

Teachers' Role in Dealing with Errors in Students' Second Language Learning

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Abstract—Methods applied to improve learners' achievements in learning process have aroused public attention in second language education. Error correction is what both teachers and learners often focus on, and most of them over emphasized the importance of corrective feedback, which leads to a lack of confidence in learners to tap their capacity in using the new language. Therefore, this paper discusses the effective way to deal with learners' errors in second language learning process. A switch from the emphasis on the correct form of language to the way to improve learners' learning ability is investigated in a second language class with instructions of how to apply new knowledge properly in practice being introduced in Group Work activities. Grading in Learners' writing and oral exams analyzed by SPSS shows an advancement as well as the improved learning confidence. Some effective teaching methods and the positive effects from the results of a quantitative research on second language learners are explored in this paper, which are of great use in a second language class as well as some relative researches.

Index Terms—second language learning, error correction, learning confidence, teaching methods

I. INSTRUCTION

In second language learning process, students always focus on the errors made in grammars as well as vocabularies and thus learners are afraid of using the new-learned language or try to avoid any mistake when learning to use it. And most teachers also heavily emphasize the errors correction in their teaching process. Both of the two responses become an obvious obstacle that is more likely to lower learners' learning achievement and efficiency. Although error correction has been proved to be effective by many researchers to help learners acquire new knowledge in second language learning field, if all mistakes made by second language learners are corrected as soon as they make use of the target language, errors are always considered in the first place, which shows a lack of understanding what causes the errors and thus lead to an inefficiency in dealing with them. Assumptions from child language learning studies present that a language learner forms a provisional learning system when he is exposed to a new language and he can apply it in certain situation by making use of this system (Gorbet, 1974). And in adult second language learning, this process is also reasonable to enable them in acquiring new language information. Errors are evidence of the language system of a learner's choice, which is not from the target language, but most likely the one of some other language they are familiar with, so errors in the second language learning is a sign for learning instead of failure (Gorbet, 1974). Therefore, the teacher who teaches an adult a second language should not focus on correcting the errors found in the learners' output, but choose a proper way to facilitate their development. This paper is going to investigate what a teacher should do to deal with the errors in using English language via a quantitative research on the effects of some teaching methods in class.

A. Need for Study

Various investigations have been conducted in how to provide error correction in second language teaching class as well as the role of teachers' corrective feedback in learners' language use accuracy in second language learning process. Evidence has shown the effectiveness of corrective feedback in second language writing and speaking. However, few studies focus on the drawbacks brought by the immediate correction in the learning process or the more effective methods to deal with errors instead of correction. Therefore, it is of great importance for teachers to know the sequence in which second language learners acquire the knowledge so that courses will be developed that correspond to the certain sequence and thus makes the learners' task much easier.

B. Purpose of the Study

This paper is going to investigate the effective measures in a naturally occurring teaching sequence that can be applied in learners' second language learning process so as to deal with the mistakes that are always found when learners are acquiring new knowledge and try to put them into practical use.

C. Significance of the Study

Some effective teaching methods and the positive effects on second language learners are explored in the study, which are of great use in a second language class to improve learners' achievement in both writing and oral output and it is also valuable for the further study in some relative researches.

D. *Research Questions and Hypothesis*

The research question in this study is whether there will be significant improvement in second language learners' writing and speaking achievement when errors in language use are resolved in a more natural and proper way rather than be corrected immediately after being found. And a hypothesis will be examined as there will be a higher achievement in learners' writing and oral practice as well as an enhancement in their confidence after adopting the teaching methods which emphasize the effective facilitation from teachers on errors.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Limitations of Corrective Feedback*

As it is well known, errors occurring in the second language learning process can be attributed to two main reasons. Some errors are in development for they are normal to the learning process, while others are caused by improper materials, faulty teaching or learning. The experienced and sensitive teacher can become skillful in distinguishing these through careful study and observation. However, it is of great difficulty to deal with errors effectively unless we strive to discover what causes them.

Corder (1973) points out some errors are more significant than others, thus as the teacher, we must correct the errors in a selective and systematic perspective. Because when errors are regarded as random occurrences, it is useless and unhelpful to make any isolated corrections. Therefore, the teacher should be responsible for being effective correction in remedial work in a deliberate and well-planned way. A correction that does not produce the desired results may in fact produce undesired results and as teachers we must be keenly aware of this possibility. We automatically tend to think of 'errors' when we think of correction and here it is crucial to be aware of our learners' communication strategies. As we have seen, it is not uncommon for students to adjust, or even abandon what they want to say in an effort to say it correctly, or to the teacher's satisfaction. The end product may then be correct in the grammatical sense, but it is inadequate from the viewpoint of communication. It is so important that our students learn to say what they want to say as well as what we want them to say. Therefore, it is sometimes more important to tolerate errors than to correct them. Determining when to and when not to ignore student errors is perhaps the most difficult challenge of teaching.

Moreover, we must also be careful about the way to correct errors. Only using drill as medial tool have been disappointing, and even lead to disastrous results. Many teachers have complained the short-term effect of drill. When we drill the learners, they have it perfectly, but as soon as the drill is over they turn around and make the same mistake. It is conceivable that our experience screams that the drill cannot be used effectively for remedial work, for it does not foster communication and it does nothing to aid the student in using the drill at the wrong time.

B. *Theoretical Background*

1. **Error Analysis**

The term 'Error Analysis' implies that the focus of theory is on students' errors. It is misleading because although analyzing errors is certainly involved in an Error Analysis, much more is implied. Essentially it is a theory that is developed to explain the learning processes involved in acquiring a second language and in this sense it is first and foremost a language learning theory. Firstly, the assumption underlying the theory is that errors are evidence of a learner's language system, which is not the system of the target language, but a system of some other language. And the theoretical objective of Error Analysis is to describe the 'other' language. Besides, the orientation of the study is psycholinguistic, in that the fundamental question influencing its development has been the cognitive processes in learning a second language.

2. **Three Stages in Acquiring Target Language**

Corder (1973) suggests that all second language learners go through three stages in acquiring the target language: a pre-systematic stage, a systematic stage and a post-systematic stage. In the pre-systematic stage, the learner does not realize that there is a system in the target language or the functions of it. His output is completely random. In the systematic stage, the learner is formulating his hypotheses. He cannot correct his errors as they are still largely random, although he can explain what he means and learning is active. In the post systematic stage, he is able to correct his errors and there is evidence that he is systematically applying rules. In the systematic stage the teacher can create a non-threatening atmosphere which will encourage the student to form his hypotheses and he can help the student in the post systematic stage in adjusting the hypotheses already formed. A learner might be pre-systematic in one sub-system, systematic in another and post-systematic in yet another one.

3. **Constructivist perspective**

The constructivist theory takes the view that learning is constructed, so learners have to construct their own knowledge on the basis of what they already know, individually and collectively (Davis, Macher, & Noddings, 1990). That is, their prior knowledge influences what they construct. Most of the theories in cognitive science entail some kind of constructivism as these theories are regarded as individuals construct their own cognitive structures when they interpret their experiences in particular contexts (Palincsar, 1998). Rather than the transmission of knowledge, learning is an internal process of interpretation: "Learners do not transfer knowledge from the external world into their memories; rather, they create interpretations of the world based upon their past experiences and their interactions in the world." (Cunningham, 1992, p. 36)

The term “constructivism” used by many psychologists and educators often mean different things, while some of them focus on how individuals make meaning, others emphasize the shared, social construction of knowledge (Woolfolk, 2001). Most people who use the term of constructivism emphasize “the learner’s contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity” (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999, p.215). No matter when learners work in group or on their own, errors are common in the learning process, which manifests the development in knowledge construction. Focus on these errors by either collaborators or the individual learners may lead to an obstacle on the constructive behavior and thus exert side effects on the achievement in language practice.

C. *Related Studies*

Recently, many linguists and psychologists have felt that we can learn a lot about the nature of language learning by observing and studying the way children acquire language. And no wonder, when we think of the complexity involved in a language, it is really quite amazing that almost all children manage to become very fluent in at least one language and sometimes more, by the time they are four years old. "No two children are exposed to the same primer linguistic data, or the same amount of such data, and yet despite such different experience and wide differences in intelligence almost all children are able to crack the code of the linguistic system of their culture and learn to understand and produce sentences". Children also seem to pick up second languages better than we do. Considering these facts, psycholinguists and applied linguists such as Corder (1973), Selinker (1972), and Richards (1972) who were studying second language acquisition turned to first language acquisition studies for initial clues about the cognitive processes involved in language learning.

Studies in child language acquisition start from observing children's speech, then comparing it with the speech expressed by native adults and trying to describe and explain the differences between the two utterances. Results from such studies have been surprising for those who thought language acquisition was an activity to form mimetic habit. In the psycholinguistic literature put out in the last decade, psychologists and linguists both agree that child language acquisition should occurred in a more active and creative process. It is active in the sense that the child does not simply receive data rather he processes it and it is creative in the sense that the child, on the basis of his grammar and his understanding of the world, is able to form statements which he has never heard. All children seem to have an innate capacity to acquire his language.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Introduction*

A quantitative research was conducted to investigate whether there would be a significant advancement in both writing and speaking achievement when the teacher adopted some proper teaching methods that focused on facilitation rather than error correction. Having discussed the theoretical frameworks about error analysis and some related studies of positive and negative effects of error correction in second language learning, this chapter concentrates on the methodology of the study, mainly including the sample and sampling procedures, research design, instrument and treatment of this study.

B. *Sample and Sampling Procedures*

Samples in this research experiment were freshmen majoring in Business English from one class in Tianjin Transportation Vocational College. Students in this class were teenagers from 18-21 years old. There were 42 students, 28 of them were girls and 14 of them were boys. Although not all of them had received a solid education in high schools (some of them graduated from technical schools), they had acquired a basic command of English knowledge and they would be learning in this college for three years as Business English majors. In the past English learning experience, accuracy of grammatical structures and vocabulary were emphasized and most of them were required to correct the mistakes they had made with the help of classmates and teachers. Therefore, they were always afraid of making mistakes in applying the new-acquired knowledge. In order to improve this situation, facilitation of teachers shift from error correction to natural use of target language.

C. *Research Design*

As it mentioned in 3.2, instead of correcting mistakes during second language learners learning process, they are facilitated by the teacher to learn English in a natural way.

A pretest was conducted at the beginning of the semester in September, 2015. Students in experimental class were required to have a test by writing a free essay to express their feelings of becoming a freshman in this college and expressing the feeling orally to the class as a whole. Forty minutes were given to them to finish writing and 10 minutes including preparation were given to them in speaking practice in class, and they are not allowed to talk to others or use dictionaries and other reference materials. After collecting all papers, the teacher asked two of her classmates, two postgraduates majoring in English language education in Tianjin Foreign Studies University with experience in teaching English writing and speaking, to score each composition with the criteria of Band 4 (some different requirements in details could be regulated according to the needs). Results from the pretest were collected to compare with the data that

will be got from the posttest in the final to see whether there will be a significant advancement after adopting the new teaching method in class.

Text book applied in class was New Practical English and Band 4 test papers as the complementary materials were given to them. Speaking and writing models are introduced in the text book, providing communication context, how to select proper words, organize correct sentences, arrange a complete structure of passage, and form a logical thinking. Students had 6 hours of English class per week, in which writing class takes 1.3 hours and speaking class takes 1.5 hours per week in the whole semester.

During both speaking and writing course in this semester, teacher should teach the students some relevant skills mentioned in the text book, and also asked them to finish the exercises. In class, students were asked to exchange their ideas on the questions with others to achieve their answers jointly, and then they could show their different ideas and choices of words or sentences in either oral or written form, but they were not allowed to correct the mistakes of their group members. Each learner in the group first formed their own ideas on the task and then write a composition or make a dialogue or monologue to check whether they could master and apply what they had learned. After that, teacher's instruction was given to them by offering some original materials with relevant accurate knowledge input. As a result, learners were able to learn from the correct form and imitate it so that some inaccurate uses in language output would be modified naturally by learners themselves. In this process, mistakes were not over emphasized and everyone would focus on second language learning itself rather than error correction which was an obstacle of the learning.

After one semester's teaching experiment, data from the final speaking and writing examination were collected as the posttest results. As soon as the final examination finished, the teacher got the papers of the class copied and asked her two classmates to give an evaluation and grade each paper with the Band 4 criteria, and then scores from the posttest were put into SPSS to testify whether there would be a significant difference in the speaking and writing achievement between the two tests after one semester's experimental practice.

D. Instrumentation (SPSS & Interview)

Instruments used in this study were pretest and final test for both speaking and writing. And an interview for learners about inquiry on the effects of this teaching method was conducted after final. The pretest was conducted at the beginning of the semester, and the posttest-final speaking and writing examination, at the end of the semester. In order to make sure that both of the organized speaking and writing tests were on the equal level and would be accurate to testify students' progress in writing achievement, another test was made by randomly selecting 22 students in the experimental class. Students in that class were asked to finish the two speaking and writing tasks of the pretest and posttest at two times within a week. Results were also scored by the two postgraduates and the data collected were put into SPSS to make a Paired Samples T- test. According to the result shown in table A, $t=-.796$, $p=.435$, $p>.05$, there was not a significant difference between the mean score of the two compositions. Therefore, it proved that the pretest and posttest were almost on the same level which presented that results in the educational experiment would not be influenced due to the unequal degree of difficulty of the two test papers.

TABLE A
PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

	N	M	SD	T	P
Pre-test	22	77.86	8.85	-.796	.435
Post-test	22	79.81	8.71		

After the test, an interview was conducted to inquire the feeling of learners on the effect of adopting the teaching methods that avoid direct correction on learners' output. Most of the responses were positive, showing that learners were highly encouraged to express themselves in both oral and written form. They were voluntarily to think or express without a lack of confidence caused by being afraid of making mistakes. Therefore, confidence was built and thus the competence.

E. Treatment

In the teaching experiment, firstly, teacher made a group arrangement. In order to avoid the influence from different elements as English levels, gender, friendship and affect, etc., the 42 members in the class were divided into six groups with each one composed of seven members under the control of the teacher. Since a pretest was operated, each student's writing was relatively clear to the teacher. Therefore, top six students were assigned into the six groups separately in order to avoid inequality, and at the same time, 14 boys were also put into each group to make certain that in every group a communication of girls and boys could be achieved. In the middle of the semester, the teams were rearranged for a wide communication among the whole class members, with each group also having a top student and two boys.

Secondly, before the teaching activities organized in groups, teacher introduced and explained some important elements about the learning objectives, learning tasks and the fundamental methods adopted in the whole class. After doing so, the relevant knowledge about speaking and writing skills introduced in every chapter of the text book was taught by the teacher, such as pronunciation, selection of words, organization of sentences, and the structure various tasks. Before doing exercises in the text book, audio or video speaking materials as well as a sample composition were provided, and then tasks would be finished by students within the groups, and they could discuss and share opinions to

complete the task when the teacher walked around the class to offer help without any unnecessary interrupting. After that, according to the requirements of the topic, students were encouraged to organize their thought. Then they could read the information in the text book, based on which they were going to write an outline of the oral topic and composition jointly. When the students worked in groups, the teacher was available as an adviser, a guide, and a facilitator. In this process, the teacher was responsible to extend students' ideas without giving corrective feedback.

Thirdly, students went on to complete the whole speaking and writing tasks. They were asked to discuss the main content of each part, they might argue with each other to select words, organize sentences and form opinions, with the teacher also giving some suggestions. Various possible selection of vocabulary and sentence structures were offered by teachers so that learners can receive enough information to make choices. All choices were correct, but when learners make other choices out of those offered by the teacher, no correction should be made even if it was improper. After that they need to complete the whole tasks, which were assigned differently in two stages. During the first half of the semester which was defined as the first stage, students within a team were required to finish the oral practice and composition together with each one in charge of one part, and the speaking task should be handed in with a tape and the writing task on a piece of paper. The teacher can check if everyone had made a contribution by listening to different voices and observing the different handwritings. While during the last half of the semester, students were asked to exchange views about the content and expressions in their tasks, and then each member was to finish the them independently.

Fourthly, although, normally, students should do a cooperative modification after completing the writing task. The teaching methods in this class had to be operated in different ways. For the speaking task, in the first stage, every learner was required to read the well-prepared materials or expressed it freely around the topic, when it was necessary for them to keep on talking without being interrupted. In this process, other students listened to their speech carefully and they were asked to take down the mistakes in pronunciation or improper expression without telling the speaker. At this time, the teacher was responsible for observing the presenter's performance and prepare to repeat the video with correct input on relevant information. For the writing task, in the first stage, the composition written by the whole team was to be read aloud, the teacher would help other team members take down some notes for some disagreements after listening to what they were talking about, including word selection and grammar to the complex structure organization. Whereas in the second stage, compositions completed by individuals should be exchanged within the team and each team member need to modify one of his partners' compositions with the correcting points without leaving any marks on the paper. In both two stages, the teacher had to pay attention to the improper uses and select some facilitating materials to offer learners an indirect suggestion to help them get improved mainly on their own awareness.

Fifthly, the selected video materials and sample composition were given to the learners to check their finished tasks and they were required to revise what they had done. After that, all learners were able to realize the differences between the samples and their own output and when they were asked to make the oral practice a second time and hand in their revised compositions, most of the mistakes they had applied before were corrected consciously by themselves. For the rest part of the mistakes that were not easy to be realized by learners, the teacher organizes a summary if the class by explaining rules specially designed according to the difficulties the students encountered in the practical application. And the learners could revise their tasks a third time by referencing the summarized rules.

Finally, after the revision for three times, audio of learners' oral task as well as the compositions on paper were handed in to the teacher. A further suggestion would be given to the learners after scoring.

F. Limitations

Experimental research was only conducted in one class, so the higher achievement was only proved by a Paired-Sample T Test. Besides the treatment used in the class, some other factors could also affect the results from data analysis. Therefore, it is suggested that a comparison between two learning groups or between two classes should be conducted to testify the effects of this teaching method so that it can be widely acknowledged in the future second language learning class. Besides, in this study, time devoted to this quantitative research is limited, for it only lasted one semester-16 weeks. samples are also restricted to those who are students of the writer, so it is not a random selection, which may also have an ill effect on the research results. Moreover, the amount of the sample is small, which only consists of 42 students.

IV. RESULTS

The purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of the teaching methods that avoid error correction by others on second language learners' speaking and writing achievement. Research question addressed by this study is whether there will be significant improvement in second language learners' speaking and writing achievement when errors in language use are resolved in a more natural and proper way rather than be corrected immediately after being found. This part presents the results of this study based on the research design.

Table 1 set out the tests for normality for data collected from the pretest and posttest for both speaking and writing of the class. From Table 1, the rate for prewriting between the Skewness (-.656) and its Std. Error (.365) is -1.797, within the range of -2 and +2, therefore the normality Skewness is assumed; the rate between the Kurtosis (1.283) and its Std.

Error (.717) is 1.789, again within the range of -2 and +2, therefore the normality of Kurtosis is assumed. So are the rates from data in other three tests.

From Table 2, we can see in prewriting, the W statistic under Shapiro-Wilk is .898, the significance is .161, which is larger than .05, indicating that there is not a significant difference between the “pretest” variable distribution and normal distribution. Now it is safe to say the “pretest” variable distribution is normal. The data shown in other three parts are also normally distributed.

TABLE 1

Descriptives		Statistic	Std. Error
prewriting	Mean	86.5952	1.51610
	Skewness	-.656	.365
	Kurtosis	1.283	.717
postwriting	Mean	74.9048	2.70647
	Skewness	-.562	.365
	Kurtosis	.740	.717
postspeaking	Mean	76.5238	2.43075
	Skewness	-.647	.365
	Kurtosis	.003	.717
Pre-speaking	Mean	83.2619	1.62231
	Skewness	-.329	.365
	Kurtosis	-.452	.717

TABLE 2

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-writing	.176	42	.112	.898	42	.161
Post-writing	.177	42	.102	.920	42	.057
Post-speaking	.131	42	.067	.948	42	.056
Pre-speaking	.187	42	.071	.935	42	.060

According to the result illustrated in table 5, $t=3.692&3.333$, $p=.001&.002$, $p<.05$, there were significant differences between the mean score of the two speaking and writing tasks. Therefore, it proved that there were improvements in the pretest and posttest of the two tasks.

TABLE 3

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pre-writing	86.5952	42	9.82545	1.51610
Post-writing	74.9048	42	17.53993	2.70647
Pair 2 Pre-speaking	83.2619	42	10.51378	1.62231
Post-speaking	76.5238	42	15.75303	2.43075

TABLE 4

Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Pre-writing & post-writing	42	-.050	.755
Pair 2 Pre-speaking & post-speaking	42	.565	.000

TABLE 5

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences	Paired Differences		Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation		Lower	Upper			
		Pair 1 Pre-writing – Post-writing	11.69048		20.52540	3.16714			
Pair 2 Pre-speaking – Post-speaking	6.73810	13.10010	2.02139	2.65582	10.82037	3.333	41	.002	

Data Analysis shows the results of this study by using SPSS to do a Paired Sample T Test. It has shown that there are significant differences in both speaking and writing achievement after one semester’s experimental practice.

V. CONCLUSION

A. Summary of the Study

Results from the research study shows that a proper facilitation from teachers is more effective to help second language learners achieve their goals in target language application. Focus on the corrective feedback may only emphasize the mistakes, which have proved to be the normal learning process instead of what have to be avoided for directly supplying the correct form will probably not be very helpful. The learning methods that are adopted in experimental class instruct learners to naturally use the knowledge in language use and the attention to the errors they make in the learning process is avoided, and what they have to do is listening to the sample speeches and looking at the sample compositions, which enables them to correct their mistakes spontaneously.

B. Implication for Practice

It is implicated that if we are to treat errors effectively, the student's part in the correction should be active. The teacher who hints at the correct form or supplies it indirectly should have much better results, especially if he is able to relate his correction to the learner's strategy. It is of great importance that the student must be put in the position where he can make inferences, formulate concepts and alter his hypotheses and he must be given the time and encouragement to do this.

C. Recommendations

As the research study has some shortcomings, sample selection and time devoted to the research should be improved. Most significant attention should be paid on the application of teaching methods. It may be helpful to explicitly formulate the rule that the student is having problems with, especially if they seem to have undue difficulty formulating them himself. As Corder (1973) points out that 'a concept is achieved partly through the illustration of what is not an example of the concept; that is, through negative instances. Therefore, as teachers we may be able to aid our students considerably by presenting the constraints of a rule as well as instances of its proper application. Along the same lines, we can avoid closely related items that are confusing to the student in his formation of concepts. Whatever method we take, we should keep in mind that our task is to aid the student in formulating his concepts about the language, not to supply him with isolated linguistic items.

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