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## LEARNERS' APPRECIATION OF ERROR CORRECTION

Drawing from the assumption that learners may benefit from errors, the author presents a study of learner's attitudes to their own errors and of their reactions to the treatment of these errors. The results of the investigation not only support the initial claim, but are also indicative of learners' preferences for the kind of treatment they receive and expect in both oral and written production.

### 1. Introduction

The significance of errors in foreign language learning has for long been widely recognised; however, the controversy over their learning value is still not settled: one group of teachers and researchers claim that errors inhibit the learning process, while another claims that errors can enhance it. The present author places himself in the latter group. Further to a number of findings and considerations concerning the learning value of errors presented and discussed elsewhere (cf. Zybert 2000), he has carried out an investigation whose results are presented below.

### 2. Research

The research was started with two aims: on the one hand, it attempted to validate our earlier claims and, on the other, to find whether language learners appreciate error correction and if so, in what form. It was claimed that in order to "cure" an error a number of conditions have to be met. Firstly, learners must be made aware that they have made an error (an initial condition for successful eradication of errors) - this could be achieved by means of some form of feedback. Secondly, learners must be willing to fight their errors (some learners do not care very much about accuracy, as they are aware that they can achieve their communicative goals without grammatical correctness, thus fossilising their incomplete, i.e. imperfect, L2 systems). Thirdly, they must be informed what the correct

form is (this they get from the correction itself, which serves as input to construct an improved hypothesis). Fourthly, the learner must be given enough opportunity to use the new information to practice (and test out) the new hypothesis. Consequently, the teacher's steps in handling errors might be:

- (1) Inform the learners of their error; if they are able to (and do) correct themselves, OK. If not:
- (2) Inform the learners of the proper form (i.e. raise their grammatical consciousness) and/or,
- (3) Give them the opportunity to practice.

### 2.1. Subjects

The research encompassed 298 Polish learners of English who belonged to the following four groups:

- (1) Beginners: 88 primary school pupils aged 12-13.
- (2) Post-intermediate: 76 students (teacher training college – English majors) aged 19-20.
- (3) Advanced: 34 students (as specified in (2) above) aged 21-22.
- (4) Advanced: 100 students (university – English majors) aged 20-21.

### 2.2. Study questions

The participants were all given a questionnaire that included the following questions (to avoid possible confusion or misunderstanding all the questions were provided in Polish):

- (1) Do you believe that we learn from errors?
- (2) Are you interested in the grammatical accuracy of your utterances (oral and written), i.e. do you want to know if you have made errors?
- (3) Do you believe that an error becomes fixed if you commit it often?
- (4) Does the noticing of errors help you avoid making them later and use a correct form instead?
- (5) If yes, whose errors contribute more to your learning: yours or someone else's?
- (6) Do you want to have your errors corrected?
- (7) Who do you prefer to correct your errors:
  - (a) yourself,
  - (b) the teacher,
  - (c) another student?
- (8) Which errors do you want to have corrected:
  - (a) articulatory,
  - (b) grammatical,
  - (c) lexical,
  - (d) orthographic?
- (9) Do you want to be interrupted when you make an error while speaking?
- (10) If you are unable to repair your error, do you prefer to be
  - (a) aided in getting the right form, or just
  - (b) provided with the correct form?
- (11) In your written tasks do you prefer the teacher to
  - (a) only indicate the error (for self-correction),
  - (b) define the error (e.g. word order, tense, spelling), or
  - (c) correct it, too (i.e. provide a correct form)?

(12) Does your understanding of the nature and cause of your error facilitate learning correct forms?

(13) Do you want to have your errors discussed in the classroom?

(14) Do you believe that all errors should be discussed in class or only some?

Apart from these fourteen questions the subjects were also invited to provide their comments on errors from their own experience in language learning, in particular concerning questions 1, 2, 5, 10, and 11.

### 2.3. The results

The results obtained from the students' answers are presented in the table shown below.

Question no.	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Mean	
	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
1	100	0	100	0	88	12	100	0	97	3
2	100	0	100	0	100	0	100	0	100	0
3	91	9	71	29	76	24	84	16	81	19
4	78	22	89	11	100	0	92	8	90	10
5	<i>own</i>	<i>s.else's</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>s.else's</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>s.else's</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>s.else's</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>s.else's</i>
	95	5	97	3	77	23	82	18	88	12
6	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
	87	13	100	0	100	0	100	0	97	3
7 a	73	27	58	42	53	47	59	40	60	39
b	23	77	32	68	35	65	40	60	32	78
c	4	96	9	90	12	88	0	100	6	94
8 a	73	27	89	11	87	13	90	10	85	15
b	82	18	95	5	100	0	98	2	94	6
c	78	22	87	13	94	6	90	10	88	12
d	91	9	87	13	83	17	90	10	88	12
9	56	44	5	95	24	76	20	80	26	74
10 a	95	5	100	0	100	0	70	30	91	9
b	5	95	0	100	0	100	30	70	9	91
11 a	32	68	29	71	35	65	20	80	29	71
b	23	77	66	44	53	47	80	20	56	44
c	45	55	5	95	88	12	68	32	52	48
12	95	5	100	0	100	0	92	8	97	3
13	18	82	18	82	29	71	22	78	22	78
14	<i>all</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>all</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>all</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>all</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>all</i>	<i>some</i>
	78	22	89	11	100	0	94	6	90	10

Table: Percentage figures of subjects' answers

#### 2.4. A quantitative analysis

With regard to the particular questions, a comparison of the results across the four groups of learners yields the following observations:

(1) Language learners believe that errors, in general, contribute to learning a foreign language. The first question was answered positively by an overwhelming majority of learners.

(2) This conviction is manifested in the interest that they take in their own errors, irrespective of age or proficiency level, 100% of the learners wanted to know whether their performance was correct or not.

(3) Answers to question 3 show that learners are, generally, against errors and think that they should not to be tolerated as they pose a danger of fossilisation.

(4) The beneficial role of errors in learning a language is, on the whole, highly appreciated by learners, particularly by the advanced ones<sup>1</sup>.

(5) A great majority of learners claim that noticing their own errors contributes more to learning than noticing someone else's errors. This learning value of errors was admitted by nearly all beginners and post-intermediate students (groups 1 and 2), while a considerable number of the advanced students (i.e. one-fifth) admitted that they benefited more from noticing other students' errors.

(6) Except for the beginners, all learners claim unanimously that they want to have their errors corrected. This finding is in accordance with those of other researchers<sup>2</sup>. Only some beginners (13%) want their errors to be ignored. This finding is rather contrary to expectations and also difficult to account for, unless it is assumed that these learners have had adverse experience with error correction, or are not motivated for learning, or focus on communication and not on accuracy (this last assumption seems unlikely with 12-13-year-olds).

(7) More than a half of the learners prefer to correct their errors by themselves. Surprisingly enough, the beginners are more inclined to self-correction than the other learners are. Not surprisingly, however, very few learners want to be corrected by other learners. The desire for self-correction may result from the learner's ambition to prove to both the teacher and other learners that they are bright enough to deal successfully with their imperfections, and that these are rather accidental slips only. Those who do not opt for self-correction rely on the teacher as a source of authority, not on other learners who are likely to, and actually, make errors too.

(8) In regard to errors made at different language levels, almost all learners are definitely concerned mainly with grammatical accuracy; young beginners make the only exception at this, since they seem to be preoccupied first of all with spelling. The non-beginners' focus on grammar is attributed here to their awareness of its significance in communication: this awareness develops from experience in language learning and use, which also increases linguistic sensitivity. In contrast, more than a quarter of young beginners (whose affective filter is generally low, with regard to communication in a for-

<sup>1</sup> It is worth remarking that this finding fully corroborates Selinker's claim that the recognition of error becomes a strategy for learners to help promote their SLA, necessary "in-between stations" (1992: 206).

<sup>2</sup> For example Cathcart and Olsen (1976) have concluded first, that all learners want to be corrected when they make oral errors (100% of their subjects), and second, that most learners prefer to be corrected all the time (74%), while others (17%) prefer to be corrected most of the time.



eign language) find English orthography of the greatest difficulty (it is also likely that their placing spelling errors at the top of their hierarchy is derived from their teachers' demands).

(9) The figures obtained for the answers to this question seem somewhat unexpected. Language teaching methodologists usually insist on not interrupting learners while they are speaking and learners also admit that they prefer not to be interrupted, or even hate it (this is, at least, what they claim in informal discussions about error correction). If they welcome immediate intervention into their erroneous oral production, it suggests their insecurity and, in the case of the young beginners, their dependence on the teacher.

(10) Most or all learners in the investigated groups definitely favour the correction techniques that enable them to self-correct. This healthy attitude towards their own errors is certainly welcome as it involves a learning effort that becomes an individual creative contribution to success. In light of this finding it is considered rather disappointing that as many as 30% of university students majoring in English are not willing to try self-repair, but expect to be provided directly with a correct form. Contrasted with 100% of college students and 95 % of school children, who are in favour of being aided in order to self-correct, this finding is difficult to account for, unless it is claimed that those students are not ambitious or just lazy.

(11) Preferences for treating written errors differ considerably from preferences for treating oral errors. A large majority of the learners are not satisfied with mere indication of errors, but rather seek guidance. This finding seems compatible with the finding about oral errors, but in fact it concerns only one group of learners, i.e. group 3, who do not request to be explicitly provided with correct forms. This single result blurs the mean result for question 11c. As for the remaining preferences, their distribution varies across groups. The request for the correct forms of errors committed in writing is again expressed by a similar number of university (advanced!) students, as was the case of oral errors. It is also worth noting that learners generally expect information on their written errors. This, however, does not refer to the majority of young beginners: they do not have enough metalinguistic knowledge or are not sufficiently developed cognitively to take advantage of relatively abstract linguistic information, and thus prefer to relate their errors to the models provided.

(12) The very high percentage of the affirmative answers to this question proves that explanations play an important role in both treating (and curing) errors and language learning in general. This result very strongly supports the claim that language acquisition is enhanced if learners obtain adequate amounts of data on the new or difficult elements that they are currently exposed to and have not yet internalised. The figures also suggest that teachers should provide as much explanation as needed and expected by learners.

(13) Significant numbers of students, irrespective of age and proficiency level, do not wish to have their errors discussed in the classroom. The result obtained in this investigation is consistent with the findings concerning classroom anxiety that are described in relevant publications. Since discussing one's errors in public is a stressful and anxiety-producing activity with most learners, teachers should not practice correcting errors openly, but rather treat them anonymously.

(14) Since the majority of learners express a desire for treating all errors, this finding indicates that they are seen to be equally important in language learning, and therefore should not be ignored by the teacher. This postulate is certainly unrealistic in actual

teaching, but at least indicates learners' levels of involvement and motivation. Which errors are actually treated or corrected depends ultimately on the teacher.

### 3. Basic findings and conclusions

A number of questions concerning the role that errors play in language learning need to be answered. Four of them (for their discussion cf. Zybert 2000) seem to be of crucial importance for the teacher who wishes to know how to react to his learner's errors, so as to enhance learning and improve teaching:

- Does the learner learn from errors?
- What kind of errors does the learner expect or need to have corrected?
- What way(s) of correcting errors is the most helpful?
- Who should correct the learner's errors?

Drawing on the observations and results presented in the preceding Table, the following concluding remarks are made with reference to the four questions posed above:

(1) Language learners do learn from errors, whether they notice them themselves or are told about them.

(2) They want to improve accuracy at all linguistic levels, but give priority to grammar; hence, of all errors they are chiefly interested in the grammatical ones.

(3) Most learners seek an explanation of their errors (however, most young beginners do not) and simultaneously expect being provided with correct forms<sup>3</sup>.

(4) They definitely prefer self-correction to teacher-correction and dislike being corrected by other learners.

It is rather difficult to account for the obvious discrepancy between findings 3 and 4 above: one cannot want to be corrected by the teacher and prefer self-correction at the same time. Since learners are not consistent in providing answers to questions, the interpretations of the results need to be regarded with caution.

On the other hand, the comments that the learners gave voluntarily (and anonymously) in the questionnaires provided additional interesting information. The most illuminating observations are summarised in the concluding paragraphs below.

All learners emphasise that they do learn from errors and so find them useful: they just do not like errors and do not want to make them. They are convinced that correction is important and all errors must be corrected, otherwise they are repeated and may become fixed. Many claim that they do not continue committing certain errors only because they remember the exact circumstances in which they were corrected. Those learners who maintain that they cannot learn from their own errors believe that they just do not notice them because they focus on communication. In most comments stress is put on the significance of noticing and recognising errors: "If I'm not corrected, I have an impression my language is correct, and my error becomes fixed" is a typical remark. Nevertheless, some learners observe that pointing out their errors in class invokes in them "a feeling of guilt" or belief that it is "a reproach for our imperfections or lack of knowledge".

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<sup>3</sup> This particular finding confirms another one that was obtained by this author in an earlier investigation (cf. Zybert, 1999): language learners attach the greatest value to explanations of errors and examples of correct forms (this is what they especially attend to).

Another issue raised in almost all comments is the learners' shared conviction that the most valuable help in fighting errors are explanations of their causes and reasons. Although this is in line with finding 3 above, it has to be mentioned that only about 25% of the subjects provided personal comments. Their trust in the usefulness of explanations is almost always tied with the way that the teacher handles their errors.

Teachers who support mere indication of errors are in favour of self-correction: they argue that since the correct forms have already been taught, they must have simply been forgotten. It is believed then, that by not correcting errors, learners are given a chance of recovering lost knowledge and, consequently, of self-contributing to learning. This, presumably, takes place since they are obliged to work on their own: they put an effort into auto-correction and thus remember better. They also take pride in giving proof that they are able to do the correction without relying on the teacher. The other learners insist on the teacher correcting them by providing the right form. To this group, mere indication of errors is not sufficient: "If I knew the correct form, I would use it", "If I am to correct my own errors, I run the risk of making another one or further ones," are typical arguments.

Teachers note that many learners expect them to correct their errors and, unfortunately, they often yield to this expectation (regrettably, it can often result in developing "classroom competence" only: learners fear using the foreign language outside the classroom). One often hears that teachers, as observed earlier, have a natural pedagogical inclination to correct errors. Overdoing this, however, can be dangerous, as quite a number of learners are likely to develop an undesired preoccupation with form instead of meaning. Therefore, a balanced approach to errors should be expected on the part of the teacher. She ought to realise that learners have different expectations and needs: some welcome or even request corrections, while others hate them; some count entirely on the teacher's help, others need a 'learning space' and prefer self-monitoring. What a 'balanced approach' really consists of is very difficult to define. The teacher may not correct the learner on the grounds that an error belongs to the learner's interlanguage: the teacher believes it is inevitable at the given point of linguistic development, and so it will disappear naturally, given enough practice and adequate input are provided. She may thus fear that correction, on the other hand, may develop both unhealthy learning attitudes and dependency on the teacher to the detriment of learner autonomy and self-reliance in language learning.

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