

ERROR CORRECTION IN SPEAKING – LOOKING FOR A “GOLDEN RULE”

“...see how much they have learnt, praise them for that, remember about correction but do not worry about every single mistake” (source: own).

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to present and discuss the results of the study that I carried out a few years ago in two first grade Polish high school classes, 30 students each. In one of them extensive, sustained correction was applied, while in the other it hardly prevailed. The first part however, will cover errors' division and various approaches to their management. Moreover, part of this work will be devoted to my observations and other teachers' attitudes and opinions concerning error correction. The general conclusion seems daunting, as the study only proved that we, the Poles, and in particular we, the teachers tend to be extremely intolerant towards others, aim at avoiding errors and focus on perfection at any cost, forgetting that our students are sensitive human beings of different personalities, language aptitude, background and motivation.

1. Error correction approaches

There are generally two attitudes towards mistakes and errors made in second language learning. Most learners and teachers still consider them as “undesirable, a sign of failure” and try to avoid or correct them as soon as possible; while others, favour the claim that mistakes are “an essential part of learning” and treat them as learning steps rather than failures (Norrish 1983). Starting from the Grammar Translation Method, when communication was neglected and translation was the primary goal to achieve, the first approach to mistakes assumed avoiding them, and if occurred in order to reach perfection, instant correction was usually provided by the teacher. Unfortunately, the concept of learners' feelings was non-existent. Since teachers were considered to be the only authority, and, but for literature which was analysed, the only source of knowledge, the students' chances

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for self correction were none. With time, the responses to GTM with changed attitude towards errors and mistakes were numerous: Direct Method, Audio Lingual Method, Reading Approach, Suggestopedia, Silent Way, Community Language Learning, The Total Physical Response Method and finally, the method which is appreciated and widely adopted by contemporary scholars, namely Communicative Approach (Larsen-Freeman 1986). We owe it to S.P. Corder that Error Analysis is a useful tool and holds its place as a scientific method in linguistics. Corder introduced the distinction between *errors* (in competence) and *mistakes* (in performance). This distinction directed the attention of researchers of SLA to competence errors and provided for a more concentrated framework. Thus, in the 1970s researchers started examining learners' competence errors and tried to explain them. We find studies such as Richards' *A non-contrastive approach to error analysis* (1971), where he identifies sources of competence errors; L1 transfer results in interference errors; incorrect (incomplete or over-generalized) application of language rules results in intralingual errors; construction of faulty hypotheses in L2 results in developmental errors. However, not all researchers have agreed with the above distinction. Let's take Dulay and Burt (1974) who proposed the following three categories of errors: developmental, interference and unique, or Stenson (1974) who suggested another category, namely that of induced errors, which result from incorrect instruction of the language. As most research methods, error analysis contains certain weaknesses, yet these do not diminish its significance to teachers, researchers and learners.

Errors are of importance to the teacher as they show a student's progress; to the researcher as they show how a language is acquired and what strategies the learner uses and to the learner who he can learn from them.

As it was pointed out, at the first stages of learning, L2 learners make the same "deviations" as children acquiring their L1. Those are often called "informed guesses" and can actually serve learning. Therefore, it is claimed that the strategies used by someone learning a second language are, very similar to, if not the same as, those used by the first language learner (Celce-Murcia 1991). It does not mean that the two activities are "alike"; rather, they contain certain similar features, and so the errors made can be dealt with using similar techniques. Thus, it appears that not only is the error an inevitable part of the learner's output, but it is rather a necessary element, too. It often conveys some important feedback for the teacher, helping him find the proper solution (Larsen-Freeman 1986).

Krashen was one of the first linguists to have suggested that a formally "learnt" language is often not of use in real situations later, and that the language which is truly useful to the learner is unconsciously acquired by understanding the language to which the he/she is exposed. Consequently, the methodological suggestion to the teachers may be the following: if a student makes a mistake, it should be responded to but not corrected. At the same time the student should be exposed to the language just above her current level of the target language. More-

over, what Krashen suggests is that if the teacher responds naturally, reformulating, students are exposed immediately to language that they will understand and possibly benefit from (Bartram and Walton 1991). The technique of reformulation attempts to imitate the way in which correction occurs in real life, while learning L1. Caretakers at home or people in the street do not normally wave their hands, tap their fingers or say "That was wrong. Correct yourself." On the contrary, they often reformulate what the speaker said in a correct form, seek clarification asking additional questions or allow for self-correction. Their main aim is not to hurt, offend the speaker or even correct him/him, they wish for clearance in order to understand the message. This technique can easily be adopted in the classroom conditions, though it requires a lot of skills on the part of the teacher who will be given a chance to respond to a mistake without direct correction. This repair may be harmless to the students and will surely appear natural. Slightly to the second approach which suggests that the most efficient way to teach learners the correct form is not by simply giving it to them, but by letting them discover it and test different hypotheses. (This is derived from Carroll's proposal (Carroll 1955, cited in Corder), who suggested that the learner should find the correct linguistic form by searching for it. Hagège is among those who point out the importance of self correction (p. 82-83) and its advantage over correction by the teacher, especially if the latter is done in a severe or intimidating way. He claims that self correction is even more efficient when done with the help of children's classmates, and the younger the children, the greater the cooperation among them and the less aggressive or intimidating the corrections. Hagège dedicates a section in his book to the importance of treating errors in a positive way. In the section, titled "The teacher as a good listener", he notes that it is useless, if not harmful, to treat errors as if they were "diseases or pathological situations which must be eliminated", especially if this treatment becomes discouraging, as occurs when teachers lose their patience because of children's numerous errors. This, of course, does not mean that corrections should be avoided; after all it is the teacher's duty to teach the rules of the L2. Yet, correction of every error as soon as it occurs is not recommended. The justification that Hagège offers is the following: the linguistic message that the child tries to produce is a sequence of elements which are interdependent; immediate corrections which interrupt this message tend to produce negative consequences, even to the less sensitive children; such consequences include anxiety, fear of making an error, the development of avoidance strategies, reduced motivation for participation in the classroom, lack of interest for learning, reduced will for self correction, and lack of trust towards the teacher. Esser (1984, cited in Hagège) also made a similar point: repetitive and immediate corrections, he noted, may cause sensitive children to develop aggressive behavior towards their classmates or teacher. Thus, Hagège concludes, correction must not be applied by the teacher unless errors obstruct communication. This is the main criterion for error correction and it seems to bring more benefits than in the extreme cases of errors being

totally ignored or blindly corrected. As Wilberg (1989) remarked, "*a teacher's responsibility is response-ability*".

Nonetheless, even though the main aim of Communicative Approach is successful communication and not perfection, majority of teachers tends to focus on accuracy and especially grammar correctness, often applying on the spot, straightforward correction, forgetting about the humane aspect. Thus, they often intimidate and discourage students, even though delayed correction or less offensive and more natural reformulation technique could have been used. That's why the most important criterion that must be considered by the teacher is individual students' needs. The importance of this factor is mentioned in Corder, who in turn notes that this idea had been suggested previously by Carroll (1955, cited in Corder 1967) and Ferguson (1966, cited in Corder 1967). Each student is different and thus may react differently to error correction. We infer from Freiermuth's claim that the teacher must perform two main tasks: first, assess some specific character traits of students, such as self-confidence and language acquisition capability. Freiermuth agrees with Walz (1982, cited in Freiermuth) that self-confident, capable students can profit from even minor corrections, while struggling students should receive correction only on major errors. This claim agrees with Esser and Hagege's claim that repetitive corrections are likely to decrease motivation; it is reasonable to accept that students who lack self-confidence will be "stigmatized" to a greater degree than confident students. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers I questioned would not agree with Corder that it is more efficient for learners to correct themselves than be corrected by the teacher.

2. Difficult questions

The most important of the questions that the teacher should consider before actually correcting is "when" and "how" to treat the "wrong" utterance.

In 'Correction' by M.Bartram and R.Walton these questions are presented as a guide to deciding 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?
11. What time is it?

12. What day is it?

13. What's the weather like?

Choosing the right moment and method appears to be the most difficult of all. It may do no good at all to try to give learners feedback on a form they are not ready to learn, nor correct every single slip. Moreover, when deciding on the most appropriate method, we must not only think about our convenience, but most of all about the learners' personality. It has been demonstrated that native speakers who are not teachers tend to be less severe in their reactions to students' faulty utterances than language teachers. Furthermore, non-native speaking teachers of the target language are consistently more severe in their reactions to learner's errors than their native-speaking counterparts are (Allwright and Bailey 1991). This pattern has been documented in a review (Ludwig 1982) of the error gravity research conducted on several languages, including German, Spanish, French and English.

3. Why and when do you correct your students?

Is it ethically right to correct our students? Teachers do not correct their American or British friends when they struggle with Polish. Is correction really the most important part of being a teacher? In order to get the answers to those and other questions, I carried out an anonymous questionnaire among the teachers of English, during a meeting/conference organised by Longman in 1998 in Jachranka. They were to provide the answers to, among others, the following question: "When and why do you correct your students?". Let me present some of the most interesting answers, unammended:

WHY?

- Aim - perfection.
- To make students be able to express themselves in a way that they can be understood by others.
- I've been corrected during my course of learning and I feel it is an important part of the process. Moreover, it is an important part of learning and a way of learning a language.
- Not to fossilise the mistakes. To make them realise that it's not good for them to say, write things in certain way.
- To make them good speakers of English.
- To ensure students hear the correct form. To give students prove that they've taken care of their knowledge.
- To show some students that they are not as good as they think to be.
- It's a routine; I'm in the habit of correction - as any teacher. Besides, done consciously, I believe some correction or feedback is really helpful.
- I correct out of habit, hoping that this will help the student to avoid the error in the future.

- I want my students to be accurate. I want them to manage communication – sometimes errors may break it.
- I do it because I want my students to be aware that they make mistakes, and making mistakes is not only unavoidable part of a learning process, but also a sign of a sort of progress. I want to prevent them from acquiring incorrect structures, vocabulary – frequently influenced by L1. To enable them express better in L2. Finally, I want to teach them how to get what they need, effectively.

The last opinion was my own. I had always believed that successful meaning conveying was the key to success. However, to be honest, I also believed that in order to achieve it, there was room for hardly any errors and their elimination used to be my primary goal. I believe, that most of these opinions look familiar and majority of teachers would agree with and sign under them. The good thing is, that since we seem to care about our students' accuracy we correct for their sake, however, the worrying aspect is the habit, we were caught in. For most teachers, the ability to identify and immediately correct the mistake or error seems of vital importance, as it proves their superiority over the students and ensures certain sense of power and control.

WHEN?

- When I know that what student said is not acceptable.
- I correct pronunciation mistakes, during drills, grammar exercises. I usually try not to correct during communicative activities: group, pair work.
- If my students insist on correcting them (usually older ones).
- Probably too often as well.
- In drills, exercises focused on accuracy. Besides. I correct students' mistakes also during communicative exercises when their output is impossible to comprehend.
- I deliberately "miss" language errors when students are performing communicative tasks (though it's hard not to correct).
- I correct usually written texts and concentrate on serious mistakes, grammar errors; however, I don't neglect errors appearing in speech. Sometimes it is delayed to the next class.
- Tests or essays (grammar & spelling), reading (pronunciation). When a mistake/error makes a student (completely) impossible to understand.
- For the reason of discipline preserving. Written work when mistakes show that a given (worked-out) rule has been misunderstood. Obvious mistakes at the early-practice stage of the lesson.
- Almost all the time, excluding some exercises on free practice, or when correction prevents shy students from speaking up their ideas.
- When there is enough time. When correction doesn't mean disturbance of pupil's flow of linguistic production.

- I try or tend to correct only these errors which interfere with the understanding of one's oral or written utterance or are confusing for a listener or a reader..
- Pronunciation errors: done straightforward and easier to correct. Errors of coherence: very hard to diagnose.
- Considering activities based on fluency I always refrain from any sort of correction as long as the student's speaking logically. I make notes and try to indicate and point out the important mistakes but only after he/she has finished.
- If we have in mind pure communication, error correction ought to be avoided or done after the exercise. In other cases I correct immediately, even at times interrupting the student. Especially if it is a serious grammar error or during drills.

Unfortunately, I used to interrupt my students very often, thinking that they would benefit from that, since immediate, on the spot correction seemed to me more efficient than delayed one or none at all. Thanks to this research, I noticed that most of the correction went unnoticed by the students, or on the other hand, intimidated them and discouraged.

Drawing conclusions from the answers provided, I would like to underline that most teachers admitted to and justified being in the habit of correction as the only way to insure successful communication. Nonetheless, the facts that worried me most were the timing of the correction applied: the right time to correct being here and now; and the manner: direct pointing out the mistake and either requesting self-correction or providing the appropriate form. The minority of teachers mentioned or seemed aware that, especially when it came to speaking, there was a number of reformulation or clarification seeking techniques, widely adopted by native speakers. Some admitted to having forgotten about them, or being bound by the requirements of exams openly stated, they had not had ample time to implement them in their teaching.

Therefore, I dare draw a conclusion that rather than see errors and mistakes as a proof that learning process takes place and communication is not obstructed, we, the teachers being more preoccupied with the correct form, do not only forget about the students' feelings but also lose the sense of a true purpose of communicative language learning.

4. Correction – “To be or not to be” – that is the question

The study I would like to present was carried out in one of the high schools in Bydgoszcz in two first grade classes, 31 students each, 4 hours of English a week. It started on November 26th 1998 and ended on June 4th 1999. The main principle I followed was based on **overt-correction (including reformulation, body lan-**

guage, echoing, facial expressions, repeating in context, pretending to misunderstand, repeating the wrong utterance with doubtful intonation, non-verbal sounds, automatic correction and asking for self or peer correction) in one class and limiting correction to minimum in the other. The aim of the study was to find answers to the following questions: "Will overt-correction, yet done in more natural way, bring more harm than limited one or none at all? Will refraining from correction make students seek some compensation and lead to self-correction or look for other alternatives? How will they benefit from that? What impact will limited correction have on grammar tests, fluency and accuracy?". The answers and results will be discussed in the final part of the paper.

How painful and demanding venture it would be, I would have never suspected. I must admit that it was much harder not to correct than correct too often, and even though I bit my tongue countless times, there were moments when the correct form just slipped out. I had not informed my students about the whole study for fear of false results and this fact did not let me sleep well for the next months. One of the greatest doubts that appeared during the first week of the study concerned losing respect in the eyes of the students who were to be left without correction. I trully believed that they would start to think lack of correction meant I lacked the knowledge.

In the course of the study I kept a journal, tape-recorded some lessons, tested the students and finally conveyed a questionnaire about correction. I used the following code: 1A – overt-correction, 1H – limited correction.

Let me present some extracts from the journal:

– 1998-11-27 1H

I couldn't help myself from correcting grammar mistakes, it is the –s ending in Present Simple they have problems with. *Marriage* pronounced [mer-jaž] – no way, I had to correct it. Oh no! It will never work, I corrected a girl, and it wasn't necessary. I thought she had said *blouse*, but it turned out to be blue.

– 1998-12-9 1H

It is very hard not to correct! They tend to correct each other when I don't react.

– 1999-01-05 1H

Names of jobs... those who had not known them before were confused and not sure what was right. I try hard not to correct. They asked for correct pronunciation of *bridegroom*.

– 1999-03-02 1H

I am surprised. One girl asked me straightforwardly: *I can swim good or well? What is correct?* They haven't asked such questions for nearly two months. Does it mean they need correction?

- 1999-03-04 1H
Maciej, a boy who is quite good at English, produced a correct sentence: *Did she buy that car last week?* His friend a minute later said: *Did he bought flowers for his mother?* I did not pay attention to the mistake, but another good student Kamila, asked: *What is correct buy or bought? I don't understand it.* I had to explain it.
- 1999-03-11 1H
I think they are confused and discouraged. They lack motivation. They started to ask me for feedback and clarification again. They also started to correct each other more often.
- 1999-05-20 1H
They openly demand correction, by asking questions all the time. They are not self-confident and seek my approval. They even try to make me correct them, making errors on purpose and asking about them. I suspect that their anxiety level is high. They are even more afraid to speak than they used to be at the beginning. I think they prefer to say nothing rather than make a full of themselves not being sure of the right form.
- 1998-12-7 1A
What mean arrive? One of the boys asked. I repeated this utterance pausing: *What does...?* Student's reaction was: *What does mean arrive?* So I repeated again: *What does arri...?* This time he produced a perfectly correct sentence.
- 1999-01-14 1A
They correct each other spontaneously. They are more eager to know the correct form and more accurate than the other class.
- 1999-01-21 1A
The students ask for correct pronunciation and grammar form very often! I don't have to correct everything, it's enough if they have some time and then come up with the right form without any problems. I use my body language and facial expressions very often and it works! They are not angry or ashamed if they correct each other.
- 1999-03-13 1A
They correct each other without hesitation. They don't let a person speak if the error is really serious. The strangest thing is that nobody feels ashamed or angry about it.
- 1999-03-23 1A
It is very important for them to get the right form. 1H makes much more mistakes.
- 1999-05-10 1A
Delayed correction doesn't work! When I try to show the mistake after some time they do not remember making it. I don't correct every single error, just the serious ones and I feel they like it. They are aware of their mistakes and I think it helps them.

– 1999-05-17 1A

These students seem to be quite confident about their language abilities, but they don't like being interrupted.

Once the research was over, the results took me aback, both due to the students' behaviour and performance, but most of all because of the change in my attitude towards correction and efficacy of certain techniques over others.

Initially, those who were deprived of correction tried to make up for it and corrected each other eagerly, though still looking for my approval. In the middle of the research they gave up and returned to this habit at the end. Nonetheless, as they were still not sure which was right and which wrong, they openly asked for explanation. It shows that students could not manage without corrective feedback. Neither did they feel more relaxed or self-confident than their friends from 1A. On the contrary, they gradually became more and more confused and started losing their motivation and need for oral production. They were also unable to estimate what they actually knew and what just suspected was correct. Finally, their tests' results were much worse when compared to the other class.

On the other hand, those learners who were regularly corrected developed a natural habit to ask for clarification, correct their peers, and respect others' errors (which surprised me the most). At the beginning my habit was immediate, providing the correct form on the spot, even if it meant 'butting in'. However, when I realised that it often went unnoticed by the speaker, I gave up. I changed my manner of correction and so did my students. **Well, rather than interrupt each other, they started to apply the same correction techniques I was using, especially: body language, facial expressions, doubtful intonation, reformulation and pretending to misunderstand. I was amazed to see how well those techniques were working and how natural they seemed for my students.**

All in all, the results show that natural manner of correction is very beneficial and appreciated by the students, but most of all far more superior to lack of correction. It had seemed to me that no correction would be more 'humane' than overt-one, and seemingly that teacher's direct correction would prove more beneficial than using reformulations or gestures. Well, I do have to admit that I was wrong. I learnt one thing, that I trust all the teachers should bare in mind whenever they put correction into practice: **we do not correct a mistake, we correct a person!** Therefore, our students' feelings must be taken into consideration at any time, and as long as the message is conveyed, communication takes place and both speakers are satisfied, there is absolutely nothing to worry about. After all, our primary goal is successful communication not getting it right.

Summary

This paper presents the results of the study carried out in 1998/1999 in which I tried to find a "golden rule" for correction. I believe that the outcome may be sur-

prising for some, and motivating or even inspiring for others. Yet, I would like to draw your attention to two conclusions which were drawn once the research was over (they made me change my attitude towards correction): **If students are criticised for trying, they will stop trying, and all learners of language, whether first or second, have one thing in common, namely they all make mistakes.**

Summarizing, this research proved the superiority of such correction techniques as reformulation and gestures over direct, intimidating, on the spot correction and showed that limited correction leads to poorer tests' results, lack of motivation, lower self-confidence and fear of being foolish in the eyes of others.

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ABSTRACT

One of the major questions that language teachers often address to researchers is what to do about correction. Should they correct their learners errors, slips or mistakes? If yes, then how, when and whom to correct? Error correction is not only of importance to teachers or researchers but also to learners, who often feel insecure, uncertain of the impact of their utterance on others, or on the other hand, discouraged when overt-correction is applied. Despite the importance of the study of errors and methods of their correction, there is hardly any evidence for or against error correction during oral communicative activities in the second language classroom. In the study carried out by DeKeyser, 1993, no differences were found between a group which received sustained error correction and the one that did not, though the study also found some interesting individual variations, including the effect of anxiety on the learner and learning process. The empirical study that follows conducted with Polish high-school students of English is an attempt to assess two contrasting approaches applied, namely limited and overt-correction and show their impact on the students. Nonetheless, irrespective of the method used and the outcome, the thing that we, the teachers, must never forget is the fact that we do not correct a mistake, but we correct a person.