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ORAL ERROR CORRECTION TREATMENT IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: This work presents some principles and procedures related to oral error correction treatment in communicative language teaching, as this specific method demands a series of elements that goes beyond a mere teacher's intervention or explicit feedback during the process of correcting a learner's utterance. In the process, the reader will come across activities designed to create opportunities for concept-checking and applying the concepts in practice.

Key Words: *Oral Error Correction, Oral Error Correction Treatment, Oral Correction Techniques*

Introduction

With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT), errors are no longer regarded as taboo in the learning process, but they are now seen as indicators of progress in interlanguage development, and so allies of both teachers and learners. This is actually one of the main features that set CLT apart from other approaches to teach foreign languages: Tolerant attitude towards students' errors (MA, 2009). According to the same author, CLT treats different errors respectfully, taking into consideration a series of elements in the correction process.

Dealing with such concept is a challenge for teachers, as error treatment is an extremely complex process which requires a number of quick choices that the teacher has to make before he comes up with a reactive move to the student's erroneous response (PAWLAK, 2002). In order to explore this process of decision-making concerning error correction, Hendrickson (apud. TEDICK; DE GORTARI, 1998, p.1) framed a set of questions that have been continuously posed by researchers on the issue of error treatment in second and foreign language classroom. **Read such questions and think about possible answers.**

- Should learners' errors be corrected?
- When should learners' errors be corrected?
- Which errors should be corrected?
- How should errors be corrected?
- Who should do the correcting?

By pointing out relevant claims for each of these questions, it is possible to structure a process of error correction for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) teachers.

The following questions have been posed by many linguists in researches concerning oral error correction treatment. **Read the texts that claim answers to such questions and choose the alternative that best summarizes the text**.

Should learners' errors be corrected?

According to Krashen (apud PAWLAK, 2002: 296), error correction puts learners into the defensive, and as a result, they tend to avoid using difficult structure and so, they tend to focus on form rather than on meaning, all of which is detrimental to acquisition. On the other hand, the lack of correction may lead students to a circle of repetition of errors and consequently, to fossilization- the regular use of noticeable incorrect forms (BROWN, 2000). In other words, errors may get permanent in the learners' speech (AKHTER, 2007).

There are also researches that point out the need for correction identified by the students themselves. Waltz highlights the study of Cathcart and Olsen (1976), in which they asked a teacher to attend to a group of students' request to have all errors corrected. The result of it was that students were unable to think clearly and produce complete sentences, and it reinforces Chastain's statement that overcorrection prevents students from concentrating on the message, and that it destroys the pleasure of learning a foreign language (apud WALTZ, 1982, p. 6). It all supports the idea that correction should be done, but that special attention must be paid to it. It is the teacher's role to use correction in a way that students can truly benefit from it, not hindering their oral performance in terms of focus and motivation.

1. Should learners' errors be corrected? Why (not)?

a) All errors should be corrected due to the fact that they might get permanent in students' speech.

b) Errors should be corrected. However, it is vital that teachers analyze each erroneous utterance before employing a correction technique.

c) In CLT, errors should be corrected in a careful way, in order not to bring about a change in students' attitude towards language learning.

When should learners' errors be corrected?

In order to point out pertinent statements concerning this question, it is essential to set the difference between accuracy practice and fluency practice due to the fact that teachers employ dissimilar error correction techniques in the two contexts. Richards (2006) states that fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. In contrast, the focus of accuracy activities is on creating correct example of language use, on discrete syntactic, morphological, or semantic structures.

During fluency practice, teachers should correct only the errors that hinder communication, whereas in accuracy practice, the errors concerning the specific grammatical point of the class, function, vocabulary, and skill should be strictly corrected (CARRANZA, 2007). Bearing this difference in mind, and also taking into consideration the harm that overcorrection may do to students' motivation and impulse of trying to produce more complex sentences, teachers should then decide whether to correct errors on the spot or delayed.

In the British Council website there is the definition of on-the-spot correction as a teacher's intervention to a learner's mistake as soon as they make it, through techniques that include giving the right answer, echoing the learner but using the correct language, and applying for facial expressions and gestures to indicate there has been a problem and where it is. With regard to delayed correction, techniques are employed some time after a learner has made an error. It is recommended to avoid interrupting students during fluency practice. To do so, the teacher monitors students during group or pair work, taking notes of the most relevant errors, the ones that block communication, in order to discuss them in open class. It is also a good way to make transition between parts of the lesson.

It is essential that teachers be aware of the dangers of on-the-spot correction to students' confidence and that it can also hinder the timing and pace of the class. As to delayed correction, it is important not to make students feel embarrassed, pointing out names. It is advisable that teachers address the whole class for correction, not one student specifically.

In the classroom, the decision whether to correct on the spot or delayed depends on a variety of aspects, such as objective of the class, class dynamics, learners' attitude and expectations, motivation and level.

2. **When should learners' errors be corrected?**

a) In order to decide whether to correct errors on the spot or delayed, teachers should consider the purpose of the activity.

b) During fluency practice, only errors that hinder communication should be corrected whereas in accuracy practice, there should be correction on errors concerning the pedagogical point.

c) Students' motivation and level should be taken into consideration when employing a correction technique.

Which errors should be corrected?

High frequency errors

It is advisable that teachers analyze whether the error is a one-off problem or if it has been made more often by the entire classroom or individual students. A frequent error is usually made on a common point of grammar, so the carryover value of learning the correct form is greater than with an isolated mistake (WALTZ, 1982).

Blocking and stigmatizing errors

Hendrickson defines blocking errors are those which block the meaning, and so confusing the listeners, while stigmatizing errors have a rather negative effect on the listener, but do not cause a communication breakdown (apud SHAHIN, 2011, p. 213). The University of Utah's ESL Writing Initiative qualifies stigmatizing errors as the ones that are most likely to annoy those proficient in the language. Leki (1991) points out that this type of error is traditionally associated with lack of education. Subject-verb agreement, the occasional misuse of forms (theirselves for themselves) are examples of it. Regarding this type of error, it is relevant to point out that many linguists agree that the identification of a stigmatizing error depends upon the attitude of the listener and also on subjective judgements, and so they are hard to be identified precisely (LEE, 1990).

Pedagogical focus

Errors in using the pedagogical focus of the class and also in form that students have recently learned should be corrected. Allwright mentions the importance of the correction of this type of error:

> Students may not understand the selectivity of a teacher who chooses not to correct a certain mistake. If a class spends time studying a particular grammar feature then an error occurs and goes uncorrected, all students who hear it will begin to question their own understanding of the structure. (ALLWRIGHT, 1975, apud WALTZ, 1982: 11)

In addition to it, Allwright observes that teachers tend to be inconsistent in whom they correct and which errors they correct, that means they may correct a mistake made by one student but not by the other and they may sometimes correct an error of an specific tense

and at other times ignore it, that is the reason why he recommends a more consistent approach to error correction an so avoid confusion among learners. (ALLWRIGHT, 1975, apud RICHARDS; LOCKHART, 1996: 191).

Richards and Lockhart (1996) state that error treatment may fail if the correction is aimed at structures which are beyond the learner's stage of inter language. Corder (1967, apud PAWLAK, 2002: 296) reinforces the idea that error treatment involving grammatical structures that have not been introduced to students yet and so not part of their stage of interlanguage is bound to be ineffective. Therefore teachers should be careful when dealing with errors in grammatical points that have not been introduced to students yet. Only the correction might not be enough to clarify doubts and so it may end up confusing the students.

3. Which errors should be corrected?

a) Errors that reflect a misunderstanding about the pedagogical focus of the class should be corrected whereas the correction of errors concerning structures that have not been introduced to students should be avoided.

b) Teachers should target their correction on errors that: block the communication, sound awkward to native speakers, are constantly present in the students' speech and reflect a misunderstanding about the pedagogical focus.

c) Teachers tend to be inconsistent in error correction. That's the reason why all errors concerning the pedagogical focus of the class and structures that have recently been introduced to students should be corrected.

How should errors be corrected?

Although many linguists refer to error correction as error treatment, it is relevant for a better comprehension on the topic to set the two terms apart. According to Chaudron (1977, apud SHAHIN, 2011, p. 207; 208), the term error correction should be used in order to describe procedures that involve the teacher's direct intervention on the process of error correction, whereas error treatment is a more appropriate term to describe a branch of procedures that include the teacher's feedback, both orally and through gestures, and also the students' response to the correction by self-correction or peer correction.

According to Carranza (2007), when dealing with error treatment, it is essential to point out techniques that go beyond the forms of correction that are explicitly provided by the teacher, taking into consideration others that aim to actively involve the learners in the process of identifying and correcting their own errors, as the latter approach seems to produce more positive results.

In that context, Lyster and Ranta's work on corrective feedback and learners' uptake is of particular interest as it presents findings on types of error treatment that encourages the learner's self-repair, leading them to correct their own errors with contemplation of grammatical accuracy and lexical precision within a meaningful communicative context (TEDICK; DE GORTARI, 1998).

Some of the techniques analyzed in their studies are listed below. An example is provided to illustrate each one:

Recast

It is the reformulation of all or a part of learner's sentence, minus the error. They tend to be implicit as they are not introduced by such phrases: "You mean", "Use this word", and "You should say." Translation is considered a part of this category. (ROY; LYSTER, 1997). See the example (ELLIS, 2009: PAGE).

> L: I went there two times.
>
> T: You've been. You've been there twice as a group?

Repetition

The teacher repeats the student's error and adjusts intonation to draw students' attention to it. See the example (ELLIS, 2009: PAGE).

> L: I will showed you.
>
> T: I will SHOWED you.
>
> L: I'll show you.
>
> (ELLIS, 2009)

Clarification request

The teacher requires some repetition or reformulation of a student's utterance by showing that the message has not been understood. The teacher may use phases such as "Excuse me" or "I don't understand" to request clarification. See the example.

> T. 'What did you do yesterday?'
>
> S 'I *play* football'
>
> T 'Excuse me?'
>
> S 'I **played** football'
>
> Extracted from <http://anita-kwiatkowska.blogspot.com.br/2010/02/corrective-feedback.html>

Metalinguistic feedback

Without explicitly providing the answer, the teacher makes comments, adds information or questions related to the correct form of the student's utterance. See the example.

> S. She *like* bananas.
>
> T. What's the ending of the 3rd person singular when we use Present Simple?
>
> Extracted from < http://anita-kwiatkowska.blogspot.com.br/2010/02/corrective-feedback.html>

Elicitation

The teacher elicits the right answer from students by making questions such as "How do you say that in English?", by pausing to let students complete the teacher's sentence, as in "It's a …", or by asking students to reformulate the sentence, "Say that again" (TEDICK; DE GORTARI, 1998). See the example (ELLIS, 2009: PAGE).

> L: I'll come if it will not rain.
>
> T: I'll come if it ……?

Explicit feedback

It occurs when the teacher clearly indicates that the student's utterance was incorrect and so the correct form is provided. See the example (RASSAEI; MOINZADEH, 2011).

> Student: Where she go?
>
> Interlocutor: Where **does** she go?
>
> Student: When you come back?
>
> Teacher: When **do** you come back?
>
> The words in bold-face show that the interlocutors phonetically emphasized the corrected parts of the learners' utterances.

Opinions are contradictory in the analysis of this technique. To Schachter (1988, apud PAWLAK, 2001, p. 296), lack of negative feedback in form of explicit correction can serve to learners' as a confirmation of their incorrect hypotheses about the rules of generating the target language. On the other hand, Bartram and Walton (1994, apud CARRANZA, 2007, p. 86) observed the effect that this technique may have in the learners' motivation. According to them, although explicit correction is frequently used in communicative activities, it interrupts the learner's intent to communicate, leading them to willingness to establish communication in the target language.

Although paralinguistic signal was not pointed out as a type of corrective feedback by Lyster and Ranta, it is considered an oral error correction technique. It happens when the teacher uses gestures or face expressions to indicate that the learner has made an error (ELLIS, 2009).

4. How should errors be corrected?

a) Roy and Lyster's study on correction feedback and learners uptake point out five important error correction techniques: Recast, elicitation, repetition, metalinguistic feedback, clarification request and explicit feedback.

b) Teachers should stimulate students' self- correction.

c) Explicit feedback technique is criticized by some researchers due to the fact that it does not lead students to self-correction.

Who should do the correcting?

Before pointing out who should do the correcting in ELT, it is interesting to report what literature says about the difference between the terms error and mistake.

According to Brown (2000), mistakes refer to an error made by language learners in their performance and that represents a failure in producing a phonological, grammatical, or lexical element that has already been introduced to them. Learners fail to utilize a known system correctly, and so, mistakes do not reflect deficiency in competence, but the result of some sort of temporary breakdown or imperfection in the process of producing speech. Therefore, mistakes can be self-corrected. As for errors, they are seen as indicators of learner's competence in the target language, as direct manifestations of a system within that the learner is operating at the right time. Although most researchers call them all errors, the terms distinction made by Brown will be utilized in this section.

In order to deal with mistakes as "slips" or "lapses", which may be the production of a wrong utterance caused by lack of attention, the teacher can employ techniques to lead students to self-correction. Teachers wait longer to intervene after a mistake has been made. In that way, changes are that students self-correct it, as researches supports. In a research, Holley and King (1971, apud WALTZ, 1982, p. 15) found out that students were able to correct themselves 50 percent of the time, by having teachers waiting five to ten seconds after they began to speak. In case students are not able to self-correct, teachers can understand that it is not a mere slip and so go to the hypotheses of an error, which demands teachers' intervention with an error correction technique employed through teacher-to-student correction or student-to-student correction.

Some advantages and disadvantages of using these types of correction are listed at *Bridge TEFL input- Error Correction: Error correction information gap*:

Student-to-student correction (Peer correction)

The process encourages learners to listen carefully to one another and it also brings confidence to the student making the correction. On the other hand, the student who corrects may give incorrect forms and it may take much time, hindering timing and pace of the class.

Teacher-to-student correction

The correct form is given quickly and reliably and there can be focus on common errors among learners. The disadvantages are that it creates overdependence on the teacher and learners may lose interest while others are being corrected.

It is part up to teachers to analyze whether it is convenient to encourage self-correction as well as the appropriateness of their own intervention in oral correction.

Extrated from < http://teflbootcamp.com/tefl-skills/correcting-errors-in-efl/>

5. Who should do the correcting?

a) In order to choose among self-correction, student-to-student correction and teacher-to-student correction, teachers should be aware of the type of error that has been made.

b) Slips or lapses should be self-corrected. Errors demand explanation and the correction of errors, as attempts of producing language students have not been introduced to, should be avoided.

c) The teacher should only intervene after stimulating self-correction and peer-correction.

Food for thought

Correcting errors in learners' oral performance is essential for their development process. Errors can be interpreted as references for teachers in identifying the step in inter language progress in which the learner is, and so should also be taken into consideration for future class planning.

Errors must be corrected, but teachers have to bear in mind the consequence that error correction might have on learners' motivation and independence. There must be an oral error correction treatment, instead of just a teacher's intervention with the right answers. In a context where learners' autonomy is taken as the ultimate goal, it is necessary that teachers apply all possible techniques in order to put students in charge of their own process of learning.

It is hard for teachers to go through all items listed in this article when stumbling upon a learner's incorrect utterance. It must be a continuous practice that starts with teachers understanding the process of error correction treatment, reflecting on it and applying it in class, in a way that corresponds to both their expectations and their learners'. Teachers must remember that everything they do in class is of extreme importance for their learners' development and so error correction should be taken seriously.

IN YOUR OWN CLASSES

Let's suppose your students make the following mistakes in your class. How would you correct them?

(1) It is a group of beginners. Students have just been introduced to the present continuous. During the fluency practice, you suggest an activity in which students are detectives and so they are supposed to tell their pairs what the people in the pictures are doing. One of them produce the following utterance: "This woman talking the cell phone."

Error treatment type of error: _____

Correct: [ ] YES   [ ] NO

Why (not)?   _____

When to correct it? (if applicable) _____

Which technique? (if applicable) _____

Describe the Procedure:

_____
_____
_____
_____

(2) An advanced group is discussing a topic on office routine procedures. It is a whole class activity and one of the students produces the following utterance: "I write all my appointments in my agenda".

Error treatment type of error: _____

Correct: [ ] YES   [ ] NO

Why (not)?   _____

When to correct it? (if applicable) _____

Which technique? (if applicable) _____

Describe the Procedure:

_____
_____
_____
_____

(3) It is a group of students that has been studying English for two years. One of them produces the following utterance during a warm up activity about last weekend: "I don't buy the cell phone I needed".

Error treatment type of error: _____

Correct: [ ] YES   [ ] NO

Why (not)?   _____

When to correct it? (if applicable)   _____

Which technique? (if applicable)   _____

Describe the Procedure:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Answer Key

1. Should learners' errors be corrected? **C**

2. When should learners' errors be corrected? **B**

3. Which errors should be corrected? **B**

4. How should errors be corrected? **B**

5. Who should do the correcting? **A**

IN YOUR OWN CLASSES (possible answers)

1. "This woman talking the cell phone".

Error treatment type of error:	*Grammatical (the structure of present continuous and a preposition missing)*
Correct:	[X] YES [ ] NO
Why (not)?	*One could correct this error due to the fact that it is an activity that focuses on the use of a structure that has been presented recently.*
When to correct it? (if applicable)	*One could correct it on the spot in order to make sure the pair working together would produce more accurate utterances in the following parts of the activity.*
Which technique? (if applicable)	*Elicitation*

Describe the Procedure:

One could apply the elicitation technique, eliciting the right answer from the student by pausing the sentence: "This woman…", an attempt to make anyone in the pair complete it with the missing form of the verb to be 'IS'. In case none of them comes up with the right answer, one could go to paralinguistic gestures, indicating there is a word missing. Then one could provide the right sentence, adjusting intonation to the words missing IS and ON.

2. "I write all my appointments in my agenda"

Error treatment type of error:	*Lexical (the collocation of the word agenda)*
Correct:	[X] YES [ ] NO
Why (not)?	*One could correct this error due to the fact that it blocks the meaning, hindering communication.*
When to correct it? (if applicable)	*One could apply a delayed correction. As students are engaged in a fluency activity, I would give feedback in this and other relevant utterance when the discussion is over.*

Which technique? (if applicable)   *elicitation and/or metalinguistic feedback*

Describe the Procedure:

One can write the sentence on the board and elicit any possibility of correction from the students. If nobody comes up with it, one could employ metalinguistic feedback, giving an example of another sentence with the correct use of the word agenda along with a short explanation of the context. "The next item in the agenda is the publicity budget". Then one can tell them the possibilities of words to correct the wrong utterance.

3. "I don't buy the cell phone I needed".

Error treatment type of error: Grammatical (the auxiliar verb)

Correct: [ ] YES   [X] NO

Why (not)?   *One shouldn't correct this error in order to check whether it is a slip, wrong usage because of not concentrating, and so just a one off problem. If the student keeps on producing negative sentences in the past applying the wrong auxiliary verb, then a correction treatment is necessary.*

When to correct it? (if applicable)   *One could apply a delayed correction in order to check the frequency of this type of mistake during the activity.*

Which technique? (if applicable)   *recast*

Describe the Procedure:

One could employ the recast technique, repeating the sentence without the error "I didn't buy the shoes I needed", and then ask each student to say something they didn't do last weekend, in a wrapping up format, or a warm up exercise in the following class.

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FOR FURTHER READING

In this article, the aspects of learner uptake were not studied in depth. For those who would like to know more about it, Lyster and Ranta's 1997 study: *Corrective feedback and learner uptake, Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms* is a good suggestion.

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