

## ERROR TREATMENT IN EFL (ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE) CLASSROOMS

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### ABSTRACT

Treating students' errors is part and parcel of the process of teaching and learning a language in the field of Applied Linguistics. This article aims to present a general view of treatment of errors in L2A (second language acquisition), based on a study of the principles related to it in classroom interaction.

**Keywords:** error treatment, corrective feedback, classroom interaction, second language acquisition.

### RESUMO

O tratamento do erro é parte integrante do processo ensino-aprendizagem, dessa forma se inserindo no campo de estudos da Linguística Aplicada. Este artigo pretende apresentar uma visão geral do tratamento do erro na aquisição de segunda língua, através da discussão de princípios relacionados a ele na interação em sala de aula.

**Palavras-chave:** tratamento do erro, *feedback* corretivo, interação em sala de aula, aquisição de segunda língua.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to discuss a number of relevant aspects concerning the correction of errors in EFL classrooms in order to help teachers to understand its effects on L2 (language acquisition).

A growing concern and awareness of English teachers in making language teaching more communicative has been observed in our classrooms. This goal has been reached by the gradual implementation of an interactive teaching approach, which promotes students' learning, considering them as agents of their own growth in the L2 process.

Many techniques have been developed by teachers aiming to offer means to effectively implement this teaching approach. However, the assessment of the process has not always been conducted according to teaching aims. If a communicative approach is to be established, an evaluation centered on learners' grammatical errors seems to be contradictory.

In order to clarify how the relationship between error treatment and learners' and teachers' conceptions about the learning and teaching processes has been conducted, an experiment was carried out among high school teachers and students of private and public institutions in the region called Vale do Taquari (RS). Some findings of this experiment will illustrate the discussion we intend to present in this paper.

## 2 L2 LEARNERS' ERRORS AND FEEDBACK

### 1.1 A historical view of error treatment

In the 1950s and 1960s, one of the supportive notions in L2 research was that a language is a group of habits to be learned. Acquiring a second or foreign language, therefore, was the same as acquiring a new set of habits. In this perspective, what causes difficulty in learning is not the language itself, but the set of habits that had previously led to L1 (first language acquisition, or mother tongue acquisition). Based on this conception of error, contrastive analysis (CA) arose. Its initial aim was, through a contrastive study of languages, to predict errors that a learner of a specific L2 might produce, considering his/her L1. However, teachers' experience in L2 teaching and researchers' findings revealed that not all the predicted errors occurred; moreover, other non-predicted types were verified (Allwright & Bailey, 1991: 83). Consequently, studies of error analysis (EA) started, which according to Ellis (1994: 48) were the first step in the study of learners' language and L2A. EA restricted its studies to the errors

that students made. Teachers and researchers began to observe that all learners inevitably make mistakes, a conclusion that raised some important inquiries, like 'What causes a learner to make errors while acquiring a L2?'; 'Should errors be considered a problem or are they and integrated part of L2A?'; 'How do teachers react when facing students' incorrect productions?'; 'Do corrective reactions provoke any difference in students' progression in their interlanguage? (IL) development?'

In the 1970s, Corder's studies on error significance caused EA to be seen as an integrated field of Applied Linguistics. Corder (1967) stated that 1) the importance of the studies should not be in error identification, but in their treatment, and 2) a systematic error study would be able to lead teachers and researchers toward an understanding of the way in which students learn and organize their built-in syllabus, findings which could direct the teaching process according to students' individual characteristics and necessities. From then on, the previous emphasis on teaching has been shifted to the learning process.

### 2.2 The nature of errors and language development

In L1A, an erroneous production is commonly perceived as a *mistake*, not as an error. Most of the time infants' "wrong" production is not corrected by an adult, and even if it is, the child generally does not reformulate it. Moreover, the simple linguistic material given by children is enlarged in meaning by an adult, a fact that, allied to their total exposure to the language, ensures the necessary input for them to test their hypotheses about how the language works.

Many of the steps children go through when acquiring their L1 are analogous to the ones perceived in L2A by learners, irrespective of their age.

Different studies, have tried to explain the origin of errors. According to Taylor (1986), errors are produced within psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, epistemic or discursive sources. In this paper we will consider only the psycholinguistic ones, which are the ones mostly dealt with in the literature. Psycholinguistic errors are presented in two main branches: the ones related to language competence (called *errors*) and those related to performance (*mistakes*). Corder (1967) distinguishes these two types of erroneous forms. The author uses the word *error* to refer to systematic and regular patterns in learners' discourse that regularly differ from the model of the target language, adding that the regularity in these patterns reveals the learners' underlying competence -- the language system which governs their discourse. The word *mistake* is used by the

<sup>2</sup> Interlanguage (IL), a word originally proposed by Selinker (1972), refers to the learner's systematic knowledge of the L2, which progresses along evolving stages aiming at its acquisition.

author to refer to slips of the tongue, memory lapses and other errors of performance. Mistakes are easily detected and corrected by the learner himself/herself, while errors are generally not corrected by the students because they constitute part of their IL rules system; *i.e.*, erroneous structures can integrate the language rules system and they need to be tested, accepted, or rejected towards L2A.

### 3.3 Feedback and LA

The discussion proposed above leads us to reflect on questions on this topic: are the language learners able to identify and correct their own errors if, in their IL system, these erroneous structures are accepted as correct? How should a student be supposed to correct anything that he/she considers as needless to be reformulated?

Aiming to reflect on this concern and others related to error correction and L2A, we present some considerations raised by different researchers:

- As Tsui (1995) points out, once the IL structure moves through hypotheses formulation, which will be rejected, adjusted or confirmed, two of the L2/FL teachers' roles become even more relevant: establishing a rich linguistic input environment and giving corrective feedback.

- In a L2 classroom, we realize that many mistakes made by the students are recurrent, in spite of the corrections provided by classmate(s) and/or by the teacher. This can be explained by the idea that every learner has his/her own learning rhythm, according to his/her actual IL stage, which determines the capability of acquiring a new item at a specific moment. As students in a regular language classroom are always in different stages, some of them being likely to show problems in acquiring a new item, we might be led to question the validity of teaching and correcting. However, instruction and corrective feedback have a relevant role in conducting the students towards the development of their IL, teaching them the following step, as well as making them aware about the aspects in which their production differs from the L1 patterns, *i.e.*, making them *notice the gap* between their IL and the target language (a concept coined by Schmidt and Frota, 1986, *apud* Allwright and Bailey, 1991). It is only after consciously perceiving these differences that the learner changes the built-in language system. If the learner does not notice that a correction was provided by the teacher, nor conducts a self-correction, a process called *fossilization* might set in, which means that a non-native structure might be *petrified* in the learner's IL. In other words, the student learns an incorrect pattern.

- A great disparity in relation to students' language competence and performance has been noticed. This disparity exists due to different factors, like

levels of intrinsic motivation (which can be instrumental or integrative); frequency of exposure and use of the L2; the classroom environment itself (regarding to input and social relationship), among other features. This heterogeneous growth of students should be observed by the teacher when assessing their performance and competence in L2, taking into account their growth from the first stage they were; *i.e.*, the best way of assessing students' L2 development should be by evaluating the increasing quality of their production from the beginning of the semester or year, not in comparison with the other students, who are in other levels of their IL. Despite the very real classroom difficulty in reaching this goal, consistent thought regarding correcting errors should be maintained, as it is not adequate demanding the same competence and performance in relation to vocabulary, pragmatics; grammar and pronunciation mastery to a heterogeneous group. It is important for the teacher to understand that trying to challenge the student to reach a following step in LA can be motivating, as long as it really can be reached.

### 3 ERROR TREATMENT IN A L2A CLASSROOM

Different definitions have been given to the notion of error. An error can be the use of a deviant linguistic form, *i.e.*, a form that differs from the correct one (Allwright and Bailey, 1991), considering the 'correct' one as being the pattern used by a native speaker. However, this definition does not take into account that: (1) most of L2 teaching is held by non-native teachers, who provide a non-native model of the target language, and (2) even learners who acquire the L2 in a country where it is spoken can be exposed to a non-standard variety. Chaudron (1986) presented different ways for defining an error, as follows: 1. an error is a linguistic form or content which differs from native speakers' one, and 2. an error is any other behavior pointed out by the teacher as requiring correction. In this way, according to Tsui (1995: 43), examples of errors are answers given in a different way than the one expected by the teacher, for example using a different verb tense than the tense which is being dealt with; not replacing a noun by a pronoun functioning as the subject or the object of a sentence, when the teacher wanted the student to use a pronoun; or giving an 'incomplete' answer, like 'Sixteen', instead of 'I'm sixteen years old', when answering 'How old are you?'.

In addition to defining what an error is, another important topic needs to be addressed - corrective feedback. Providing feedback is not an easy task for teachers, because it must be given without causing students to limit their language production. Moreover, students must maintain a feeling of confidence in their

competence as speakers by realizing that even when making mistakes, they will continue to be able to convey meaning as competent language users (Lima, 1999).

The studies in error treatment in L2A have mainly been concerned with the following topics:

- Should learners' errors be corrected?
- If they should, when is the best moment to provide corrective feedback?
- What kind of errors should be corrected?
- How should they be addressed?
- Who should provide corrective feedback?

I will briefly comment on the topics listed above.

Various factors influence decisions about **correcting or not** an erroneous production. According to many teachers' conceptions, it would be unfair to correct hypotheses wrongly formulated by students about items to which they have not been exposed yet. Moreover, Tsui (1995: 45) explains that marking all mistakes could lead learners to feel unable to convey a comprehensible message which would discourage them from risking further attempts. The majority of the students that have been studied on this topic have declared that they wanted all their mistakes (oral or written) to be corrected; however, if teachers do so, especially in oral production, they complain about having had their reasoning interrupted.

Two dimensions also necessary to be considered are (1) the nature of the error: correction is indispensable when the error affects the comprehension of the message; and (2) the focus of the class: if the class focuses on accuracy in the language form, this kind of error correction should be prioritized, whereas if the content and/or fluency is/are focused, errors that do not affect communication may be ignored.

In relation to the **moment to correct**, there are three ways to proceed. Correction may be conducted as soon as the error happens (which sometimes can refrain students' production), or after the student finishes his/her production (oral or written), or even in a later unit of studies. If the same type of error has been produced by many students, it could be a starter of a new unit. The latter, as studies in psychology have indicated, can be less effective, because the efficiency of feedback is higher if it is provided in a shorter period of time after the error is detected.

The choice of the **type of error to be corrected** is linked to its importance to the focus of the class and to its direct relation with communication. Walz (1982) establishes four basic criteria for selecting the errors that require correction:

- Comprehensibility: errors that interfere in communication should be prioritized.

- Frequency: recurrent errors must be more systematically corrected while isolated deviant items can be ignored.

- Pedagogic focus: errors that reflect misunderstanding or incomplete acquisition of the items that the teacher has stressed should be treated.

- Individual characteristics: more proficient students may benefit more from the correction of smaller mistakes than the less proficient ones, who may benefit from the correction of more serious errors.

There are few conclusive studies related to the most effective **forms of providing corrective feedback**. This happens because, as Tsui (1995) proposes, it is the learner, not the teacher, who determines if the correct form has been acquired.

Some conclusions drawn from research carried out by different authors, as well as some findings brought by our experiment are summarized below:

- Leading the student to reformulate his/her production through a self-correction, instead of simply giving the correct form, might benefit IL development.
- Instruction that emphasizes self-correction is much more likely to improve the students' ability to monitor their discourse.

- Teachers should increase the waiting time provided for a student to answer a question or to reformulate sentences. Research has shown an improvement in the quality of answers and in self-correction when 5 to 10 seconds of waiting time are given to students, which is much more than the time that has generally been provided.

- Correction originated in interactive activities with feedback provided among interlocutors represents a rich opportunity for the participants to detect differences between their IL and the target language.

- According to Gass (1988, *apud* Lyster, 1998-a), fossilization of erroneous forms occurs when the learners do not receive input with negative evidence (a clear indication that marks the presence of an error). Noticing these differences can help them understand discrepancies between the item in their IL and the target language.

- Correction may assume an ambiguous feature when the teacher, intending to correct, just reformulates the students' oral production, substituting the erroneous form by a correct one – this is the type of feedback called recast. If the teacher does not indicate that a mistake has been made, the learner may not notice that the teacher has tried to correct the sentence; instead, he/she may think that the teacher is simply confirming it, as we frequently use repetitions just to confirm ideas. If this happens, it provokes no correction at all. In spite of being the least efficient corrective procedure in terms of producing self-repair, mainly in relation to grammatical errors (Chaudron 1988), recasting is the most recurrent

form of corrective feedback in L2 classrooms.

- Teachers sometimes do not apply the same criteria when correcting mistakes, and this may lead students to feel insecure in relation to the accuracy of their productions. This inconsistency can be perceived, for instance, when the teacher accepts wrong structures for the sake of communication, whereas in other moments he/she corrects insignificant mistakes while the learner is speaking.

- Recent research has emphasized the advantages of interactive activities in error correction and the consequent learner's IL development (Chaudron, 1988: 177; Lyster, 1998-b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997: 42; Pica *et alii*, 1989: 65). These authors affirm that peer-work and small group work lead students to discuss and *negotiate meaning and form*. These *negotiations* are considered to be very rich exchanges, even if the interlocutors have different levels of competence in the target language.

The last topic related to error treatment that requires discussion is **who should correct the errors**. Besides having the errors corrected by the teacher, it is important for the students to improve their capacity of monitoring their language and of implementing self-correction. As we have already mentioned, students must be given the opportunity to identify their mistakes and correct them; this is only possible if the teacher offers a waiting time between production and correction and does not simply provide the correct form. When the learners are able to recognize their mistakes and correct them, these structures are more likely to integrate their IL and be recalled during later language practice.

Peer correction is also important because of the rich input it generates; however, sometimes it has to be monitored by the teacher, because some students may be too emphatic in providing feedback. Moreover, some barriers have to be broken to reach students' confidence in this type of correction, as they generally judge it as not being complete or truthful, or as providing a means for some students to show off, conceptions identified in other researches (Lima 1999) and confirmed in our experiment.

## CONCLUSION

In the field of correcting errors in L2A classrooms, more research needs to be conducted, especially concerning the long-term effects of treating students' errors. It is important, therefore, that teachers implement some strategies that have already been shown to be effective in this area, strategies such as 1. establishing longer periods of time that allow students to correct themselves, 2. varying corrective methods and reducing the use of recasts, 3. implementing

interactive activities to increase negotiation of meaning and form as well as peer correction through students' interaction in pairs or small groups, 4. making clear for the students the criteria to be observed by the teachers when correcting/evaluating their productions.

As shown by our experiment, teachers have given a special importance to the correction of grammatical errors, whereas they almost disregard mistakes in pronunciation, reading comprehension, vocabulary adequacy, coherence and cohesion in written production - in fact, speaking and writing activities have rarely been implemented in the L2 classrooms, while grammar practice in written exercises has been the most time consuming activity.

Moreover, a lack of a clear understanding of the meaning of errors in L2A has been identified. As errors are an integral part of LA, teachers should reflect more on their importance and on the best ways to treat them. Therefore, these assumptions should always be taken into consideration: 1. errors are unavoidable and are associated with the learning process; 2. errors represent a resource that the learners use to test hypotheses in the target language and reflect their IL stage, together with all their production, not only the erroneous ones (DULAY & BURT, 1974), and 3. they can be the starting point for the teacher to organize a rich language input context in an interactive environment to enhance LA.

In spite of being something always interactive associated with EFL classrooms, error treatment must certainly be deeper studied by researchers and teachers in order to implement it in a more effective way.

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