THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES TEACHERS GO THROUGH IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO TREAT LEARNERS' ORAL ERRORS AND LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE ON ORAL ERROR TREATMENT

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Abstract. Making mistakes is a crucial part of human learning. Together with mistakes, misjudgements, miscalculations and wrong assumptions are indispensable aspects of learning skills and acquiring information. The mistakes one makes are gradually reduced as one learns from those mistakes. The provision of feedback from the environment facilitates the eventual learning. In this respect, language learning is no exception. The points of departure for the present study was to see whether the basic options and features in one such model (Long cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991) were viable modes of error correction in the classroom. A questionnaire was prepared based on Long's model in an attempt to see if the same decision-making process was followed by teachers in actual learning situations. Likewise, a similar study was also prepared to have an insight into the students' perspective on error correction. The results of the present study (teachers' responses in particular) tend to confirm the viability of Long's model. In conclusion, it has been revealed that it is the teachers' task to value their students' attempts to improve themselves on the interlanguage continuum, be sensitive and receptive to their linguistic output and try his/her best to utilize the optimum way of dealing with their errors.

Keywords: learner errors; error treatment; error correction; feedback

Introduction

Making mistakes is a crucial part of human learning. Together with mistakes, misjudgments, miscalculations and wrong assumptions are indispensable aspects of learning skills and acquiring information. The mistakes one makes are gradually reduced as one learns from those mistakes. The provision of feedback from the environment facilitates the eventual learning. In this respect, language learning is no exception. As we know from our personal experiences as well as research in the field, 'making mistakes' in reference to adults' grammatical language is a significant part of children learning a language. Moreover, as the common sense assumption

goes, 'children learn the language by making mistakes'. Learning another language (be it a second or a foreign one) is also a very similar process in which learners inevitably make mistakes, which eventually contribute to their learning. It is even claimed that learning of a language may be hindered unless learners make mistakes, which benefit them as positive feedback. The value of learners' mistakes also attracted the attention of researchers and teachers since their analysis offered some crucial insight into the process of language learning. For instance, Corder (cited in Brown, 1987) illustrated this observation by the following quote:

"A learner's errors ...are significant in (that) they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language". (p.167)

Before going deeper into the subject, it seems to be the right spot to clarify one point and make the commonly accepted distinction between mistakes and errors, as they are used to refer to different sets of facts in the field of language learning. A mistake usually refers to performance errors such as slips of the tongue, random ungrammaticality, imperfection in speech production etc. Regardless of native or second language situations, everybody commits mistakes. Errors, on the other hand, are deviations from the grammar of a native speaker and reflect the existing level of competence of the learner on the interlanguage continuum (Lightbown, 2001). It is widely believed that mistakes belong to native speakers and errors to language learners. This distinction seems to derive from the issue of competence. Native speakers, according to Chomsky's ideal speaker-hearer concept (1965), have an adequate competence of their mother tongue and can only make 'mistakes' in the form of slips of the tongue or pen, while language learners with their deficient competence always run the risk of committing 'errors'.

This brings us to the point that language teachers should mainly be concerned with errors. However, there is a further problem in the form a question of how they distinguish between a mistake and an error. This is another crucial issue, but beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, it will not be dealt with in this paper. Brown (1987) refers to the subjectivity of determining between these two concepts, saying that:

"That undertaking (determining between a mistake and an error) always bears with it the chance of a faulty assumption on the part of a teacher or researcher". (p.171)

However, with the view in mind that teachers are very good at judging the competence level of their students' proficiency levels (Chaudron, 1988; Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Brown, 2009), teachers are left with no option, but to rely on their own judgemental capabilities as well as their relative experience.

Errors are an important part of the study of language acquisition as well as learning of languages other than the mother tongue. The main reason behind the interest of the researchers in errors is their belief that errors are windows to the valuable, but unobservable aspects of learning, that is, the strategies people use in their acquisition processes (Richards, 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Dabaghi,

Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2008). It follows that errors are indicators of learners' current level at the language development. When one looks at the errors language learners make, s/he can easily tell the proficiency level of that person.

The fact that learners do make errors throughout their learning processes and these errors can be observed made it easy for researchers and teachers to reveal the underlying system of the learners throughout their learning processes. Additionally, this made the teachers more aware of the need to treat those errors. Indeed, the observability of errors second language learners make, and that of the teachers' reactions to them played an undeniably significant role in the shift from contrastive analysis to error analysis. Clearly, what those who were practically involved in the profession commonly knew was the incompatibility of contrastive analysis's findings and actual practice of the learners. It was, actually, at this point that error analysis differed from contrastive analysis in that the focal point was the real errors made by the real learners.

Error as a concept is not an easy one to describe. Typical definitions are offered in reference to the production of a linguistic form, which departs from the correct form. Corder (1973) refers to errors as breaches of the code. Errors deviate from what is regarded as the norm. And what is 'correct' or 'norm' is often defined as the form produced and used by the native speakers. However, the term 'native speaker form' is one, which naturally attracts a great deal of controversy because of various reasons. For one thing, in view of the fact that the English language is spoken in the world by different nations as the first language with, albeit slightly, some differences springs to mind the question of 'whose form' to adopt. Additionally, native speakers of a language also have individual codes called idiolects. And this makes it all the more difficult to make a distinction between errors and non-errors. For instance, the conjunction *while* in Yorkshire English corresponds to *until* in Standard English (Lengo, 1995). So, a language learner who happens to be speaking English with Yorkshire region's style should not be considered to have made a mistake when s/he uses *while* instead of *until*.   Secondly, maybe more importantly, is the fact that English as a second or a foreign language is mostly taught by non-native speakers in many parts of the world. In a language classroom, the teacher is the person who calls the shots, making all the decisions. In other words, learners can be seen at the mercy of their teachers in terms of the norms their teachers accept as the correct form and/or their level of proficiency in determining learners' errors.

In this connection, what has to be kept in mind in the real world of language teaching in real classrooms is the fact that teachers are the sole authority in judging what is an error. In most cases, it is in fact thanks to the response a learner gets from the teacher that s/he realizes the commission of an error. In the relevant literature, researchers go so far as saying that an error is a form 'unwanted' by the teacher (George cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991). For instance, based on his study in French immersion classrooms, Chaudron (1988) defines errors in different

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ways such as linguistic forms and content different from native speakers' norms and teachers' own judgement of what needs to be improved in learner's behavior. Clearly, this subjective attitude towards the identification of errors makes the job of teachers all the more difficult in deciding what is an error.

Another issue closely related to the core definition of errors is the attitude that different teaching methods take towards errors and their treatment. For instance, in a language classroom in which the teacher places more emphasis on the communicative ability and its development, one can hardly see correction being made to formal accuracy errors, which has been the case for many of the grammar-based methods. And this brings us to the point where it is appropriate to talk about what Burt (1975) called 'global' and 'local' errors that learners make. It is believed that global errors are the ones, which hinder communication. They prevent the listener from understanding the message properly. Local errors, on the other hand, are related to some elements in the sentence; so, they do not cause any confusion in the message on the part of the listener. The context mostly provides clue(s) about the meaning as a whole. Hendrickson (1980) stated that there is usually no need to correct local errors since the message is clear. Moreover, correction of such a local error may interrupt the flow of communication. It is the global errors, according to Hendrickson, that need to be dealt with because the message may remain distorted, leading to communication breakdown.

Apart from the provision of general instruction, one of the main goals of language teachers is considered to be correcting learners' errors. This is specifically unique to classroom situation since no one in everyday life situations has the right to impose judgement on one's normal behavior, let alone linguistic one. From teacher's point of view, correcting errors is an important means through which learners are informed of their linguistic behavior in the classroom. From learners' point of view, correction of their errors by the teacher is a significant source of improvement in their language development. According to Brown (1987), one of the most important practical problems in second language pedagogy is the issue of when and how to correct the errors of the learners in the classroom. However, this is an issue more difficult to cope with that it looks for the very basic reason that research on error correction methods is not at all conclusive on the most effective method or technique for error correction (Brown, 1987). In this sense, language teachers are faced with a process in which some important decisions have to be taken with regard to if, when, how, by whom the learners' errors are to be corrected.

The decision-making processes teachers go through when reacting to learners' oral errors is an important issue in the language classroom. The classroom research to date does not have very many applications regarding the role of immediate, delayed or postponed feedback (correction treatment) (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Especially language teachers have to be made aware of the various strategies and make their own informed decisions when treating learners' errors. Similarly, some

researches show that teachers' and second language learners' perspectives differ on the desirability of error treatment.

The findings of various studies on error treatment illustrate that teachers have an ample range of techniques for dealing with learners' errors (Allwright, 1975; Chaudron, 1987). Those findings, however, also reveal that teachers actually do not utilise all these options of correction techniques appropriately (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). The decisions that teachers are to make are seen as complex due to the intricacy of the process in terms of how to go about treating the error.

This study will essentially focus on how teachers correct the 'oral errors' of language learners. For this aim, a questionnaire (appendix-2) was prepared following a model (appendix-1) (proposed by Long's cited in Allwright & Bailey, 1991) of a decision-making process language teachers go through. Long's model details the choices that teachers have to make when an error occurs and its immediate treatment. (The notion of feedback is more of a general term compared to error correction. Both terms will be used interchangeably in this study). The aim of this paper is to try to reveal if there is a correspondence between the Long's model of how oral errors are treated by language teachers and how some language teachers at a specific educational institution (a high school in Bursa) actually accomplish the task of oral error correction. With the view that students in the classroom generally want and expect more errors to be corrected (Cathcart & Olsen, 1976; Chenoweth et al. cited in Allwright & Bailey, 1991), this paper also aims to find out with another questionnaire (appendix-3) if they are corrected sufficiently and the way students would like to by their teachers. In this connection, the present paper will address the issue of whether the expectations of teachers and learners match in any way in the treatment of oral errors. This study does not try to classify the type of oral errors whether they are phonological, grammatical, lexical, content-based or pragmatic. For one thing, Long's model did not attempt to do it either. Additionally, such a classification would probably require a more comprehensive research and ample time. Before reporting the results of the questionnaires, we will briefly look at the Long's proposed model mentioned above.

Description of Long's Model

The model proposed by Long can be seen within the framework of four steps in each of which a different question is posed and answered. At the first step, the teacher is essentially concerned with decision whether to treat the error or not. This decision involves the option of ignoring the error. Of course, this is a critical decision to make by the teacher and s/he has to keep certain factors in mind. For instance, the question of if it is a global or local error is a crucial factor. The fact that an error might be beyond the capacity of the learner is another one. Obviously, we are not even considering the fact that, depending on its type, if it (the error) really is an error following Allwright and Bailey's assumption of non-native speaker teachers' problem of noticing or identifying errors!

The second step in the model is the timing of the treatment. There are several time slots for a teacher to treat the error. For instance, an error may be corrected immediately; that is, just the exact moment that it is committed. Or the teacher may delay it by waiting for the student to complete what s/he is saying at that moment. Despite the delay, however, the error is corrected later within the same lesson. The last alternative is the postponement of the correction for longer periods of time such as another lesson in the same week or the following week.

The third step involves the way to apply the correction after the error has been noticed and the correction time specified. At this step, teachers are faced with three choices in deciding what to treat. First one is to tell the student that an error has been committed; the second is to show them where the error is; and the third is to inform him/her of the type of the error.

The last step of the proposed model is who will carry out the error correction. In this model, in addition to the stereotypical view that it is the teacher who always deals with the correction of errors, the learner who has committed the error or another member of the class is expected to make the correction.

As far as the findings of the relevant studies are concerned, the ideal way is the identification and correction of the error by the student him/herself who has committed it (self-initiated, self-correction). This is essentially the preferred common practice of going about correcting errors in natural conversations (the commonly desired context in which learners are expected to find themselves in real life) (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977). This finding is also in line with commonly desired view that the ultimate goal of language education is to make learners self-sufficient in developing their interlanguage systems. Despite the fact that self-initiated, self-repairs are desirable, it is equally important to realize that correction is carried out by the learner him/herself whether it is self or other-initiated.

Methodology

As has been mentioned before, a questionnaire inspired by Long's model of teachers' decision-making process of oral error correction was prepared. An additional questionnaire was also prepared for students in order to have an insight of their view of if; how and how often error correction is carried out by their teachers. These questionnaires were applied at a state high school where seven of the English language teachers and about forty students participated. Six of the teachers were female and only one was male. The teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire at a time when they felt the most comfortable and most of them returned the questionnaires in one of the following days. The teachers and students were asked not to put their names and assured about the confidentiality of the questionnaires. So, I have to state here that since I do not know which questionnaires belongs to whom, when I need to mention the teachers, I will be using both of the third person pronouns.

The students' questionnaire was given in four different classes. In each of the classes, teachers chose nine students in total to answer the questionnaires. I asked the teachers to choose the students from three proficiency levels of 'good', 'intermediate' and 'weak' ones in order to make sure that they were representative of the whole class. The students were asked to complete the questionnaires at the end of the class hour. Some of the student questionnaires were obtained the same day and the rest the following day.

In addition to giving questionnaires, I personally observed some of the classes with the teachers' permission. The classes observed were not necessarily the ones the questionnaires were applied at, but some others as well. The aim of these observations was to familiarize myself as a researcher to the class. During the observations, I also tried to see if I could catch some of the instances of how error correction was essentially carried out. The most conspicuous point that I noticed was the difficulty of observing error correction with naked eyes. Should I have decided to document the actual error correction practice in a classroom situation (i.e. a case study), I definitely would have needed to either video- or definitely audio-recorded the teaching sessions. In sum, classroom observations were quite useful from the point of view of having first hand experience of the 'real thing'. However, these informal and unsystematic observations have not been used in the analyses since their inclusion would require more systematic and longitudinal study. The following section comprises of the results of the data analysis and its discussion.

Results of the Analysis and Discussion

I will first focus on the teachers' responses. Before the results are revealed, one point needs to be made clear: For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to teachers as T-1, T-2 etc.

It seems that teachers are divided on the question of whether to correct or ignore learners' errors. For instance, two of the teachers (T-1 and T-2) stated that they would either wait for the student him/herself or other students to notice and make correction, or simply ignore it. Their reasoning was that interruption due to the correction might be discouraging for the student in a way that student(s) may not want to speak again. Similarly, they claimed that interrupting the student might even cause him/her to make more errors. T-1 and T-2 also believed that other-initiated self-correction was more useful in the sense that the learning of the 'erred linguistic item' would be reinforced both for the erred student and for the whole class. Another point they emphasized was that when they had to do the correction eventually, they would make it later in the same lesson. By this way, they claimed, the corrected item would be 'learnt properly' and the learning would be 'more permanent'.

Another teacher (T-3) advocated the postponement of errors only to be corrected within the same lesson. The objection of T-3 to immediate correction was the

'negative effect' it might have on the student. Additionally, s/he stated, the delayed correction helped them to overcome their fear of making errors. Since the T-3 did not indicate how s/he would eventually deal with the correction, it would not be wrong to assume that the T-3 him/herself would go about making the corrections.

The other two teachers (T-4 and T-5) supported the idea of both immediate and delayed error corrections. In fact, T-4 and T-5 tended to specify the type of errors for the immediate correction. For instance, they thought that the errors that deserved immediate correction were phonetic and lexical ones. They did not state any reason for it though. Other types of errors, which they did not specify, could be postponed until either the speech of the student ended or the completion of the lesson. Instead of error types, T-4 and T-5 specified the type of the activity for the reason of not making immediate correction. They stated that correcting errors during activities such as dramatization and conversational dialogues would discourage students from speaking and distort the flow of the activity. Therefore, errors that occurred during these activities had to be dealt with later. One of these two teachers (T-4) further stated that s/he would spare a special 'error correction period' at the end of the lesson and deal with each of the errors committed without mentioning the names of the erred students. T-4 also stated her preference for error correction at another time, if necessary, without detailing which errors and why. One detail, however, provided by the T-4 was his/her observation of the difference of the students' tolerance of accepting error correction between the beginning and end of the term. S/he reported that as the term progressed, it was easier for the students to accept teacher's error correction, helping them to become less apprehensive of making errors.

T-4 and T-5 both stated that their first preference when the error had to be corrected immediately was the self-initiated, self-correction. T-5, however, reported that she would tend to use teacher- or other-initiated, self-corrections as well. Interestingly, T-5 admitted that s/he would sometimes use other-initiated correction both to stimulate classroom participation and to draw students' attention on a particular point.

The T-6 and T-7 were advocates of the immediate correction. For instance, the T-6's straightforward reason was his/her conviction that once students learnt the erred form (by not immediately correcting the error), it would be very difficult to get it right later. The T-6, clearly by mistake, pointed out all types of immediate error correction. With the help of intuition, it might be possible to conclude that s/he would probably use all types accordingly when they were due. Similarly, the T-7 seemed to be using a likewise philosophy for his/her preference for immediate correction, stating that it would be 'more useful for the students' ultimate learning'. An interesting point highlighted by the T-7 was his/her belief that getting an erred linguistic form right later was much more difficult than teaching something new. Finally, the T-7 stated that s/he would opt for the teacher-initiated self-correction, when an error correction was needed.

Let us now turn to what the students had to say in the questionnaire. One of the most noticeable things all the students agreed on is the fact that when the teachers noticed the error, they always corrected them. The point of noticing by the teacher is important in the sense that about forty five percent of the students reportedly claimed that the teachers sometimes failed to notice them. This different point of view might stem from teachers' strategy of postponement for later correction. About eighty five percent of the students reported that when the teacher made a correction, it was an immediate one. When the immediacy of error correction was in question, the students were not equally divided about who ought to make the correction. While about sixty five percent of the students preferred teacher-initiated, self-correction, the rest of the thirty five percent opted for self-initiated, self-correction. It was interesting to see that none of the respondents picked the other-initiated self-repair and other-initiated other-repair. On the other hand, when the correction was postponed, all the students without exception stated that correction was eventually carried out later in the same lesson. No correction seemed to have been left to another lesson, day or week.

Discussion

We have so far seen the responses of both teachers and students to the questionnaires. These qualitative and quantitative (albeit simple) results now beg for interpretation. What has to be highlighted at the onset is the fact that the model of decision-making process for oral errors as described by Long was, to a great extent, utilized by the teachers of English at the high school where this questionnaire was applied. Therefore, following Long's model and as far as the results of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire are concerned, it may be possible to talk about the generality of this process in the context of dealing with oral errors. On the other hand, given the immensity of the variables in different teaching contexts and the resulting inconclusiveness of classroom research (Chaudron, 1988; Allwright & Bailey, 1991), language teachers are inclined to get on with dealing with oral errors with their own circumstances, students' qualities and relative teaching competences in mind. In other words, the immediate variables effective in their own particular situations, which they are fully aware of, determine, to a certain extent, when, how and by whom error correction ought to be made. For instance, some of the teachers (T-6 and T-7) are well aware that with their specific group of students, no other alternative apart from immediate correction would be useful. Otherwise, it might be too late to prevent fossilization of certain linguistic items from occurring. On the other hand, there is the counter argument for the immediate of error correction by T-1 and T-2 with their of relative conviction that their students might get discouraged from attempting to speak at all, should they be interrupted for error correction. Even the relative perspectives of these two groups of teachers illustrate that teachers seem to be aware of their differing situational variables and competence level of their students as well as their learning styles and strategies.

Although it was not made very clear, what the term 'error' means to the teachers seems to correspond to its commonly accepted definition of 'deviation from the norm'. And the 'norm' is probably what they have learnt to be what is grammatically, phonologically and lexically acceptable in language teaching/learning books. Of course, it could be interesting to investigate the teachers' perception of error in another study. As some of the teachers (T-4 and T-5) made clear, the type of the error had an impact on their decision on when and how to apply the corrective action.

A relatively interesting result is some of the teachers' conscious decision to postpone the correction by not noticing it and the students' reportedly close attention to the teachers' not noticing (that is, ignoring). It seems to be the case that the students are inclined to believe that their teachers simply 'miss' the error. We are able to make this judgement based on the result in which students reported that when an error was made the teacher immediately corrected it. Maybe, this point needs to be clarified by the teachers to the whole class at some point in order to prevent the students' misinterpretation that 'our teacher's English is not very good'.

Another point that needs mentioning about is the teachers' and students' preferences for who ought to make the correction. In the classroom research literature (Allwright & Bailey, 1991) as well as in the natural conversations (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977), the preferred type of error correction is self-initiated self-correction. The respondent teachers in this study also reported their preference for the common type of self-initiated self-correction first, notwithstanding allowing other correction types too. More than half of the students, on the other hand, reportedly preferred teacher-initiated self-repair. This result can be interpreted within the framework of Turkish education system in which students principally expect 'to be spoon-fed by their teachers' (Karatepe, 1998; Yılmaz, 1998).

When I started to analyze the students' questionnaire, I realized that there might be one more point that could have been asked about. That point was whether or not they would want more correction to be made. However, by looking at their responses (unanimously saying yes) to the first question (whether or not their teachers make correction), we can perhaps interpret it as their wish for more correction.

Conclusion

As has been clear so far, the matter of error correction is a complex one. Research on error correction methods is not conclusive on the most effective technique for correcting errors (Brown, 1987; Chaudron, 1988). The points of departure for the present study was to see whether the basic options and features in one such model (Long cited in Allwright & Bailey, 1991) were viable modes of error correction in the classroom. A questionnaire was prepared based on Long's model in an attempt to see if the same decision-making process was followed by teachers in actual learning situations. Likewise, a similar study was also prepared to have an insight into the students' perspective on error correction. The results of the present study (teachers' responses in particular) tend to confirm the viability of Long's model. On the other

hand, given the immensity of the variables in different teaching contexts and the resulting inconclusiveness of classroom research (Chaudron, 1988; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Dan Brown, 2016), language teachers were inclined to get on with dealing with oral errors within their own circumstances, students' proficiency levels and relative teaching competences in mind. In other words, the immediate variables effective in their own particular situations, which they are fully aware of, determine, to a certain extent, when, how and by whom error correction ought to be made. It became somewhat clear that students' perspectives and expectations on error correction did not precisely overlap with their teachers' actual error correction practice. It might be an idea for the teachers to consider informing the students' of their error correction strategies. It can be concluded that it is the teachers' task to value their students' attempts to improve themselves on the interlanguage continuum, be sensitive and receptive to their linguistic output and try his/her best to utilize the optimum way of dealing with their errors.

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