

# Teacher's Error Correction: A Key Factor in Developing Iranian EFL Learners' Speech Accuracy

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**Abstract**—The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of the teacher's error correction on the accuracy of the EFL learners' speech. In this regard the proposed null hypothesis is: "There is no significant relationship between the teacher's syntactic error correction and the EFL learners' speech accuracy". In order to test the null hypothesis, 95 students who study English as a Foreign language at Azad university, Mashhad branch participated in a TOEFL test, 40 of them were ranked as "intermediate" and were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. Both groups took part in an interview performed by the researcher as the pre-test. During the treatment procedure, in the experimental group, the syntactic errors of the students were corrected by the teacher as soon as they committed them in their speech. On the other hand the syntactic errors of the students' speech in the control group were totally ignored by the teacher. After the treatment, which took 16 sessions, the students participated in another interview as the post-test. Both the pre-test and post-test interviews plus all the class discussions during the treatment were tape recorded. The interviews were scored by five raters. In order to compare the means of the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups a t-test was calculated. The observed t was 2.072 and t critical was 2.021. Since the observed t exceeded the t critical, the null hypothesis was rejected. We can conclude that "There is a significant relationship between the teacher's syntactic error correction and the EFL learners' speech accuracy". The results of this study can be useful for language educators in dealing with their students' syntactic errors in speaking.

**Index Terms**—accuracy, consciousness raising, error, feedback, mistake, syntax

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Dulay, Brut, and Krashen (1982) "Errors are the flawed side of the learner's speech or writing. They are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norm of mature language performance. Teachers and mothers who have waged long and patient battles against their students' or children's errors have come to realize that making errors is an inevitable part of learning. People cannot learn language without first systematically committing errors." (p.138) Murphy (1986) stated that "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a language learner who makes a mistake [or error] must be in need of correction." (p.146). Research in the classroom reveals that in fact teachers are partial and selective in making corrections. In particular some may consider correction inappropriate or problematic in communication activities. Murphy (1986) suggested that correction is necessary in communication activities.

Correction is a form of feedback to learners on their use of the language. Essentially it is neutral and may describe success or failure, because language in use exploits both form and function, it may be concerned with accuracy or fluency. Giving correction, the teacher attempts to help and improve learning; indeed, learners are reported to want correction and find it useful.

Since making errors is an inseparable part of human learning process, the aim of this study is to investigate the effect of the teacher's syntactic error correction on the speech accuracy of EFL learners.

One of the questions that second / foreign language teachers most often address to second/foreign researchers is what to do about error correction: How and when should they correct whom, if at all? Error correction is of practical importance and it is also a controversial issue in the second language acquisition literature.

Following the mentioned points, this study is intended to reveal the role of the teacher's error correction on the speech accuracy of the Iranian EFL students.

This study is hoped to be useful for the language educators in the following ways: It may provide insights into the existing techniques of syntactic error correction in speech and may be a step forward in the direction of choosing the most suitable solution for the error correction. It may also turn out to be useful in making all those concerned with teaching a foreign language in Iran aware of the vital role of the Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### A. Different Attitudes towards Error Correction

According to Keshavarz (2011), over the past few decades, there has been a significant change in foreign language methodologies and teaching materials and also a significant change of attitudes toward students' errors. When Contrastive Analysis and Audio-lingual Approach to foreign languages were at the peak of their popularity through the fifties and sixties, there was a negative attitude toward errors. For example Nelson Brooks (1960) considered error to have a relationship to learning resembling that of sin to virtue. He stated: "Like sin, error should be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected." (p.58) (as stated in Keshavarz (2011))

With the emergence of error analysis in the late sixties, as a reaction to contrastive analysis and with the wave of research interest in the processes of first and second language acquisition and the similarities between them, the errors committed by the second language learners became noticeable. Consequently, the negative attitude held toward errors previously changed to a positive one. Errors were no longer considered as evil signs of failure that had to be eradicated at any cost; rather they were seen as a necessary part of language learning process.

Alongside the emergence of such theoretical views toward errors, innovative methodologies and materials for teaching foreign languages were developed that encouraged creative self-expression and not error free communication.

It should not be implied from the above that errors should not be corrected at all. Even today the role of error correction in ESL/EFL classes is acknowledged. As Nassaji (2007) points out "dealing with learners' errors is an important aspect of L2 teaching ....[and] .... Most of the evidence points to the usefulness of error correction versus no error correction" (stated in Keshavarz (2011)).

However; too much correction should certainly be avoided. Teachers should realize that correction of errors is a very delicate task, and if it is not done in an appropriate way it will do more harm than good as it may cause embarrassment and frustration for the learner. This will lead to linguistic insecurity and the learner will be discouraged to speak out in class and write freely in the target language. As Lightbown and Spada (2010) note, "Learner's errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent bad habits." (p.167) "When learners are allowed to interact freely they learn each other's mistakes" (168). On the other hand they state that: "excessive feedback on error can have a negative effect on motivation and teachers must be sensitive to the way their students react to correction." (p.167)

### *B. Stages of Errors*

There are various ways to describe the progression of linguistic development that learners manifest as their attempts at production successively approximate the target language system. In fact learners are so variable in their acquisition of a second language that stages of development defy description. Brown (1987) borrowed some insights from a model proposed by Corder (1973) and came up with a four stage category, based on observations of what the learner does in terms of errors alone.

The first stage of "random errors" which is called "pre-systematic" by Corder, is a stage in which the learner is only vaguely aware that there is some systematic order to a particular class of items. Inconsistencies like "John cans sings" and "John can singing" said by the same learner within a short period of time, indicate a stage of experimentation and inaccurate guessing.

The second, is "emergent". In this stage, the learner grows in consistency in linguistic production. S/he begins to discern a system and to internalize certain rules. These rules may not be correct by target language standards, but they are legitimate in the mind of the learner. This stage is characterized by some "backsliding" in which the learner seems to have grasped a rule or principle and then regresses to some previous stage. At this stage, the learner is unable to correct errors when they are pointed out by someone else. Avoidance of structures and topics is typical.

The third stage is called "systematic stage", in which the learner is able to show more consistency in producing the second language. While those rules are not all well formed inside the head of the learner, they are more internally self-consistent and are closely approximating their errors when they are pointed out.

The last stage is called the "stabilization" by Brown and "post-systematic" by Corder (1973). At this stage, the learner has relatively few errors and has mastered the system to the point that fluency and intended meanings are not problematic. Here, the learner can self-correct. The system is complete enough that attention can be paid to those few errors that occur and corrections made without waiting for feedback from someone else.

It should be mentioned that these stages of systematicity do not describe a learner's total second language system. We would find it difficult to say, for example, that a learner is in an emergent stage, globally, for all of the linguistic subsystems of language. One might be in a second stage with respect to the perfect tense and in the third or fourth stage when it comes to simple present and past tenses.

According to Gass and Selinker (2008) "Errors can be taken as red flags" (p.102) They can provide windows onto the state of the learner's knowledge of the second language. They should not be viewed as a product of imperfect learning or a reflection of faulty imitation. Rather, they are to be viewed as indications of a learner's effort to impose some regularity on the language the he or she is exposed to.

### *C. The Usages of Errors*

1) Errors help find out the ways through which one learns a language. They clearly indicate that the learner is making and testing hypothesis to learn language. They provide data from which inferences about the nature of the language learning process can be made. Correct sentences do not show how language is learned, while erroneous utterances highlight the strategies a learner employs. The systematicity of the errors proves that there is a mental process involved

in language learning. Were the errors not to exist, one might have argued that the learner is just repeating what he was already encountered. For example, the deviant ungrammatical sentence “I goed to the park” shows that the learner is over generalizing the rule he has induced himself or has been explained to. Such an over generalization is a mental process indicating that the learner is not just a passive agent mimicking whatever he has heard. He may never have heard such a deviant sentence from the people around. He constructs such sentences from his own relying on the rules and regulations he induces from instances of regular verbs like: open – opened / wash-washed.

2) Errors can help find out how well someone knows a language. Errors are indications of learners’ level of language proficiency. We may say that errors help the teacher be more realistic in approaching his job.

3) Learners’ errors can help gather information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials. This may be interpreted as the adaption of teaching strategy and instructional materials from the learning strategy employed by the learner himself. Learners’ errors indicate to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language students have more difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner’s ability to communicate effectively.

4) Errors provide a means for evaluating the students as well as the teaching strategies employed by the instructor himself. Accordingly, the teacher will have an authentic basis upon which he can determine the future task. By analyzing the errors, the instructor can provide himself the best means to handle the problem of evaluation of both his instruction and of student’s achievement.

#### *D. Consciousness – raising*

Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985) stated that “By conscious-raising we mean the deliberate attempt to draw the learner’s attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language”.(275)

Schmidt (1990), distinguishes the contrast between conscious and unconscious as follows: Conscious is learning with awareness, noticing, understanding the insight, intention to learn, intention to use metacognitive strategies, ability to report what is known, explicit knowledge, focal attention, the use of short-term memory, controlled processing and serial processing, while unconscious is learning with no awareness, no noticing, no understanding and insight, with incidental learning without the intention to use metacognitive strategies and the ability to report what is known, with implicit knowledge, peripheral attention, the use of long-term memory, automatic and parallel processing.

One of the more controversial issues in applied linguistics concerns the role of conscious and unconscious processes in second language learning. On one hand there are many who believe that conscious understanding of the target language system is necessary if learners are to produce correct forms and use them appropriately. In this view, errors are the result of not knowing the rules of the target language, forgetting them, or not paying attention. There is little theoretical support for the most traditional form of this view; no current theory points the conscious study of grammar as either a necessity or sufficient condition for language learning. However, Bialystok (1978) has provided a theoretical framework that allows a role for conscious knowledge, and Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985) have argued that consciousness-raising, drawing learners’ attention to the formal properties of language, facilitates language learning.

According to Gass and Selinker (2008) attention which is the concentration of the mental powers upon an object, has come to be one of the important constructs in second language research. There is a relationship between attention and awareness. They also state that, attention and memory are closely aligned in many areas of second language learning.

Based on a study performed by Gass, Svetics and Lemeline (2003), in which they considered attention from the perspective of its differential role on different parts of the grammar (lexicon, morphosyntax, syntax). They concluded that focused attention was more beneficial for syntax.

#### *E. Grammatical Consciousness-raising*

The unstated assumption of many languages –teaching professionals, past and present, has long been that an essential part of language teaching is the teaching of grammar. Rutherford (1987) believes that the assumption of grammatical consciousness-raising has two parts to it “1. A belief that language is built up out of sets of discrete entities and that language learning consists of the steady accumulation of such entities by the learner. 2. A belief that the essential characteristics of the entities can be directly imparted to the learner through teaching.” (p. 17)

In this regard, Sharwood Smith (1980) stated that “Instructional strategies which draw the attention of the learner to specifically structural regularities of the language, as distinct from the message content, will under certain conditions significantly increase the rate of acquisition over and above the rate expected from learners acquiring that language under natural circumstances where attention to form may be minimal and sporadic.” (p.275)

#### *F. The Significance of Learners’ Errors*

According to Corder (1981), the learners’ errors are significant in three different ways. First, to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learnt or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Third, the errors are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the learner uses for testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning. The making of errors is a strategy used both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language.

In order to achieve the goal of the present experimental study, the following research question was posed:

*Q1. Is there a significant relationship between the teacher's syntactic error correction and the intermediate EFL students' speech accuracy?*

To provide a reliable answer to the above mentioned research question, the following null hypothesis is proposed:

*H01: There is no significant relationship between the teacher's syntactic error correction and the intermediate EFL students' speech accuracy.*

### III. METHOD

#### A. Participants

Among 95 Iranian, adults both male and female, aged between 19 to 25, who were EFL freshmen and sophomores, 40 of them participated in this study. They were all studying at Azad University, Mashhad Branch.

Their homogeneity in English proficiency was proven by a TOEFL test in advance. They were considered as "intermediate". The students were divided into two groups: one 18, and the other 22. They respectively made the experimental and the control groups. The process of error correction was performed on the experimental group.

#### B. Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were as follows:

(1) A TOEFL test for the purpose of making homogeneous subjects in the level of English proficiency.

(2) A number of questions for the pre-test interview.

(3) A checklist of certain grammatical points that was used as a guide-line for correcting the students' syntactic errors in speaking, during the treatment. It was also used as a guide-line for the raters who rated the interviews.

(4) A number of questions for the post-test interview.

It has to be mentioned that, this research was performed in the "conversation" class of the students. Both groups were given the same topics to talk about each session. Moreover, all the class discussions of both experimental and control groups in addition to the pre-test and post-test interviews were tape-recorded.

#### C. Procedures

The following procedures were taken systematically in order to fulfill the purpose of this study.

Primarily 95 TEFL students of Azad university, Mashhad branch participated in a TOEFL test. The allocated time for the test was 90 minutes. According to the TOEFL scale, the ones whose score fell between 350 and 500 were considered as "intermediate", in the level of English proficiency. Out of the whole participants, 40 students could be determined as "intermediate". These subjects were interviewed by the researcher. During the interview, a number of descriptive questions were asked and there was no time limitation for answering the questions, therefore the subjects could answer as much as they could. The interviews were tape-recorded and were considered as the pre-test.

Then, the subjects were randomly divided into two groups of 18 and 22 which respectively made the experimental and control groups. During the treatment, in the experimental group, as soon as a subject made a syntactic error (the errors that were mentioned in the checklist), in her speaking, the teacher interrupted his or her speech and corrected him or her by saying the right form. In other words the teacher gave him or her conscious awareness immediately. In the control group the errors that the students made during their speech were neglected, and they were not corrected by the teacher. Of course in both groups the effect of peer-correction and self-correction were the same i.e. no one stopped the peers from correcting each other. It is to be mentioned that all the class discussions in both groups were tape recorded, so that the researcher could make sure that the procedure were going all right.

After the treatment, i.e. sixteen sessions, all of the subjects participated in another interview which was considered as the post-test. The questions of this interview were again descriptive type and the students were given enough time to answer as much as they could. These interviews were also tape recorded.

The pre-test and post-test interviews which were tape recorded, plus a checklist of certain syntactic forms were given to five raters. They listened to the interviews and gave scores to each one of them according to a checklist. The procedure of scoring was in a way that for each syntactic error one score was deducted out of 20. It is to be noted that one of the raters was the researcher herself, and the rest of the raters were chosen among the most meticulous colleagues and classmates of hers.

When the raters finished scoring, the researcher collected all the scores and calculated the inter-reliability of the scores. Since the coefficient of correlation indicates the extent to which the raters' judgments were in agreement, it showed a high degree of agreement between the judges.

In order to see if the difference between the means in the groups is significant or not the researcher calculated the *t-test*. For achieving this purpose, she calculated the means and variances of the post-tests in both groups, and since the number of subjects were known, the calculation of the observed *t* was done easily. The result indicated that the observed *t* exceeded the *t* critical value of the table, so the null hypothesis of this study was rejected at the 5 percent (0.05) alpha level of significance.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having collected the required data based on the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures the researcher conducted the analysis of data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study.

To ensure that the researcher made interview questions were reliable, an analysis was done employing Cronbach's Alpha to estimate the reliability indexes of pre-test and post-test interview questions. As table 1 indicates, both series of questions enjoy a relatively high reliability. ( $\alpha=.83$  for the pre-test interview questions and  $\alpha=.85$  for the post-test interview questions).

TABLE 1:  
RESULTS OF THE RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONS OF THE INTERVIEW

Interview Questions	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Questions
Pre-test	.83	6
Post-test	.85	6

After all the raters finished scoring the interviews, the researcher calculated the inter-rater-reliability of their scores.

TABLE 2:  
RESULTS OF INTER-RATER-RELIABILITY

Groups	Pre-test	Post-test
Exp.	0.869	0.802
Cont	0.831	0.770

As it is shown in TABLE 2, the inter-rater reliability for the experimental group in the pre-test is 0.869 and in the post-test is 0.802. In the control group for the pre-test is 0.831 and for the post-test is 0.770.

The inter-rater reliability of the scores given by the raters was calculated, by using the coefficient correlation formula which indicates the degree of agreement between the raters. The results showed that there is a high degree of agreement between the scores of the judges.

TABLE 3:  
RESULTS OF T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR THE POST-TEST

Groups	N	M	SD	t	df	p.
Exp.	18	16.04	2.17	2.072	38	0.05
Cont.	22	14.70	6.55	2.021		

As table 3 shows, the number of participants in the Experimental group is 18 with ( $M=16.04$   $SD=2.17$ ) and in Control group the number of the students are 22 with ( $M=14.70$   $SD=6.55$ ).

The *t-test* was calculated in order to see if the difference between the means in the groups is significant or not. The results indicated that the observed *t* (2.072) exceeded the *t* (2.021) critical value at the 5 percent (.05) alpha level of significance, and the degree of freedom of 38. Since the hypothesis of this study was null, two tailed test was implemented. The results indicated that since the observed *t* exceeded the critical *t* the null hypothesis of the study can be rejected.

Therefore it can be concluded that: "There is a significant relationship between the teacher's error correction and the EFL students' speech accuracy".

## V. CONCLUSION

Primarily the correlation between the scores given by the raters indicated that there is a high agreement between the judges' scores. Then the means and variances of the post-test in both groups were calculated. In order to see if the difference between the means in the groups is significant or not, the researcher calculated the *t-test*. The results show that the observed *t* exceeded the *t* critical, therefore the null hypothesis of this study was rejected.

According to the data analyzed through the statistical technique of *t-test* there appeared a significant relationship between the teacher's error correction and the TEFL students' speech accuracy.

It should be mentioned that the results of this study can primarily be useful for the language educators who teach at the intermediate level. They can realize that if they correct the syntactic errors of their students, as soon as they make them in their speech, this will improve their speech accuracy.

It will make the teachers more responsible toward their students' syntactic errors, because they should give the students conscious awareness about the errors they make.

The results of this study will make the students more meticulous about the components of the speech they produce. Because they know that if they make an error they will be interrupted and corrected immediately and this is not pleasant for most of them.

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