Should we correct our students errors in l2 learning?

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Lightbown & Spada (1999:16)

Abstract

In teaching and learning a foreign language, there is a general belief of not leaving an erroneous utterance in the air but correct it; however, this is a very complex issue which depends on many internal and external factors affecting the language acquisition and learning process.

This article opens a debate about the topic in a thought-provoking way by analysing the most representative research done so far, the set of reasons to account for and against error correction and a critical evaluation of positive and negative ways of correction and its methodological implications for a direct application in the language classroom.

Key words: Second language, error, correction

Resumen

En el ámbito de la enseñanza/aprendizaje de segundas lenguas existe una tendencia generalizada a creer que una expresión errónea no puede quedar impune y ha de ser siempre corregida. Sin embargo, estamos ante un aspecto realmente complejo que va a depender de muchos factores externos e internos que afectan al proceso de aprendizaje y adquisición de una segunda lengua.

El objetivo de este artículo es abrir un debate que nos haga reflexionar sobre las investigaciones más representativas llevadas a cabo hasta nuestros días sobre el tema, establecer una serie de razones a favor y en contra de la corrección y evaluar de forma crítica tipos de correcciones efectivas e inefectivas junto con sus implicaciones metodológicas para que así podamos aplicarlas en el aula de idiomas.

Palabras Clave: Segunda lengua, errores, corrección

1

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Susana Gómez Martínez   *Encuentro* 16, 2006, pp.

1. Introduction

A lot of research has been devoted to study how a second language should be taught; however, a very good technique or a very competent teacher does not always mean that a better learning process will take place. The good teacher is not only the one who has got a good competence in the language or has graduated with honors, but the one who is aware of the students needs and difficulties and focus his teaching on them and interacts with the students as a moderator or guide of their own learning process. In other words, the good teacher is actually the one who can see beyond the face of the students and beyond the grammar books he is using to do his teaching.

There´s no doubt among teaching professionals that, although we as teachers play a very important role in second language teaching, it is the learner who plays the main role in the learning process. According to the Personal Agenda hypothesis proposed by Schumann & Schumann (1977), every student has his personal view on what he wants to learn and how he wants to do it. The reason why some learners do pick up some things but not others, could be due to the learners´ ability to take from a lesson only those things that they want and in the manner they want. Thus, as a very important starting point, we need to be aware of the variety of students individual learning styles, individual factors affecting their acquisition and learning and be flexible enough to adapt to the students individual needs; this way, we will have the key for success in both language teaching and language learning.

2. Errors in L2 learning

Although there is a general belief of not leaving an erroneous utterance in the air, but correct it, this is a very complex matter which depends on many factors as we will analyze below.

Sometimes errors should be corrected, others should not; the methods used for correction sometimes work, some others do not... This is a complex issue which will depend basically on the learner personal agenda, his personality and some other individual factors which are implied in his learning style and preferences.

Nevertheless, before going into greater detail about the debate of whether the errors should be corrected or not, I will start by looking at the positive versus the negative concept of errors. Thus, whenever we listen to the word "error" in language learning, we immediately associate it with a deviance from the native language and something which has to be avoided by all means. However, despite the negative connotations this word may have, it also has positive connotations, as it is considered as evidence that the learning process is taking place. Following this idea, Edge (1989) does not use the word "mistake" or "error" but "learning steps". Thus, from the teacher´s point of view, errors provide them with feedback so as to know the effectiveness of their teaching and enable them to decide whether they should spend more time on a specific item or go on with a new one.

A distinction has been made between errors which affect the linguistic competence –grammatical errors– or the communicative competence –communicative errors–. Grammatical errors or local errors are minimal constituents in the sentence which do not affect the comprehension, whereas the communicative or global errors do. The fact that our students use a definite instead of the indefinite article, or that they use an incorrect form of the past, the wrong preposition, etc, despite being deviances from the English system, they do not affect communication. Since language learning has been considered in terms of communication (when talking about English as a second language, it is learnt basically as the language of international communication), accuracy does not play such an important role; thus, according to this point of view, it would be more important to get the meaning through than being accurate.

Edge supports this theory by emphasizing the importance on communication as a motivational aspect in second language learning. :

> "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).

Nevertheless, it is not communication all that matters; thus, Allright (1986) supports the importance of grammatical errors by suggesting that two steps are taken by learners when they interact: the first one is to get the message across and understand it, and the second one is to use the interaction as an opportunity to observe and produce features of the language. The first one corresponds to the communicative function whereas the second is the learning function. Thus, getting the meaning of the message is the main function although the input received is also very important in order to build or rebuild the learner´s grammar. This theory will help teachers to be aware of this distinction, consider the students needs and students expectations and account for one or the other kind of correction or even for both whenever required.

3. Against error correction

Although there is the general belief that a wrong utterance should be corrected, some theories in Second Language Acquisition deny the role of error correction by supporting that students go through systematic stages in learning and they just acquire a structure when they are ready for it, but not before. Thus, the Morpheme Studies and Krashen´s Natural Order Hypothesis account that we acquire the rules of language in a predictable way and this is independent of the order in which rules are taught in language classes (Krashen 1982, Brown 1973, Dulay & Burt 1973, 1974; Bailey et al. 1974). This is a very important aspect which is overlooked by some teachers who keep correcting the student with no successful result.

Moreover, research done by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), Tuscott (1996,1998, 1999),Young (1991) - among others- supports that correction of errors has also been considered to have negative effects. Walker (1973) for instance, found in his study that students preferred not to be corrected for each speaking and writing error because this practice undermined their confidence and forced them to waste so much effort on details that they used to lose the overall ability to use language. Thus, correction turns to be a way to break the flow of conversation -specially when the teacher interrupts the student before he has finished his utterance-, and it is also a way to lower the student´s motivation as only his failures and not his goals are highlighted.

Excessive feedback on error can also have a negative effect on motivation and can also prevent learning steps to take place because, if everything is corrected, students do not take risk and do not say anything unless they are sure it is correct.

Edge (1989) criticize what he calls <<the over-corrected teacher>>, i.e. a teacher –normally non native- who focus too much on accuracy when speaking. Although he asks the students to talk freely, the students end up following the teacher´s way and focusing too much on accuracy rather than on communication and fluency. Norrish (1983) also supports this idea by defending that teachers should emphasize the idea of the language as an instrument for communication and encourage their students to express themselves rather than worrying too much on weather they do it right or not. He tries to encourage teachers to be more tolerant with the students errors so as to let them risk, guess, enjoy the learning and provide them with a feeling of security to use the language.

3

Should we correct our students errors in l2 learning?
Susana Gómez Martínez   *Encuentro* 16, 2006, pp.

4. For error correction

There is no doubt that conversational interactions are very important; however, focusing too much on "what they say" rather than on "how they say it" can be dangerous. This can result in a situation where learners provide each other with input which is often incorrect and incomplete and which other learners process as if it were right. This can lead us to support that form focus and error correction is also necessary, that correction of errors should be made, otherwise they can create false hypothesis and fossilize. However, we cannot take it too seriously as too much emphasis on accuracy will inhibit students to talk. The right balance is again sought and we mus not forget that when correcting it is important to take into account the students sense of achievement, success and learning preferences.

The positive influence that corrective feedback has in SLA is supported by research done by Carroll & Merrill (1993), Doughty and Varela (1998) Iwashita (2003), Long, Shhunji, Ortega (1998), Lyster (2001), Lyster and Ranta, 1997 and White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta (1991). The theory of SLA by excellence which accounts for error correction is the Behaviouristic theory (Watson 1924, Thorndike 1932 and Skinner 1957) which suggests that it is through correction that learning happens, i.e. when a mistake is made, the teacher should correct it immediately and then repeat the correct version to be learnt by the rest of the class.

Students´attitude towards correction is sometimes positive, specially in advance levels where students specially want to be corrected in order to improve their language and avoid errors to be fossilized.

Levine (1975) also accounts for the positive effects on correction and talks in his book about the dangerous consequences of non correction. He analyses the effects of non giving confirmation nor disconfirmation to the students´ guesses and accounts that if an error is not corrected, both the speaker and the rest of the class will consider it a right utterance to be learnt. He carries out an experiment and proves his hypothesis that the teachers response to wrong utterances is very important as part of the learning process as they cause the subject to alter a negative hypothesis he had wrongly thought of.

As pointed out before in this article, errors are learning steps and we have to look at them in a positive way and make the most of them in order to overcome them and go a step beyond in the interlanguage stage.

5. Do´s and don´ts of error correction

As we have analyzed in the previous sections, the correction of errors is sometimes necessary and positive but some other times it has a negative effect. Being able to know about our students individual learning styles and preferences will give us the clue so as to know whether we should correct them or not and how error correction could improve their linguistic and communicative competence.

This last section suggests some insights on different ways of correction and their positive and negative effects, so that teachers can use the correct techniques for better results.

So as to start, it is important to distinguish that there are two types of correction, the implicit and the explicit one. The problem with the first one, i.e. feedback on error which takes the form of recast or repetitions may be interpreted by the learners as a continuation of the conversation, therefore, explicit correction may also be needed and it is more effective sometimes. Another problem implicit correction can mislead us to is that teachers sometimes do not highlight where the error is, therefore, the student may not realize where the focus of difficulty is and changes other elements which are completely right.

The most typical way of correcting is by interrupting the student before he has finished speaking. This could have a negative effect, specially among anxious students as they normally loose the track, forget what they were talking about and their anxiety levels are increased.

Some other times teachers do not wait the time necessary for the student to assimilate the correction. A useful technique is to wait, write down the correction and find correction at a later time. This issue has to do with the Incubation Hypothesis which accounts that students need an incubation period before the new structure starts to appear in their performance. This is also another reason why teachers should correct an error which is performed by the student some minutes later.

Another problem occurs when teachers correct students' errors which are beyond the students´ level. They just correct them because it is not the English standard form without realizing that this correction is beyond the students' capacity.

The problem with this is also that the teacher has to stop and explain the new concept. Therefore, only those errors which correspond to the grammar it is being learning should be corrected.

Moreover, emphasis on error should be done on the lexicon, intonation and pronunciation because they are the main areas for the understanding of the message. According to Vázquez (1987) pragmatics and semantics play a more important role than morphosyntax in the comprehension of the message, so we should take this into account when deciding which type of errors to correct.

A very useful, practical and effective way of correction is the use of an inductive method in which the teacher asks the student to correct himself (self-correction) and realize on what he did wrong. This way it will allow the student to carry out an error processing which actually helps him more to retain the right form in his mind.

Another effective way of correction, specially if we think of the teacher not only as the great source of knowledge but as a moderator or guide in the language classroom is to wait until someone comes out with the right answer. It is also important to encourage self correction rather than teacher correction and it is also very useful to discuss correction with students.

So as to finish this section, I would like to focus on some questions proposed by Bartram and Walton (2002), which are very useful to decide whether to let an error go or not:

1. Does the mistake affect communication?
2. Are we concentrating on accuracy at the moment?
3. Is it really wrong? Or is it my imagination?
4. Why did the student make the mistake?
5. Is it the first time the student has spoken for a long time?
6. Could the student react badly to my correction?
7. Have they met this language point in the current lesson?
8. Is it something the students have already met?
9. Is this a mistake that several students are making?
10. Would the mistake irritate someone?

6. Conclusion

Error correction is definitely needed at some point in the learning process to a lesser or a wider extent; however, a very wide range of individual factors defining our students make this task a very complicated one which will depend on factors such as the learner´s age, aptitude, stage in the language process, proficiency level, motivation, anxiety, metalinguistic sophistication, individual preferences, learning styles, learning strategies and previous achievement, factors which turn to be crucial information for the language teacher in order to improve the learning process.

5

Should we correct our students errors in l2 learning?
Susana Gómez Martínez   *Encuentro* 16, 2006, pp.

Teachers should try to get the most information as possible from the students in order to know what their learning styles and preferences are. Thus, teachers should consider on the first hand the students' reaction to error correction, because some want to be corrected and others do not, and also which errors should be corrected and which ones should be left uncorrected, depending on the students level and students´ needs.

Throughout this article, we have emphasize the role of communication as a first and most important one in second language learning. So, despite the exceptions which are normally applied to advanced levels, we can suggest that teachers should correct errors which interrupt the interaction, specially in the first stages, because in everyday situation it is more important to communicate successfully than to communicate perfectly. In the same way, teachers should also encourage students to take risks and make errors if necessary so as to develop their learning steps which in turn is the main goal of language teaching and learning.

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6

Should we correct our students errors in l2 learning?
Susana Gómez Martínez   *Encuentro* 16, 2006, pp.

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7

Should we correct our students errors in l2 learning?
Susana Gómez Martínez   *Encuentro* 16, 2006, pp.