Beyond error correction - towards 'exploring' and 'exploiting' errors in the EFL classroom

Maria D. Tzotzou
State EFL Teacher

Introduction

In the traditional EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom, errors are frequently corrected and the teacher usually thinks the errors as a thorn in his/her flesh, because the focus of classroom instruction is laid on accuracy. However, in fact, errors should be considered natural products in EFL learning which reflect the modes of learners' developing EFL system.

From my own experience, too much error correction could frustrate EFL learners and even overwhelm their motivation and interest in EFL learning. Therefore, it is really necessary for teachers to consider the practical situation of learners and teachers' own linguistic background, and then conduct the correction in 'good timing' using 'appropriate' correction strategies and adjusting their lesson planning accordingly. In other words, there are obvious advantages for EFL teachers in conducting their own error analysis research (Richards, 1974): they can find out why their learners are making errors and then plan appropriate remedial lessons.

How to explore and exploit EFL errors

To become more specific, errors should no longer be treated as the thorns in the teachers' flesh that need immediate picking. It is significant that the EFL teachers realize that not all errors need to be corrected right after they are made in the classroom. For example, some errors are infrequent and may be 'slips', which do not bar the communication either in an oral form or in a written form (Littlewood, 1984). These errors mostly cannot be corrected. However, in order to help EFL learners make progress, for persistent errors, especially those shared by most learners, teachers should correct them consistently in various ways.

In monolingual classes, for example, most learners usually make the same errors. You may play 'an error of the week' game. Choose an error which most learners make,

tell them what it is and write the correct version on a piece of paper on the wall. This raises the learners' consciousness about this particular error. They then have to try not to make this error all week. The learner who succeeds in this game-like attempt can choose the 'error of the week' for the next week.

Additionally, in dealing with learners' errors, one teacher may suggest correcting them as soon as they appear, another might emphasize ignoring them, and another would say to find ways to help learners on the basis of these errors. The first two suggestions may lead to a debate which appears unlikely to help learners in learning grammar in those countries that pay considerable attention to this problematic aspect of language teaching.

As EFL teachers, we realize that some errors found in our learners' output are more serious than others. What may be less obvious, though, is that our judgement of learner error can yield linguistic insights, and that sharpening our error-analysis skills (Richards, 1974) might improve the quality of our error feedback. That is, making errors is an inevitable and necessary part of EFL learning. It is only through making errors, and hearing the correct forms, that EFL learners can develop their own understanding of how English works. It is thus important that learners have as much opportunity as possible to produce language and, with the focus on using English creatively - rather than simply repeating language - the number of errors that learners make will inevitably rise. Teachers, thus, need to think carefully about how they will respond to these errors. For instance, on hearing an incorrect form, you have to decide what to do about it:

- *Should we correct it immediately?*
- *Leave it to form the basis of a remedial lesson?*
- *Offer it to the student for self-correction?*
- *Correct it "surreptitiously"?*
- *Or ignore it completely?*

"Not correcting errors sounds scandalous even irresponsible to some language educators and many learners, so teachers may think they are doing the right thing by not correcting immediately and frequently" (Wu, 1990). But from the learners' point of view, they may assume that those teachers do not know English well enough to give appropriate feedback. One's decision of what and when to correct will therefore

depend on a number of variables, and one's decisions may differ from group to group, or learner to learner.

In other words, there are many problems associated with error correction in the EFL classroom. For example, every learner wants to improve their accuracy but not every learner likes being corrected. Another common problem is that learners and teachers often disagree on the amount of error correction that there should be in class. As should be clear from these two examples, for most teachers today it is not a case of deciding whether there should be error correction or not, but the much more difficult task of getting the amount of error correction just right for each individual level, age group, nationality, personality type, learning style etc. Another consideration concerning learners' individual reactions towards error correction is that some learners may emotionally over-react to this kind of face-threatening act.

Last but not least, the process of absorbing a new language structure takes considerable time. EFL teachers cannot, therefore, expect that simply correcting an error will produce immediate results. Some errors can remain even up to very advanced levels (such as the 's' in 'she lives', 'he goes', etc.). A strong emphasis on error correction cannot be expected to produce learners who make few errors. In fact, an over-emphasis on error correction is likely to be counter-productive as learners become deterred from using - and experimenting with - new language and vocabulary items. But learners do need to have their errors pointed out to them. The key is to limit correction to a small number of points at a time and to judge when the right moment for correction is.

Conclusion

To sum up, EFL learners approach the learning task with active strategies by making errors, mostly transitional in their nature, which in turn help them to progress as the learning goes on (Corder, 1981˙Tarone, 1983). Errors themselves are the 'product' of learning from which we can make inferences about the whole learning process and represent aspects of the same underlying learning strategy in order for an EFL learner to make sense of new experience, to be able to speak English as a foreign language (James, 1998). What is significant here is that learners' errors need not be seen as signs of failure by the EFL teachers. On the contrary, they are the clearest evidence for the learners' developing systems and can offer us insights into how they

process the data of the 'new' language. Also, not surprisingly, it is often not possible to attribute a particular error unambiguously to one single cause, but it is possible to deal with EFL errors effectively and creatively adopting the most appropriate and effective teaching approaches.

References

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