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Policies for Teachers towards Errors

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Based on a brief review of theories about errors, by considering second language development, classification of errors, as well as the significance of error analysis, this paper focuses on recommended policies for teachers to have towards errors from six different perspectives. A case study is presented with the purpose to implement the policies suggested in practical situation, intending to answer the following questions: How to treat errors and what policies should teachers have towards error correction?

Introduction

In the 1960s, error correction had already attracted scholars' attention. Corder's article "*The Significance of Learners' Errors*" was published in 1967, which was called historical milestone by Seliger (1988: 17) in psycholinguistic domain. Seliger (1988: 17) states that "this article changed the way researchers in SLA viewed learners and the language they produced". It was Corder's work that a new field called error analysis emerged (Seliger 1988: 18).

A large quantity of articles were published on this issue from different perspectives covering "the frequency of particular errors (Palmer 1980), the frequency and generality of structures involved in an error (Johansson 1973), linguistics classifications of errors (James 1974, Burt and Kiparsky 1975), and the error's effect on communication (Johansson 1973, Enkvist 1973)" (Davies 1983: 304). Therefore, error correction is a complex task, involving the considerations of "the situation, the learner, the focus of the class, and the nature of the error" (Allan 1991: 62). "Few successful techniques seem to have been developed to deal with this problem" (ibid.: 61). In this case, with the purpose to gain some insights into error correction, the present paper attempts to outline the theoretical framework of errors as a starting point.

1.   Brief review of theories about errors

Theories of errors are so complicated and can be studied from different angles, an overall review is well beyond this paper. However, to shape a brief framework of errors, the present paper sketches from three different aspects: second language development, classification of errors and the significance of error analysis. From the point of view of second language development, it presents the concept of errors that can be classified in some detail, then the implications of analyzing errors will be discussed.

1.1   Second language development

When scholars describe the development of learners' second language, they attempt to identify the process in different terms, which actually refer to the same system of language development. With the terms "transitional competence" (Corder, 1967), "approximative systems" (Nemser, 1971) and "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972), each of which shows us a slightly different aspect of the system that the learner evolves. In another word, all these terms refer to the dynamic process of second language learning, indicating that different learners change their knowledge of the second language all the time in the course of learning process and that "the learner may be viewed as progressing along a continuum from zero knowledge of L2 to a level closely resembling the linguistic competence of the native speaker of the target language". (Seliger 1988: 20)

Learners' errors always accompany the dynamic learning process. Corder (1981: 25) suggests that "making of errors is an inevitable and indeed necessary part of the learning process". Different kinds of errors can reveal learners' developmental stage that learners stay at. In this sense, familiarizing with the classification of errors will beneficial for our further understanding learners' learning process.

1.2   Classification of errors

We can not discuss classification of errors without mentioning the following categories supplied by different scholars such as Corder (1973), Richards (1971), and Ellis (1994). Corder suggested that there are three basic categories of error:

1.   pre-systematic error: i.e. those made by a learner while he or she is trying to come to grips with a new point;

2.   systematic errors: i.e. those which occur when the learner has formed an inaccurate hypothesis about the target language;

3.   post-systematic errors: i.e. the temporary forgetting of a point that had been previously understood.

(Corder 1973: 271, cited in Lott 1983: 256)

Richards (1971: 206) classifies intralingual and developmental errors under four categories, namely, "1. overgeneralisation, 2. ignore of rule restrictions, 3. incomplete application of rules, 4. false concepts hypothesised." He clarifies developmental errors in this way:

Rather than reflecting the learner's inability to separate two languages, intralingual and development errors reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. ... Developmental errors illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypothesis about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook.

(Richards 1971: 205-206)

Though Corder and Richards offer different categories of errors, in fact, all these categories overlap. For example, Corder argues that learners' making errors is a process of hypothesis testing with the purpose to develop from inaccurate stage to the target language, which is quite similar to Richards' comments on developmental errors shown above. Then what significance error analysis has needs to be clarified.

1.3   The significance of error analysis

Reflecting learning process will show us that error analysis is of great significance. First of all, making errors shows the process in which learners are trying to perform the target language when they are learning. Learners are trying to learn English by receiving a lot of input, which is processed immediately and some knowledge is intaken and internalized, cumulating in their brains, later they attempt to express them either by speech or writing. When they try to convey what they have just learned, they can inevitably make errors in the course of output. Gaies (1987) seems to support this point of view:

In the last fifteen years, errors have been viewed as windows to the language acquisition process; errors are seen as overt reflections of a learner's internalized knowledge of the language. They are furthermore regarded as an inevitable part of acquiring a second language; indeed, for some, errors are the best evidence that acquisition is taking place. (Gaies 1987: 333)

Secondly, studying errors can also provide useful information which will help teachers to make decision on how to deal with these errors by adapting teaching procedures. Johansson (1975: 248) argues that "an analysis of the learner's error gives us evidence of his competence in the foreign language. We also gain valuable information concerning learners' difficulties at different stages. Such information is important for the planning of courses and the construction of teaching materials". Considering phonological error analysis, Soudek (1977) holds similar viewpoint, stating that error analysis "does provide the language teacher with an important tool for diagnosis and remedy in the classroom". So how to respond to learners' errors is one of the most important ways to interact with learners because errors can explicitly reveal learners' weakness of their language knowledge. Corder (1981) summarizes that learners' errors have significance 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. Thirdly (and in a sense this is their most important aspect) they 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 has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning. (Corder 1981: 10-11)

According to Corder (1967), an error is a deviation in learner language which results from lack of knowledge of the correct rule. "Error analysis aims at systematically describing and explaining errors made by speakers of a foreign language" (Johansson 1975: 248). Therefore, analyze learners' errors will provide a fundamental basis for language teaching. The problem is what policies should be utilised by dealing with errors. This problem will be discussed in greater detail next.

2. Recommended policies for teachers to have towards errors

Hendrickson (1978), in an overview of the research available at that time, concluded that error correction does improve the proficiency of EFL/ESL learners, if they are errors that inhibit communication, stigmatize the learner, and appear frequently. But Makino (1993: 337-338) states as follows:

Long (1977), however, argued that error treatment is not so important, and others have expressed similar doubts about the effectiveness of error-correction (Krashen 1982; Krashen and Terrell 1983). Their argument is that the errors made by learners are part of a natural process of language learning, and simply indicative of a certain stage of their interlanguage which will develop naturally into more accurate and appropriate forms.

Allright (1975, refer to Makino 1993: 337) suggested that learner errors should be corrected if learners ca

nnot correct themselves, and that teachers need coherent policies for correction and clear classroom strategies in order to avoid confusion in their learning. Combined with all these scholars' viewpoints, some policies should be followed when teachers treat errors. In this case, recommended policies will be worth discussing next.

2.1 Using a wide range of feedback to collect data

Getting data of errors will serve as fundamental step in error analysis. In order to get sufficient data of errors that learners make, the easiest and simplest way is to give them various kinds of tasks including oral tasks and written tasks. In carrying out the tasks assigned, the students will show their strengths and weakness by revealing some errors in their language performance. Design of oral tasks involves different activities such as dialogue, pair work (or conversation), group work, presentation in class, and so on. We can also integrate oral tasks into the out-of-school activities such as preparing role-play, story-telling, and jigsaw activities. Teachers can ask students to record what they have performed on different occasions and ask them hand in the recording for gaining data later. This is an effective and efficient way to get data of oral errors. Similarly, teachers can obtain a large quantity of data from students' written work, such as writing a composition, describing a people, keeping a record of classroom activity and so forth. Teachers can also design some tests or quiz to achieve information about students' errors. To discover learners' errors will provide sufficient evidence of learners' language development and simultaneously it can prepare teachers for error analysis and error correction.

2.2 Systematic error analysis and error correction

To make error analysis systematic, the ways of how to explain errors seems to be important, and symbols for error correction in written work are often mentioned, these symbols can be regarded as cues and hints given by teachers. According to Johansson (1975), explanation of errors is very important after getting information or data about errors. His explanation and analysis (1975: 251) touch upon the following aspects: 1)interlingual interference (from L1); 2)difficult constructions of target language; 3)general learning strategies; 4)overgeneralisation. Learners' errors appear in both oral production and written work. With respect to written work, it is worth establishing a set of symbols for daily use based on the consensus of all the teachers in order for them to systematically analyze errors with obvious markers. Brumfit (1980: 13) holds similar viewpoint and insists that large institutions should establish "an agreed and limited set of symbols" for essential use by all staff in error-correction of written work. Furthermore, Makino (1993) investigated to what degree teacher cues or hints help their students correct their own errors in EFL written compositions, and what kinds of cues are more effective in self-correction. Gorbet (1979: 28) claims:

Since the learner is actively involved in the learning process, the teacher who hints at the correct form or supplies it indirectly (as parents often do) will have much better results than the teacher who supplies it directly, especially if he is able to relate his correction to the learner's strategies.

2.3 Tolerate errors or conduct error correction

Some errors should be corrected immediately; some errors corrections should be delayed and some errors should be tolerated. While dealing with errors, we should obey the two principles: when the students' error gets in the way of understanding, we should conduct error correction or correct the error immediately. On the contrary, when we stress not the accuracy but the fluency, we'd better tolerate errors or correct errors with delay. Gorbet (1979: 27) seems to support this point of view shown above:

It is sometimes more effective to tolerate error than to correct them. Some errors are normal to the learn

ing process and are developmental. Determining when and when not to ignore errors is perhaps the most difficult challenge of teaching. What should be clear is that teachers cannot and should not correct every error.

2.4   Encourage learners' self-discovery and self-correction

It is very important to offer students as many opportunities as possible to discover and correct errors. By so doing, we do not by any means imply that we will avoid adopting other ways of correcting errors, such as partner correction, group correction, the whole class correction and so on. The most important point is to encourage learners themselves to use their own head to self-discover and self-correct errors that they have. The problem is that sometimes learners find it very hard to discover their own errors, in this case, hints and guides are needed from teachers (mentioned in 2.2) in order to make error correction more affective and efficient. Makino (1993: 338) points out:

It is clear from the study how much students can self-correct with the help of teacher cues, and that more detailed cues lead to a higher ratio of self-correction. This technique of error correction has two advantages: one is that teacher cues give students a chance to reflect on their writing and to pay more attention to the structural forms they have written; the other is that students can activate their linguistic competence in correcting their own errors. They also improve their linguistic creativity through self-correction. Therefore, we can reach the conclusion that self-correction is highly effective with grammatical (especially, morphological) errors.

Brumfit (1980: 10-11) argues in favour of students self-correcting their own work in groups and lists eight reasons, involving the significance of immediate error correction and benefits from self-correction in groups to both learner and teachers. From this viewpoint, self-correction in groups can be seen as a part of collaborative language learning. The process of cross-checking will help a student to detect errors in his own work. He lays emphasis on discussion in the course of self-correction in groups: "Any student will benefit more from taking part, alone or with others, in the improvement/correction of his own work, but there is little educational value in students making each others' work without discussion or consultation. " (Brumfit 1980: 11)

2.5   Consider learners' individual differences and preferences

How to deal with errors will to some extent depend on learners' differences and preferences. But we can never consider such issues in isolation because they are intimately related to external factors. Some students are quite extrovert, while others are introvert. Teachers should find the most appropriate and suitable way to correct errors that they have made. As usual, teachers should treat different student's errors in different way including by different formats, in different place or at different time. The most considerable point to mention is that the real purpose of error correction is to facilitate students' learning and to encourage them to learn much better rather than frustrate them by error correction. Therefore, teachers should respect learners' personality and self-esteem. Never make learners feel shy and shamedless, otherwise, error correction will lose its significance. Gorbet (1979: 28) suggests: "Errors must be seen not as signs of failure, but as signs of learning itself. … From this perspective, errors are not a cause for alarm but are tools for helping us to help the student process easily and naturally through the stages of his interlanguage. "

2.6   Take into account the context and situations

How to correct the errors also depends on the context and situations, for instance, what kinds of errors. T

o the errors in spoken English, teachers can repeat the sentence in a correct way immediately or ignore them for time being and after the student finished speaking the teacher correct errors. To the errors in written English, teachers can not only underline or circle the errors to let the students correct them, but also can use correction code to indicate errors so that the students can correct them (for example *sp* for spelling errors, *tense* for tense errors, *Gr* for grammatical errors and so on) to ask for the students' correction. Sometimes we can correct errors selectively. By so doing, the students will make a deep impression on how they have made errors and how they should correct them.

3. A composition analysis

Errors can be analysed at different levels, such as lexical level, syntactical level, semantical level, pragmatical level including text and discourse levels. Corder (1981: 35-44) analyse the role of interpretation in the study of learners' errors in depth, involving bilingual comparison based on applied linguistics, and psycholinguistic processes of learning. He further classifies errors into errors of omission, errors of addition, errors of selection and errors of ordering. He points out that teachers only analyse errors at linguistic level and they should go further. He suggests that a systematic analysis of errors should be required, in terms of systematic analysis, he refers to analysing tense, number, mood, gender, case and so on at grammatical level. He also pays close attention to language correctness in form and appropriate in context or social situation, which sets a higher demand for foreign language teacher to analyse the errors.

3.1 Description of errors appearing in the short text

Wyatt (1973) collected 52 composition books and recorded and classified all the errors under 14 titles altogether including spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, verb groups, noun groups, pronouns, adjectives, preposition and so on. By contrast, Ibrahim (1978: 207-209) offers different categories of errors in spelling as follows:

1.   Error caused by the non-phonetic nature of English spelling.

2.   Errors caused by differences between the sound systems of English and the learners' native language.

3.   Errors which may be attributed to analogy.

4.   Error which may be attributed to the somewhat inconsistent and arbitrary nature of English world derivation.

5.   Error which may be described as transitional

According to errors appearing in the short composition, the present paper will analyze the following sorts of errors: spelling including small or capital letter, overgeneralization, grammatical errors, logical errors, and semantic or pragmatic errors. Sometimes these categories quite overlap without any clear-cut to distinguish between each other.

Spelling including small or capital letter:

   In written language, we usually pay more attention to spelling, including small letter or capital letter. For example, in the sentence: "I lost my baggage at the airport which I checked in *At* Los Angeles. " "At Los Angeles" should be corrected, the first letter "A" should be small letter not capital one. Similarly, "It is ok,

…" In this sentence, "ok" should be "OK". In addition, "allright" should be "all right". In contrast, this kind of errors can be avoided, but the pronouncing errors (i.e. consonant) will take instead.

Overgeneralization:

When a learner has learned some rules, he may make use of them, sometimes to the extent that is inappropriate. For example, after learning that the past tense of "play" is "played", the learner may use "goed" rather than "went". Such kind of errors are generated in the composition.

We are poor at representing our emotions; joyness, anger, sorrow, and happiness. (joyness—joy)

… I did not have any words which explained my anger in English. (which explained—to explain)

In the first sentence, the learner misunderstands the part of speech of "joy". Perhaps, he knows that "-ness" is a suffix indicating a noun, so he generalizes the noun form of "joy" must be "joyness". But the error in the sentence is in another situation, from absolute grammatical angle, the second sentence might be considered a right one, however, it is often viewed a incorrect one by native speakers.

Grammatical errors:

The following sentences in the composition have grammatical errors including verb errors, tense errors, singular or plural errors:

I could not do anything but accepting the fault of the airline … (accepting—accept)

Soon the man who was stand next to me shout to me: Why don't you complain? (stand—standing; shout--shouted; don't —didn't)

It is clear that I had to wait until they would find my baggage. (would find—could find/found)

But in the USA it is one of the most important thing to explain how I feel. (thing—things)

These errors emerging in written work should be corrected, but in the case of oral English some of them may be ignored.

Logical errors:

This kind of error may be caused by L1 interference for the differences between L1 and target language, for example:

Actually, I could not explain my anger in English, but even in my language. (but—not)

Semantic or pragmatic errors:

From lexical or syntactical perspectives, the sentence may be all right. But it may be probably inappropriate or unsuitable to the language context. We can get some insights about this from the following sentences:

I was tired for a long trip, … (for—after)

I was too confused with two problems: one is to lose my baggage and another is to make my friend be disgusted with me because I also lost my words to explain my feelings. (one is to lose—one was I lost; one is to make—one was I made)

Later on, I was thinking about that. (was thinking—kept thinking)

We are poor at representing our emotions; … (representing—expressing)

But in the USA it is one of the most important thing to explain how I feel. (I—you)

3.2   Difficulties and limitations of explaining a single text source

Lott (1983) argues that "mother tongue interference, or teaching techniques, or problems inherent in the target language are the major cause of their students' errors". But when we analyze the composition in isolation without knowing any background of the learner's native language, even we can give judgement to some errors, we can never satisfactorily explain all the errors emerging in the short text for deficiency of social circumstances. We cannot judge whether the errors made are produced by L1 interference or they are developmental ones. Furthermore, sometimes, there is no clear-cut between different kinds of errors. Therefore, it seems too difficult for us to describe the errors in the following sentences:

I had no idea about such an accident. … But I have to know my emotion and thought at the time. I got angry and I was very sad when I noticed I felt it somewhere. The next moment, I was too shy to talk about such feelings. …It is a kind of culture character.

3.3   What errors and why should we point out to the students

Although some scholars (Makino 1993: 338 for example) argue that learners can correct their own errors, we still insist that some errors should be pointed out because learners' errors indicate the deficiency and weakness of their language proficiency after all. Apart from this, making learners informed what errors they have made will activate their linguistic competence in one way or another. It is worth pointing out that the policies should be flexible and adaptable, which permit teachers to enrich. With reference to different errors, teachers should have different policies towards them. If learners are able to correct their own errors, teachers do not need to correct them. If learners do feel very difficult to discover errors, teachers can conduct error correction by giving them some supportive cues or hints. If learner do have great trouble to express themselves both in oral language or written language, teachers should take measures to help learners overcome difficulties by error correction. In the course of processing errors, strategies should be used: Some errors should be pointed out immediately, some errors can be tolerated, some correction can be delayed, some others can be ignored. Just like Gorbet (1979: 27) warns that "teachers cannot and should not correct every error".

Conclusion

Both teachers and learners have shown great concern with errors in teaching and learning a foreign language. With reference to psychological theories of language learning and teaching, this paper has mainly discussed several policies that teachers should have towards errors involving getting data of error, systematic error analysis and error correction, and how to deal with errors in different situations by taking into account different learners' personality, features of errors, language and social context. After examining a shor

t composition, the paper touches upon classification of errors in practical applications, discussing both the difficulties encountered in identifying errors and the limitations of a single text source on error analysis, explaining which errors we should point out to the students.

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Appendix 1

My experience in living a new culture

My life in the United States started with a big trouble. I lost my baggage at the airport which I checked in At Los Angeles. I could not do anything but accepting the fault of the airline when the man at the desk said to me that they were sorry, but they could not find my baggage at the time. I was tired for a long trip, besides I did not have any words which explained my anger in English. So I just said: it is ok, even with a smile. Soon the man who was stand next to me shout to me: Why don't you complain? You should not have said it was allright. I was too confused with two problems: one is to lose my baggage and another is to make my friend be disgusted with me because I also lost my words to explain my feelings. Fortunately, I got my baggage the next day. However something remained in my mind. Later on, I was thinking about that.

It is clear that I had to wait until they would find my baggage. I had no idea about such an accident. And I was so tired. But I have to know my emotion and thought at the time. I got angry and I was very sad when I noticed I felt it somewhere. The next moment, I was too shy to talk about such feelings. Actually, I could not explain my anger in English, but even in my language. It is a kind of culture character. We are poor at representing our emotions; joyness, anger, sorrow, and happiness. But in the USA it is one of the most important thing to explain how I feel.

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