inability to take into account students' capabilities. The teachers tend to make correction on the basis of the Standard English rules, which at times may not make sense to their students.

This issue tends to result in the teacher having to stop frequently in order to clarify and demonstrate the new rule. Hence, the teacher

should correct only errors which are related to the grammar which is taught.

Moreover, a teacher should correct errors that affect the understanding of a context such as the selection of the right word, how he/she pronounces it, with regard to intonation. In his article, Vázquez (1987) considers semantics as more important than syntax in understanding a message. This is to be remembered to determine which errors are to be corrected.

It is preferable to implement inductive technique in correcting students in which students are asked by the teacher to correct themselves which is called self-correction. It is proved to be a useful way in which a student does error processing which enables him/her to keep the correct form in mind.

By looking at the teacher as a moderator and a guide, as opposed to just a source of knowledge, we can uncover another correction method. This is done when the teacher encourages self-correction within the classroom by allowing the students to find the correct answer on their own. The teacher can do so by encouraging discussion within the classroom.

To conclude this section, it is important to consider some questions suggested by Bartram and Walton (2002) which are extremely helpful in determining whether to correct errors or not:

1. Is communication affected by a mistake? 2. Is accuracy our focus currently or not? 4. What was the reason that a student committed a mistake? 5. Has the student spoken so long for the first time? 6. Could the learner respond negatively to my amendment? 7. Has he/she encountered this language idea in the present lesson? 8. Is it a mistake that many students committed? 9. Will the error bother anyone?

3- Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology

The qualitative method was used in this research, the interview method which was conducted in this study was semi-structured in particular. Creswell (2005) stated that the qualitative method is usually used for research that seek to examine a topic in an in-depth way. "Qualitative research is the collection, analysis and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., non-numerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest", (Gay, Milla and Airasian, 2009, p7).

Homogenous sampling was selected for this study because according to Creswell (2005, in

such sampling, the researcher chooses participants in regard to their connection to a subgroup that has certain and limited characteristics.

3.2. Participants:

Twenty eight university students aged 20 to 22 participated in this study. They are all EAP students. The course was of 12 weeks with one class on daily basis for 90 minutes. The language of instruction was English, ditto for communication in class. Despite the fact that the students were of different levels and their performances varied, the majority of them were beginners.

The teacher divided the students into 2 groups. Group 1 consisted of 14 members, was the correction group and Group 2 also consisted of 14 members, was the self-correction group. For group 1, the teacher corrected them frequently anytime they committed errors, while the teacher allowed group 2 members to proceed in their speaking task even if they committed mistakes since the mistakes they made were local rather than global ones. They were only corrected when they asked if they had committed any global errors and felt that their communication was not effective enough. However, the teacher recorded separately the number of errors each student committed. These questions were addressed through the interview method:

Q 2. How is learners' motivation affected by error correction?

Q 4. What are the kinds of activities that motivate students?

This research exploited the interview method with a structured observation strategy because Kothari (2009), believes that in such strategy, the researcher will make important pre-coding and the observation is in the form of detailing the regularity that the pre-coded performances occur. These theoretical questions were addressed by the observation method:

Q1. Do students appreciate error correction by the teacher or not?

Q3. How does self-correction occur? Under what conditions?

Common errors were the activities that were observed by the teacher for scoring committed errors by both groups' members. After group 1 members were corrected, initial reactions were made. The researcher conducted the study at one of the EFL classes he teaches in which certain

grammatical errors determined the scores for common errors.

Following the period of the study which extended over ten days, each participant was interviewed regarding his/her perception on being corrected by the teacher, in addition to his feeling in this regard. The participants were asked five semi-structured questions. All of the interviews were recorded. Their responses were transcribed to be analyzed so as to enable the researcher to identify the themes that would be examined based on the research questions. The five semi-structured questions that were asked for the participants were:

- When you commit local errors, do you prefer your teacher to correct you? Why, or why not?
- When you commit global errors, Do you like your teacher to correct you? Why, or why not?
- Do you like error correction in your classroom discussions? Why, or why not?
- What are the activities that motivate you in class? Why?
- Does error correction have any influence on your performance?

4. Results

The common errors that the students committed can be categorized under: *subject-verb agreement*, */prepositions*, */articles* / *pronouns* / *verb tense* / as per the observations results, not less than 71% of Group 1 students did not appear to favor the teacher to correct them. Furthermore, at least 75% of the students did not like to take part in the discussions as they felt that they were watched and their mistakes were observed. Around 27% of the participants preferred, enjoyed and expressed appreciation if the teacher corrects them. Further, 93% of Group 2 participants stated that when given the opportunity to correct themselves, they were highly motivated. About 87% showed and expressed their eagerness to correct each other more than Group 1. Furthermore, according to the topic, most of Group 2 members enjoyed class discussions, around 84% of them liked classroom interactions and discussions which, according to them, enhanced their self-confidence and motivated them to speak in public. Paradoxically, most of Group 1 participants, around 68%, showed that they felt embarrassed and tensioned any time the teacher

corrected them and 70% revealed that they felt embarrassed and confused when discussions were halted by the teacher as corrections will probably be made whenever they committed errors which they considered de-motivating to them. Following is a brief of the study outcomes:

4.1. Summary of Common Errors observed for Groups 1 and 2

No. Of Days	S- V Agreement	Preposition	Articles	Pronouns	Tenses
1	1	0	3	1	2
2	2	0	4	1	3
3	0	2	2	2	2
4	3	0	5	1	3
5	2	0	5	1	2
6	1	0	5	2	2
7	2	1	4	1	4
8	2	3	2	0	3
9	1	3	4	0	4
10	2	0	1	0	2

4.2. Summary of Interview Responses

Interview Questions	Group A		Group B	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
When you commit local errors, do you like the teacher to correct you?	9	19	N/A	N/A
In committing global errors, do you favor the teacher to correct you?	10	18	23	5
Do you like error correction in your class discussions?	8	20	25	3

5. Discussion

The main rules underlying the common errors committed by the participants are listed below. These errors and the related information are meant to supplement and support the qualitative data elicited from the participants' interviews.

1. Subject-verb agreement: Subjects must go with the verbs in number. This means that a singular subject will carry a singular verb and vice versa.

In the present form, nouns and verbs have opposite forms: we add an "s" to plural nouns and singular verbs and we remove it from singular nouns and plural verbs. It is a rule that learners cannot easily assimilate because inflectional morphology in English is less specific compared to its counterpart in Arabic. For instance, the present form in English has only two forms of agreement which are the base form and the -s form, and one form in the past tense, (-ed); unlike Arabic language in which each pronoun in the subject position has its special inflectional formula.

2. *Prepositions*. It is a connector which combines nouns and pronouns in a sentence. It also defines the relationship between a noun or pronoun and the other word. According to Lawal (2004), prepositions indicate different relationships between words or phrases in sentences that involve those of position, direction, time, and several amounts of rational or emotional attitudes.
3. *Articles*. Articles are separate words or bound morphemes that combine nouns in noun phrases to specify their type of reference. They are used to indicate definiteness and indefiniteness. (Cowan, 2008)
4. *Pronouns* which can be defined as alternatives or substitutes to nouns or noun phrases with a general reference such as I, they, she.....etc.
5. *Verb Tense*. It can be defined as the time when someone did something or the time when something took place. It has three basic forms which are the present, the past and the future.

The result of the first research question shows the ineffectiveness of error correction as a strategy for addressing the participants' errors. This study reveals the effectiveness of self-correction in language growth and in motivating students to perform better in speaking. Pishghadam et al. (2011), indicates that self-correction effectiveness is exemplified in the fact that students realize that they are making errors while speaking aloud and fix their errors by themselves, which reflects positive output in the classroom. Pishghadam added "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 learners 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). Thus, the answer to the research question-number 2- is that it is self-correction which is absolutely connected with the students' motivation unlike error correction which is done by the teacher.

6. Conclusion

For decades, the effectiveness of correcting errors has been discussed on a large scale. There are some researchers who hold a strong belief in

the viability of error correction for EFL learners, while some others believe that error correction leads to a number of negative impacts, including an increase in anxiety among learners which could eventually result in poor performance. The present study of 28 UAE students taking an EAP course suggests that error correction by teachers is less effective than self-correction. The latter is also completely correlated with inspiration which stems from learner autonomy in a way when the learners are encouraged to correct their mistakes themselves. This study also approves that correcting errors leads to emotional problems as those revealed among the participants of Group 1.

This does not mean that error correction is totally negative and has no benefits. Instead of concentrating on only one method, teachers can perhaps incorporate different feedback ways, for instance, self-correction to help students improve in the most efficient way. The teacher should adjust the most suitable correction technique that differs according to the intellectual capacities and moral qualities of the learners. It is even better if teachers ask students about their preference of whether error correction by a teacher is an appropriate technique for them or if they see a mixture of both methods (self-correction and error correction) as a more effective way.

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