



**Topic: What are errors and how should we deal with them
in the Contemporary Dynamic ELT Classrooms.**

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Abstract

As the famous Shakespearean saying "To err is human" we know that it is natural to make mistakes when something new is learned. From error being seen as a sin to viewing error as an opportunity to learn, errors and correction have been a hotly debated topic in the ELT world.

Errors, in Krashen's perspective (1983), were indications that language development was taking place. However, Moerk (1994) emphasized on more formal way of teaching and learning in which error correction is an integral part of language learning. So what are errors and how should we deal with them? Which way is better- Immediate correction or Delayed correction? There are some teaching experts who identify the common mistakes and error correction is done as a group activity. However, some language experts believe that the impact of too much feedback can have an opposite effect on the level of motivation for the students. Hence, this article will focus on errors, how and when to correct them in English language teaching and learning. It will look into the possibility of balancing the act of error correction, so that it doesn't have a negative effect on neither the students nor the teachers.

Key words: Error correction, mistakes, feedback

Introduction

Students are often being taught common grammar rules and vocabulary but still teachers do not get the desired result. Many educators take this too seriously and consider that making an error is unacceptable and see it as a sin while some teachers would see it as an opportunity to reflect on the errors by making it an interesting learning process where both learner and the teacher benefit. In a widely-quoted study, Paul Black and Dylan William found that feedback given to students on their work probably have more positive effects on achievement than any other factor. (Black and William 1998). Teachers stay calm and cool during the feedback process and this really helps them to have an open, uninterrupted flow of communication with the students. The students don't feel scared to make mistakes because they are aware that teacher will correct them without judging or shouting on them. As Pakdel and Khansir (2018) points out that when a second or foreign language is learnt, errors are inevitable as these reflect continuous growth in terms of learning a language and learners should have freedom to make errors as it does not affect the communication in general.

What are errors and mistakes?

What are errors especially in language teaching and learning? According to CARLA “An error is a form in learner language that is inaccurate, meaning it is different from the forms used by competent speakers of the target language”. Does an error affect communication? Does it affect the academic performance of a language learner? To know the answers to these questions, error analysis needs to be done. Pakdel and Khansir (2017) said that “error analysis is one of the major important topics of Applied Linguistics which can be used in order to promote and improve language teaching strategies in ELT classroom” (p. 115). What is noticeable in terms of error analysis is that a teacher need to have a clear understanding about the nature of errors and mistakes. So what is a mistake? “A mistake is described as a deviation in the speakers' language that occurs when the speakers, although familiar with the rule, fail to perform according to their competence” (Calenda) What are the differences between an error and mistake? Are errors and mistakes the same? There is a distinction between the error and mistake. Errors are the

result of incomplete learning and linguistic incompetency of the learners and errors cannot be self-corrected by students. On the other hand, mistakes are the results of poor performance of language due to many factors like fatigue and carelessness on the part of learners etc. Learners have the knowledge of the correct linguistic form and they can self-correct themselves on the basis of their linguistic knowledge. Auroux defines errors as distinguished from mistake, does not entail spontaneous self-correction, since it results from the speaker's ignorance and, therefore, could not be emended without confrontation with a still unknown and yet broken rule (1998). Julian Edge in his book about mistakes and correction suggested that the mistakes students commit can be divided into three categories. First one is slips, these are issues which students can correct themselves once they are pointed out to them. Then there are errors, which the students cannot correct themselves and they need explanation. There is the third category which is called 'attempts'. This is when a student tries to say something but doesn't know the correct way of saying it. (Edge 1989: Chapter 2) Of these three categories, it is the category of 'errors' that worries teachers the most. Of course, though the students' 'attempts' would tell the teachers a lot about their current knowledge- and then work on those particular areas.

Sources of errors

Now what are the reasons or sources of why students make errors? As Pakdel and Khansir (2018) said that in order to address errors at their root cause and prevent them from being made, it is crucial for language teachers to understand why their students make mistakes in the target language. It is important for language teachers to know why their students make errors in the target language in order to know that the language teachers may attack errors at their root cause and address them before they are even made. The most common reason why students commit errors is the influence of L1. All students who learn English as a second language has an issue with the high possibility of interference of L1 with English, which is being learnt as a new language. This can create confusion among the students. Bose (2005) mentioned that “the reasons for making errors in SL are generally the same for all learners of English” (p. 66). It can be at the level of sounds or grammar. For example, the students in Oman. Arabic has a slightly different system of grammar. To cite a simple example: There are no indefinite articles in Arabic, therefore our students often omit using articles “a”, and “an” in sentences out of habit.

May I borrow a pen. becomes May I borrow pen.

An elephant is **a** large animal. becomes Elephant is large animal.

Students may also use personal pronouns instead of the appropriate relative pronouns in the clause.

Significance of making errors

Hence, it is known to everyone that students commit errors in a language classroom, whether it be from any source. Errors do happen because of the lack of attention by the students, ignorance of the grammar rules or, as we discussed before, due to the influence of their first language. Therefore, instead of considering as something to be completely avoided in English language learning, errors, from whichever source, are, as Selinker (1969) opines, significant in three respects: (1) they indicate the learner's progress in language learning; (2) they provide insights into how language is learnt; and (3) finally, help students to get involved in hypothesis testing. As errors are opportunities for both teachers and students, strategies have to be developed by teachers to help students to identify those errors and try to eliminate them while they produce the language next time.

Role of providing feedback

Assessing students' performance is a key area in language teaching. Harris and Hodges (1995) defined assessment as the process of gathering data to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of student learning. Useful information about students' learning comes from well-designed assessment methods. They provide teachers with detailed information on what students were taught, how well they learnt it, and where they got into trouble. However, assessment is the final destination of a student's learning process. Prior to that, during the teaching and learning process, there has to be a lot of interaction between the teacher and students in terms of providing feedback to the students at various stages. Giving feedback plays a significant role in how a student demonstrates steady improvement in language acquisition. According to Bohdana Allman (2020) teachers recognize that feedback is balanced, differentiated and supportive because they understand about the developmental nature and role of errors in language learning. Allman opines that teachers need to look for patterns in the student's work, see what the student knows and what kind of errors they make, and provide feedback related to the next step in their growth. (137)

Teachers usually give feedback to students in two ways. A teacher either praises or blames a student for the language one produces. This kind of feedback can probably produce negative results as well. When teachers praise the students for the language a student produces, it can make that student overconfident and complacent. Grant Wiggins (2013) says, “Feedback is not about praise or blame, approval, or disapproval. That’s what evaluation is – placing value. Feedback is value neutral. It describes what you did and did not do.” Famous language expert Geoff Petty (2019) suggests feedback should include giving medals and missions to students. The medal is what we give students for doing something well, and the mission is the direction we give them to improve. Therefore, a medal should be more towards a direction for improvement which is called a mission. This is the basic idea teachers should keep in mind whenever they give feedback to students. The same pattern is suggested by Hannah Haase (2022) but with a different name. She called it the ‘feedback sandwich’, in which teachers have to start out by saying something positive, followed by criticism and constructive feedback. Then end with another positive comment. That way, teachers can ensure that their students don’t only get negative feedback and packing the negative feedback between two positive “slices” will soften it a bit. How can we provide these medals and missions or serve this ‘feedback sandwich’? Is there a proper way through? Jeremy Harmer (2013) suggests a few strategies for giving feedback to students. The first strategy is to give comments. Usually, teachers comment in various ways. They use comments such as ‘Good, excellent, very good, or nod approvingly (speaking activity) for positive feedback. Teachers use comments like ‘That’s not quite right’, “You have made so many errors’ etc. as part of negative feedback. A student who receives such a feedback can most probably get dejected and fall short of motivation and willpower to continue trying again. However, if a student can receive a medal first, which is appreciation and acknowledgement of the effort one puts in along with the comments about what went wrong can act as suggestions for future action, which is the mission.

Nature of giving feedback

The most significant question is whether teachers have to follow the same strategy in both written and oral feedback? Should teachers use two different strategies to give feedback on written work and during a speaking activity? One of the most controversial debates among teachers is whether we should focus on accuracy or fluency. There are teachers who argue that

any kind of production of language has to be accurate. It plays a key role with regard to tests and assessments. Teachers should decide whether an activity they plan to execute in the class is aimed at complete accuracy, for example, teaching grammar, introducing new vocabulary, or teaching how a word is pronounced. Teachers also plan lessons in which they expect students to use the language as fluently as possible. Hence, how teachers give feedback depends on the nature and objective of the lessons.

Strategies of providing feedback on accuracy

So, during an activity in which the focus is on accuracy, correction or feedback is usually made up of two distinct stages. Teacher should communicate to the students that they have committed an error. After that, teachers assist the students to correct it. It isn't easy for teachers to do it. If teachers aren't careful, this feedback can turn out to be blame. How can teachers point out the errors students make while producing the target language? There are a few ways in which teachers can do it smoothly without hurting the students.

Teachers can use 'echoing' as a strategy to bring the error to the notice of the students. Teacher repeats what students say, giving a stress on the part that was wrong.

For example:

I '**Go**' to Dubai yesterday?

My friend '**Said**' me.

When students hear this emphasis on those two words, they feel that something is wrong with those emphasized words. Naturally, students won't get embarrassed as well.

The second strategy that can be used by teachers is by giving a statement or a question. It can be by giving a medal first, which is appreciating their effort.

For example:

You tried well. But do you think it is completely correct? What do you think?

This hint can ring a bell of caution for the students. They would definitely go back and check. They would be able to find their mistake and correct it by themselves.

Another way to bring the mistakes students commit to their notice is by the expression of the teacher. The gestures on the face of a teacher can communicate whether the student is right or wrong. Momentary expressions that signal emotions include muscle movements such as raising the eyebrows, wrinkling the forehead, and rolling the eyes etc. (Resmana Lim & Reinders 2000). These expressions help students to read their teacher very well. They do follow the facial expression of their teacher and then they reach a conclusion on their language.

One of the other effective techniques which can be implemented in a classroom is to get students to correct each other. According to Tammy Haley (2022) reviewing others' work and preparing constructive written or verbal feedback for their peers, and eventually students start thinking more about their own work and how to improve it. The only condition for this is that the group should be genuinely cooperative.

Reformulating the sentences is a very gentle way of correcting the errors of students while the activity is going on. It doesn't affect the flow of the activity in any way. For example:

Student: She **tell** me the college bus was late.

Teacher: Oh... she **told** you that the college bus was late. Did she?

Student: OH, yes. **I mean she told me.** So, I was very happy because I was already late to wake up.

Techniques to provide feedback in terms of fluency

Now that there are many ways to give feedback during an activity in which the focus is on accuracy, how should teachers approach the key aspect of providing feedback to students during a communicative activity where fluency is focused? Language experts differ in their opinions on this matter. Some experts opine that delayed feedback is more effective. "If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then lengthy, immediate correction that diverts from the flow of speaking is less appropriate" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 299). However, quite a few of them disapprove of it as well. For example, a research study says, when students receive delayed or zero feedback, they might reinforce misconceptions by making the same mistake several times without being corrected (Kehrer, Kelly, and Heffernan, 2013). It should be observed by teachers that both the times of giving feedback are effective. It is

the prerogative of the teachers. They should be able to decide whether the feedback should be delayed or immediate based on aspects such as the nature of the activity and the attitude of the students. Any form of feedback by the teacher during a fluency activity is very significant, not only because of the way they perform at that time, but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future. The first way to give feedback is by correcting the students gently. Imagine that the communication between the students and the teachers breaks down, then teachers have to step in. Teachers have to prompt the student to continue. It should be a tactful and at the same time gentle intervention. For instance:

Student A: During my summer holiday, I enjoy **to visit** my grandparents and **to play** football with my cousins.

Teacher: Yes, I enjoy **visiting** my parents and **playing** football with my cousins too.

Student A: Ah, yes, I enjoy visiting my grandparents in my village and playing football.

In case teachers prefer giving feedback after the completion of the entire activity, one of the challenges is that they tend to forget the errors students have committed during the activity. Therefore, teachers are advised to take notes. Teachers can develop their own versions of note taking. It can be done by completing a table with different columns for various types of errors or by writing simple notes about each student. The common discussion of mistakes committed can be done by involving students as well. Initially, teachers can start with a discussion of the activity. And then analyze most common errors which were noted by the teacher. The teacher has the option to divide the students into groups and each group to focus on each mistake which was highlighted by the teacher and decide why it is wrong and recommend the changes needed.

Feedback on written work

Providing feedback for written work is as important as giving it for oral production of the target language. Gayle Morris (2021) states that feedback usually includes recommendations for revision and questions that might help students rethink weaker elements in their current assignments, along with comments about things that are currently working well that a student might build on before they turn in a “final” version.

Now, feedback on written work involves a few very important techniques which language teachers can use. The first way to give feedback can be responding. When we respond, we say how their writing appears to us and how successful we think it has been (we give a medal) before suggesting how it could be improved (which is a mission). Short comments can also be written by teachers in the margin of the students' work. There are cases among students who require additional effort from the side of the teacher by providing a detailed comment about each student which is very effective and useful for students. Some students often get dejected and disappointed when they see their paper with lots of corrections. Using correction symbols is another way of indicating students of the errors in their own writing. Each mistake is defined and pointed out by using a particular symbol. However, students should be trained on the definition and meaning of each symbol for an effective result.

It has been also observed as part of many empirical studies on students' involvement on providing feedback to their peers, that it has an extremely positive effect. For instance Georgeta Ion, Aleix Barrera-Corominas & Marina Tomàs-Folch (2016) clearly suggests that students achieve greater professional and personal autonomy in the construction of knowledge. It encourages students to monitor each other and, as a result helps them to become better at self-monitoring. Most often teachers have to guide the students when we prepare them to give feedback to their friends. In most cases, feedback students give can be very general or not focused. To produce more focused feedback, teachers can design a form such as the one below.

Table 1. Student form for feedback

Overall, your essay is.....
The part which I like is
You can improve on

The noticeable errors are

Teachers consider giving feedback to be the most significant part of the teaching and learning process. When teachers provide feedback on the first and second draft of the essay, a final draft is expected after incorporating all the recommendations, and comments students received from the teacher. Teachers' reason for using code or symbols is to make them identify their mistakes and use dictionaries or grammar books as a way of resolving these errors. When students reach that stage, all the efforts put in by teachers are fruitful. On the other hand, when teachers return the essay after correction, students put it straight into a file or lose it, then all the effort and time teachers spent is completely wasted.

Conclusion

The final question to be answered is don't teachers get stressed out because of the number of students and moreover, giving both oral and written feedback to all of them. Teachers spend an enormous amount of time making sure that each student is given proper feedback. Hence to avoid the amount of stress, teachers have to be selective, and smart and above all involve students more in the whole process to avoid unbearable stress. In conclusion, teachers need to be able to think creatively about how it can be best be done in the interests of both students and teachers.

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