

The Role of Correcting Errors and Giving Feedback in Teaching of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Errors and learning go hand in hand. Making errors is an integral and inseparable part of every learning process and making mistakes while learning a language is not an exception. Hence, insisting an error free performance at the initial stages of language learning would not only intimidate the students rather discourages them to participate freely and enthusiastically in the class. On the other hand, it is important to give precedence to the learning and using of new concepts than promoting accuracy when any new concept in the second language acquisition is at nascent stage. Furthermore, a teacher can play a significant role by creating an encouraging, supportive and responsive classroom environment for the students to express themselves without any fear of embarrassment in front of the peers. Then only, the use of mistakes will not only promote and facilitate learning rather become the basis of a deeper level of understanding.

Keywords: Teaching of English as a Second Language, Error Correction, Feedback, Second Language Acquisition

Making mistakes and learning from them are natural components of human existence. Errors and misunderstandings happen every day in the classroom too and instead of trying to mask any errors that happen, it's important to deal with them effectively. Maria Montessori, founder of the educational approach that bears her name, wrote, "It is well to cultivate a friendly feeling toward error, to treat it as a companion inseparable from our lives, as something having a purpose, which it truly has". An error-free existence, on the other hand, would lack risk-taking and often become dull and bland. Hence, only those who are willing to take a chance wind up accomplishing something significant in their lives.

Generally, a phobia is associated with the learning of English Language in many parts of India so it is essential to bring home to the students that the errors are a natural part of the learning process, and they shouldn't feel embarrassed about them. They should instead be encouraged not to view mistakes as a negative thing, but another stage in the learning journey. Usually the practitioners of different grammar teaching approaches advocate different error correction policies, ranging from "errors should not be tolerated" to "explicit error correction is not helpful." But since the new century's page has unfolded, most practitioners and researchers seem to have agreed that correcting grammar

errors in a supportive way is of value, but that the effect of error correction may be impacted by contextual factors and individual differences (Ur, P. 2012; Russell, J., Spada, N. 2006).

Therefore, to create a better learning environment, it is imperative to deal with the errors effectively. Dealing with errors is not that easy as an incorrect decision taken on the part of the teacher may make or mar a student's interest in language learning.

Why do Learners Make Errors?

ELT practitioners underscore two main reasons of making errors in Second Language Acquisition:

The first and the foremost reason is the influence from the learner's first language (L1) on the second Language. This is called Interference or Transfer. Learners may use sound patterns, lexis or grammatical structures from their own language in English.

Secondly, when the students are in the process of learning key concepts of a language, they unconsciously work out and organise language which leads to the overgeneralization of rules. These kinds of errors are called developmental errors. Learners of any mother tongue may make these kinds of errors, which are often similar to those made by a young first language speaker as part of their normal language development. For example, very young first language speakers of English often make mistakes with verb forms saying things such as 'I goed' instead of 'I went. In these kinds of errors learners wrongly apply a rule for one item of the language to another item.

Language Feedback

Rechristening the term error correction as "language feedback", Julian Edge in his book, "Mistakes and Correction" divides the mistakes made by students in the language learning classroom into three categories: Slips, Errors and Attempts. Colloquially, we might use these terms interchangeably, but in linguistics, they're distinct concepts.

Slips are smaller mistakes which a student can correct by him/herself if their attention is drawn. For example, the third person 's' ending (She go(es) to the temple daily) is a frequent slip of English learners. These can be the result of tiredness, anxiety or other temporary emotions or circumstances.

Errors happen when a student finds it hard to self-correct, but there may be other students in the group who can help with the correct version. (If there aren't, it is probably time to re-teach the language point!)

Attempts are the result of a student trying to say something beyond their language level at their stage of learning. Students have not learned a particular grammar rule in their course but attempt to use it.

Role of a Teacher

Correcting errors is an integral part of teaching, but at times teachers are unsure of how to treat students' mistakes. If they are corrected too often or too much, high are the chances for the students to get discouraged and to lose their confidence and motivation which may contribute to a heightened affective filter. Affective filter is a term originally coined by linguist Stephen Krashen in the 1970s. It describes the invisible, psychological filter that either aids or deters the process of language acquisition. When the filter is at an increased level, language development is deterred, almost as though a wall has been built around the learner to prevent the input or output of information.

On the contrary, if they let the errors go uncorrected, students may never learn how to speak or write correctly. This section of the article is going to focus on different types of error correction techniques and the constructive role of a teacher in dealing with the errors in the best way possible in any situation.

Julian Edge also reminds us about the importance of selective and meaningful response to student errors. He emphasises that not every mistake needs to be corrected, and it is the teacher who has to decide upon the appropriate time and the way to correct the student. Hence, the onus lies on the teacher and her/his role is of paramount importance.

The teacher has to make many decisions with the twinkle of an eye:

1. What should she do with the error (Correct it or not)?
2. Does the error need immediate attention? (now or may be later on)
3. Who should correct it? (self-correction, peer correction, teacher correction)
4. How should it be corrected? (best technique to correct it)

As timely and appropriate corrective feedback can help learners reduce their errors, improve their performance and significantly increase their motivation, following is a list of questions that can help the teacher determine when it is appropriate to correct a student's errors:

1. Does the mistake affect communication?
2. Are we concentrating on accuracy at the moment?
3. Why did the student make the mistake?
4. Is it something the students have already learned?
5. Is this a mistake that several students are making?

The Nuances of Language Feedback

Giving feedback is giving information to the learners about their learning. Feedback can focus on learners' language, knowledge and progress based on the purpose of the activity. Yet, a wide range of individual factors (the student's age, proficiency level, motivation, anxiety, individual preferences etc.) need to be taken into consideration before imparting the feedback. Students make different types of errors in different situations and these errors need to be addressed differently.

Diane J. Tedick refers to the process of error correction as 'error treatment' and offers several types of corrective feedback to the learners.

1. Explicit Correction. The teacher indicates that a student made a mistake and offers the correct answer.

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: He goes to the school.

2. Recast. The teacher does not directly say that the student made a mistake, but provides the correct answer, or simply re-casts/re-formulates what the student said.

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: Yes, he goes to the school daily.

3. Clarification Request. The teacher signals that the message was not clear and that there was a mistake to encourage the student to self-correct.

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: Pardon?

S: He goes to the school.

4. Metalinguistic Clues. The teacher does not offer the correct answer but asks questions to help the student see that there was a mistake (gives comments or information).

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: 3rd person '-S'

S: He goes to the school.

5. Elicitation. The teacher elicits the correct form from the student. This can be done by pausing and allowing the student to complete a sentence the teacher started, or by asking them to reformulate what they were saying.

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: Say it again, please.

S: He goes to the school.

6. Repetition. The teacher repeats the student's mistake but changes his/her intonation to signal that something was wrong.

Example

S: He go to the school.

T: He **go** to the school?

S: He goes to the school.

An Overview of the advantages and disadvantages of the Error Correction Techniques

S.No	Error Correction Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages
1	Explicit correction	Feedback is immediate and quick	Being not a learner-centered approach, does not encourage the student to self-monitor
2	Recast	It is implicit and discreet, fits naturally into the conversation	Students may not notice that the teacher has corrected them.
3	Clarification request	It fits naturally into the conversation, promotes student noticing and self correction	It works only if the student is able to self correct.
4	Metalinguistics Clue	Students will notice the correction. Such explicit attention to form can be beneficial for learning.	The communicative nature of the class may get disrupted.
5	Elicitation/Prompting	Students pay attention to the linguistic form and notice the correction. Student self correction may have a great impact on learning.	Students need to have some latent knowledge of the structure to be able to self correct.
6	Repetition	It is immediate and quick, students will notice the correction	Students do understand that they have made a mistake but may fail to see

			what was wrong with their utterance.
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Teacher Training

There is an emerging broad consensus on the fact that the role of a teacher in learning a language especially for second language acquisition is immeasurable and irreplaceable. It is the teacher only who can take the lead to reshape the landscape of the teaching and learning practices. She can make the pragmatic shift from teacher-centered classroom environment to the beneficial learner-centred possible.

In this context, it becomes very important to prepare the teachers well in every aspect. She should be made aware of the aforementioned concepts so that her pedagogy can be made effective, meaningful and fruitful. Above all, she is to be made to understand about the individual differences/factors and at the initial stage, mistakes should not be used to measure a student’s academic worth rather they should act as a vehicle to deeper understanding. Only then learning would be facilitated and the students’ morale, self-esteem, and performance would get a boost.

Extensive and reflective practice exercises should be used to extend great help to her during the course. Following is one such activity:

Analyze the different classroom situations and decide: *Would you correct the error? When would you correct it? How would you correct it?*

Situation 1 - You are doing a grammar drill to practice the present perfect tense. You ask, "Have you ever been to the hills?" A student responds, "I’ve went to the Shivalik foothills last year".

Situation 2 – You are doing a warm-up activity with your class, asking them about their grandparents. One student tells the class, "My grandmother is four and seventy".

Situation 3 – Your learners are working in groups; their task is to plan what to do together in the upcoming summer vacations. Several learners in different groups are making the same mistake, saying "We go to a cinema" or "We go on a trip".

Situation 4 – You are revising short answers before your class has a test. You are providing sentences; the students must provide the short answer. You say, "Did you come yesterday" and point to a student who says, "Yes, you do?"

Situation 5 – Your class is working in pairs doing a speaking activity. One student is asking the other to go out for the evening. The student says, "I want go to a concert".
Develop a response to each situation, grounding your response in the readings.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that mistakes and errors are indispensable parts of a learning process and instead of dealing with them with a hard hand, it is important to underscore the significance of errors as a step towards leaning and development. A teacher, hence, plays a pivotal role in the entire process. She, with just a change in the nomenclature from 'error correction' to 'language feedback' and her positive attitude can breathe life and energy into the class and pedagogy. She is the one who can encourage the students to work through errors. By considering the purpose of teaching and by keeping a range of individual factors in her mind, she can incorporate the appropriate error correction technique to create a conducive learning environment for her students.

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