Giving Feedback and Correcting Errors in ESL Classroom

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1. Introduction

Providing feedback and correcting errors to learners on their performance is an important aspect of teaching. In the traditional educational environment the errors made by the students are frequently corrected and given feedback because the focus of classroom instruction is on accuracy. The role of giving feedback and error correction has changed with the popularity of Communicative Language Teaching in ESL context. In 1990s and 1960s the behaviorists saw errors as something to be prevented as far as possible through intensive modeling and eradicated errors through intensive drilling. Teachers were expected to teach their students to communicate accurately without making errors. It had been a common practice for the teachers to correct students whenever they made any mistake. Errors are now seen as reflections of a learner's stage of inter language development. It is also an indicator of natural progress of learning the second language.

It is tricky to know when and how to correct students. Giving feedback and correcting errors may serve not only to let learners know how well they have performed but also to increase motivation and build a supportive classroom climate. Again, there is the possibility or "danger" of over-correcting students, as they may lose motivation. It may also interrupt the flow of the class or the activities if every single mistake is corrected. However, most students do want to have some of their mistakes corrected as it gives them a basis for improvement. Therefore, a lot of research has been done in this area, which has resulted in some disagreements among teachers and educators about what, when, and how to correct mistakes.

The aim of this paper is not to take a narrow view on any particular way of error correction but to highlight some key areas including what is error and feedback, types of errors and feedback, attitude towards errors and some ideas for correcting errors. This paper also deals with the experience about how to implement the theories of oral correction of errors in the classroom that I have taught as part of my internship.

2. Literature Review

Error correction is one of the major areas in language pedagogy and also in the area of teacher's role in language learning. The role of error correction and feedback not only depend on the teacher but also on the student. While looking at when and how the errors are corrected, it is also important to look at how the students react to the corrections and feedback. It is because the student may be reluctant in class to respond out of fear of making errors as teachers may correct them or the student may feel embarrassed in front of others. Students also may have some negative notion about error correction. Considering the both sides i.e. the teacher and the student, error correction and feedback play an important role in the language learning pedagogy.

Generally, the word "error" and "mistake" are considered to be synonymous, but Penny Ur(2002) made a difference between these terms. Errors are consistent and based on "mis-learned" generalizations. On the other hand, mistakes are occasional, inconsistent slips. Language teachers perceive that both mistake and error done spontaneously by the student. Again, according to Brown (2000) a mistake refers to a performance error, which is made by language learners while producing a known structure incorrectly and comes out through a slip of tongue. He also referred to it as an "unsystematic guess". Mistakes can be self corrected by native or non-native speakers but errors cannot be done so because the mistakes do not occur from insufficiency or incompetence, whereas, errors occur for incompetence in the language.

Over time, as teaching and learning of second language has changed, the role of error correction and giving feedback has also changed. There are three wildly used methods in teaching and learning second language. Below is a discussion of these methods with a focus on the way of error correction adopted in each of the methods.

Grammar- Translation Method:

The main focused of this method is to teach the students the correct form. Errors are prevented as far as possible through intensive modeling and through intensive drilling. It is very important to have the linguistic correctness. The teachers provide the correct

answers to the students and that is why there is little chance to make any mistake. The procedures or technique of Grammar Translation emphasize on memorizing rather than creativity.

Direct method:

Direct method believes that second language learning is an imitation of first language acquisition. The method includes lots of oral interaction, spontaneous use of language, no translation between first and second languages, and grammar is taught inductively. It also emphasizes on correct pronunciation and grammar.

Communicative Language Teaching:

CLT leads an effective transfer in error correction in the methods of language teaching. It is believed that all mistakes need not to be corrected because these are seen as natural outcomes of the development of communication skill. Second language learning is similar to first language acquisition. "Learning to swim, to play tennis, to type, or to read all involve a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes, by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment and with that feedback to make new attempts that successively approximate desired goal"(Brown: 2000). According to Brown, people learn language through trail and error. All other types of learning like swimming, playing tennis and reading are similar to the learning of second language. To Brown, it is natural that the learners do mistakes while they learn the second language as they do in their first language learning.

2.1. Reasons for making Mistakes and Errors:

Students make errors at various stages of their language learning. Sometimes it may occur for the interference of first language. The words which sounds same in both mother language and target language but meaning is different may cause the mistakes. Jeremy Harmer names these types of mistakes as "false Friend". Like the Spanish word "assistir" means "attend" in English but not "assist" (Jeremy Harmer, 1998). There are also some errors that may occur because of grammatical dissimilarities between students' first

language and target language. For example, Japanese students learning English frequently have problems with article usage.

Jeremy Harmer also points out that errors are not only made for the interference of mother language but there can be some 'developmental' errors as well. Students sometimes overgeneralize rules, like students may use 'ed' for past form for all words, as in go- goed. Whatever the mistakes are, these errors and mistakes have some positive and constructive aspects and also point out that the students are actively participating in the language learning process.

2.2. Types of Errors and Feedback:

Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart (1997) propose giving two types of feedback on spoken language- feedback on content and feedback on form. Feedback on content includes vocabulary errors, errors of grammar or pronunciation. On the other hand, Hendrickson (1978) points out that feedback on form should consider -

- Whether learners errors should be corrected
- Which kinds of learners errors should be corrected
- How learners errors should be corrected

(Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart, 1997)

Richards's (1971) discusses some error types-

- Over-generalization: learners create a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language.
- Ignorance of the rule restrictions: failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures.
- Incomplete application of rules: the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterances.
- False concepts hypothesized: faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. (Keith Johnson, 2001)

By repeating the error over and over, the error gets permanent in the learners speech. This is characterized by fossilization - the regular use of noticeably incorrect forms

(Brown, 2000). According to Peter James (2001), "the learners know they make mistakes, but, of course, they don't know where the mistakes are, they don't know the importance of their mistakes and even when this is explained, they repeat them."

2.3. When and How to correct Errors and give Feedback:

Learners and teachers have different preferences concerning error correction and giving feedback. Nunan (1988) reports, 'adult learners in Australia viewed error correction as very important, whereas their teachers did not value it as highly.' Similar findings have been found elsewhere (Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart, 1997). It is also very important to know for teachers when and how to correct errors. Allwright and Bailey (1991) note that teachers often correct a learner's utterance simply because it was not what they had expected to hear, which are referred as "error of classroom discourse". They also point out that the teachers are trying to help students move ahead in their inter language development. "Mistimed" error treatment may fail to help and it can even be harmful if the correction is aimed at structures, which are beyond the learner's stage in inter language development (Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart, 1997). Moreover, Gower, Phillips and Walters report that the correction depends on the aim of activities. If the focus is on accuracy, the teacher's control and correction will be tight and if the focus is on more fluency then the teacher's direct control and correction will be less (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 1995).

Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart (1997) provide some strategies of giving feedback on content and feedback on form. There are some strategies to give feedback on content -

- Acknowledging the correct answer: teacher acknowledges by saying 'Good', 'Yes' or 'alright'.
- Indicating an incorrect answer: teachers indicate the incorrect answer by saying 'No, that's not quite right' or 'Mmm'.
- Praising: give complements for right answer by saying 'Yes, an excellent answer'.
- Expanding or modifying a student's answer: the teacher can provide more information or rephrasing the answer to an incomplete or vague answer.
- Repeating: teacher can repeat the same answer.

- Summarizing: the teacher can summarize what a student or group of students has answered.
- Criticizing: the teacher can criticize a student's response.

Some strategies to give feedback on form-

- Asking the student to repeat what he or she said.
- Pointing out the error and asking the students to self-correct.
- Commenting on an error and explaining why it is wrong, without having the student repeat the correct form.
- Asking another student to correct the error.
- Using a gesture to indicate that an error has been made.

According to Harmer(1998), correction helps students to clarify their understanding of the meaning and construction of the language. Teachers should be concerned how to correct student as one way may be appropriate for one but may not be appropriate for another. Sometimes students can correct themselves as the error is just a slip. Again, students sometimes need help of the teacher. He also refers that during this time teachers can ask to correct another student. If the other students help out to solve the error, the student who made the mistake may not feel humiliated. Sometimes students also prefer a gentle correction from the teacher. Harmer (1998) also suggests that it is important to praise students for their success and to correct them for their failure. In this way teacher's positive attitude can dramatically change student's performance irrespective of their level and types of errors.

3. Implementation of Theories:

In my internship I applied some of the techniques of error correction and giving feedback. I taught English language at the elementary level, namely, Class I. During oral correction, I did not always correct their grammatical errors because it might hamper their fluency or they might get afraid to answer any question. As I followed mainly the CLT method, I corrected their errors inductively. As a result the students could realize their errors and took an attempt to overcome the problem.

For example:

T: What is the color of a Panda?

S: Black

T: What's the color? (showing the picture of a Panda)

S: black and white.

T: Yes, that's right.

Sometimes peer corrections also took place. When one student could not give answer to my question, I asked another student to help him or her out. I used this technique based on Harmer's (1998) suggestion that students feel comfortable when they are corrected by their peers.

T: What will be in the blank? (showing a sentence on the board)

S1: They.

T: Why?

S1: (silent)

T: Can you help her? (asking other students)

S2: There are two boys.

T: Good.

Sometimes I used to divide the class into two groups and arranged a competition to check their comprehension. This group work was also very helpful for peer correction. When one group was not able to give the right answer then another group answered it. At this time I did the explicit correction by saying 'no, it is wrong' or 'yes, you are right'.

T: Group A, What is the Spelling of 'stretch'?

Ss: 'streatch'

T: No, it is wrong.

T: Group B, can you give me the right answer?

Ss: 'stretch'

T: Good, You are right.

Moreover, recasting and modifying the answer were common techniques of error correction in my class and sometimes I gave some clues to rearrange the answer of the students.

T: Where does the rain fall?

Ss: The rain fall sky.

T: The rain falls from the…

Ss: The rain falls from the sky.

T: Hmmm..good.

I found that drilling was useful to correct pronunciation. I made the students utter those words, which they found difficult to pronounce several times. After drilling I asked some of the students to say the words individually to check whether they pronounced it correctly or not.

I used the technique of self-correction which was effective because this technique not only helps the students to retain an information for a long time but also to comprehend the right answer.

T: Where does the Panda live?

Ss: India

T: Open your book and find out the line.

Ss: (open the book)

T: Read out the line.

Ss: Panda lives in China.

Sometimes gesture was useful for error correction as advocated by Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhart (1997). They say that a gesture can trigger the students' mind to correct their mistake immediately. Gesture is not only a useful technique in CLT method but it is also the main technique in Total Physical Response method. Sometimes I used the TPR method to make the students understand the meaning of a word or to correct the meaning of a word.

T: (trying to lift the table but failing to do so helped explaining the meaning of the word "heavy")

I used to correct the errors based on the classroom environment and the purpose of activity. For example, if the activity emphasized on fluency then the control over correction was less emphasized, but if it was a written activity then the error was strictly guided. I also used different techniques based on my learners' needs.

4. Recommendation

Error correction and giving feedback are important roles of a teacher. An effective feedback or error correction can significantly reduce the number of error of a student. According to me, teachers can use the following techniques for effective error correction-

- Break down the instructions by using simple sentences so that the students can easily understand.
- Use demonstration whenever possible.
- Not to over correct the errors.
- Avoid giving negative feedback to increase student's self motivation.
- Provide sufficient independent practice to overcome their errors.
- Re-teach the material when necessary.

5. Conclusion

Traditionally, teachers correct all the errors made by students. However, recent trends of language teaching advocate that teachers need not correct all the errors right after they are made. They should resist the temptation of correcting every error even though they might feel doing so to prevent fossilization of errors. Teachers' role is crucial in developing the skills of a student. However, as we all know, excessive error correction could frustrate students and even reduce the motivation of learning the language. Therefore, it is really important for teachers to have "good timing" and use "appropriate" correction strategies during error correction. Actually, error correction and corrective feedback, which are traditionally thought to be the duty of a teacher, should not be classified as such. These should not be put under any single person's list of responsibility but should be everyone's responsibility, namely, the teachers as well as the students.

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