

The role of error correction in communicative second language teaching

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According to recent research, correction of errors in both oral and written communication does little to aid language proficiency in the second language. In the *Natural Approach* of Krashen and Terrell the emphasis is on the acquisition of informal communication. Because the message and the understanding of the message remain of utmost importance, error correction is avoided. In *Suggestopedia* where the focus is also on communication, error correction is avoided as it inhibits the pupil.

Onlangse navorsing het getoon dat die verbetering van foute in beide mondelinge en skriftelike kommunikasie min bydra tot beter taalvaardigheid in die tweede taal. In die *Natural Approach* van Krashen en Terrell val die klem op die verwerping van informele kommunikasie, want die boodskap en die verstaan daarvan bly verreweg die belangrikste; die verbetering van foute word vermy. In *Suggestopedagogiek*, waar die klem ook op kommunikasie val, word die verbetering van foute vermy omdat dit die leerling beperk.

INTRODUCTION

For decades teachers of second languages have been providing feedback in the form of error correction to learners, both in oral and written communication. They have done this without really questioning the validity of this kind of feedback as a means of improving the process of L2 acquisition and L2 proficiency in general. Most of the time, errors are corrected by teachers with the vague hope that the learner will register the error and rectify it when the same structure is again used.

Unfortunately the effect of this kind of feedback has not been very successful, or rather noticeably successful. Pupils seem to glance at the teacher, repeat the phrase the teacher corrected, and carry on with substantially less confidence and fluency. When written work is received after the teacher has corrected (marked) it, a similar reaction is observable with the pupils quickly glancing at the essay to see how many red markings are visible and, if it was given a mark, to see what mark she/he received, after which the essay is swiftly put away to be forgotten as soon as possible – especially if the effort of the student was not met with much enthusiasm by the teacher. Miele (1982:81) quoted a student who had the following to say about error correction:

“They (i.e. the teachers) had a no-nonsense attitude about error. They rooted it out and beat it to death on the spot. It was a kind of holy war these fanatics waged, and the standing orders they had were to shoot the infidels on sight. What they didn’t understand was that we students usually made no emotional distinction between my error and me; when our teacher clobbered one, regardless of his good intentions, he clobbered the other. Traditional classrooms have often been, and are still today battlefields – battlefields where casualties run heaviest among students, especially the not so bright students, who venture to

participate in classroom activities. To raise your hand is to risk humiliation, the humiliation of being wrong in front of everybody. The ranks of the humiliated often form in the back of the classroom, where interests alien to the educational enterprise tend to develop, and where some stay to sleep. Those who have been most humiliated drop out.”

One of the most alarming aspects concerning error correction is the amount of time spent by teachers marking thousands of essays. It is, therefore, quite understandable that researchers (and teachers) would like to ascertain whether all this time is spent productively as far as the language development of the pupils is concerned. If error correction does not make a significant contribution towards the pupils' acquisition of, and proficiency in the L2, this practice must be seriously reconsidered and be replaced by a more useful activity.

ERROR CORRECTION IN GENERAL

Wilga Rivers (1983:53) had the following to say about the matter:

“Nothing is more dampening of enthusiasm and effort than constant correction when students are trying to express their own ideas within the limitations of their newly acquired knowledge of the language.”

Caleb Gattegno (in Blair 1982:194), the developer of the Silent Way, had the following to say:

“(My students) are allowed to try their hand and to make mistakes in order to develop their own criteria of rightness, correctness, and adequacy . . . Correction is seldom part of the teacher's work.”

“To require perfection at once is the great imperfection of most teaching and most thinking about teaching.”

According to Holley and King (1969:81-88) overt correction is not only unnecessary, but definitely inadvisable and even harmful to the learners of the L2. According to Robb and Ross (1986:83-84) studies indicate that teachers of content subjects focus their attention on facts and concepts, whilst L2 teachers focus primarily on the technicalities of the language and not on the functional content of the language. The focusing on errors and the structure of the language is in direct opposition to Krashen's viewpoint that the focus should always be on the message (Krashen and Terrell 1983:1). Furthermore, the teachers provide indiscriminate feedback to the pupils, unaware of the types of errors occurring, and this makes it impossible to provide suitable remedial work (Robb and Ross 1986:84).

It is important to be aware of the fact that most L2 syllabi have been, until very recently (and some are still today), based upon the behaviourist model of L2 learning which demands a stimulus-response approach emphasizing drilling, practising (often out of context) and repetition in order to memorize as much language as possible. Brumfit (1984:57) referred to Corder (1975) who stated that:

“. . . error will be an inevitable part of the process of second-language development, and the behaviourist view that errors inevitably reinforce errors must be modified in the light of the research findings of the last twenty years.”

Many of the teachers are probably still holding on to this behaviouristic approach correcting all errors to avoid the fossilization of the typical errors made by L2 learners. According to the latest research (Blair 1982; Brumfit 1984), the emphasis of errors is doing exactly what the teachers want to avoid, viz the fossilization of the errors. The reason is probably the fact that the attention is constantly drawn to those errors.

This applies especially to the correction of errors in oral communication.

ERROR CORRECTION IN ORAL COMMUNICATION

Most researchers are in agreement that pupils should not be interrupted in their speech to correct an error made by that particular pupil. Terrell (in Blair 1982:165) stated:

“. . . there is no evidence which shows that the correction of speech errors is necessary or even helpful in language acquisition.”

Krashen and Terrell (1983:177) elaborated:

“Our view is that overt error correction of speech even in the best of circumstances is likely to have a negative effect on the students’ willingness to try to express themselves.”

Unfortunately many teachers still find it very difficult to keep quiet when they hear an error in a pupil’s speech. They feel some kind of compulsion to assist and to guide the pupil to produce near perfect L2, which cannot be expected of any L2 speaker still acquiring the language. Brumfit (1984:57) mentioned that it may even be perceived as being rude when the teacher butts in to correct an error and it definitely distracts from the message the speaker wants to communicate.

Most teachers will probably agree that it is much easier to refrain from the correction of speech errors, than refraining from the correction of written errors.

ERROR CORRECTION IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

In recent years, more and more researchers (Blair, Brumfit, Krashen) have been investigating the practice of correcting errors, and have reached the conclusion that it does nothing to promote the acquisition of the L2. However, the role of error correction in written work has been avoided to some extent. The reasons are probably manifold, but the influence of behaviouristic syllabi, the teaching methods which have been used to teach the contents of those syllabi and the uncertainty what to *do* about those errors, might have contributed to the avoidance of this very pertinent question.

Robb and Ross (1986:83-93) reported on some recent research they conducted on the effect of error correction on written work. In their article “Salience of Feedback on Error Correction and Its Effect on EFL Writing Quality” they referred to some other studies like that of Semke (1984) who found that overt correction of pupil writing tended to have negative effects on the quality of the pupils’ writing, as well as on the pupils’ attitude toward writing in the target language (Robb and Ross 1986:84-85).

Robb and Ross (1986) investigated the relative merits of direct and indirect feedback by comparing four types of error treatment. The feedback varied in that it ranged from very direct to progressively less salient feedback. The hypothesis they tested was that more salient error-feedback treatments would have a significant effect on improving the student’s overall writing quality (Robb and Ross, 1986:85). The following feedback treatments were used:

- correction group: all papers were completely corrected and the students had to re-write the compositions building in the errors the teacher corrected;
- coded feedback group: the papers were marked in an abbreviated code system and a guide had to be used to revise the errors;
- uncoded feedback group: the location of errors was marked with a yellow text-marking pen with no more feedback provided;
- marginal feedback group: the number of errors per line was written in the margin of the composition.

The statistically verified results indicated that the assumption that overt correction of errors will result in more accurate writing was not demonstrated.

According to Robb and Ross (1986:88) the monumental amount of time and effort spent on the correction of errors is not worth it: "In general, the more direct methods of feedback do not tend to produce results commensurate with the amount of effort required of the instructor to draw the student's attention to surface errors." An interesting finding of this research was that the marked improvement in the written skills of the students could be attributed to more opportunities to practise their writing, regardless of the method of feedback used by the instructors (Robb and Ross 1986:89).

THE ROLE OF ERROR CORRECTION IN THE NATURAL APPROACH AND SUGGESTOPEDIA

It is worth noting what is said about error correction in two relatively recent communicative language teaching approaches. According to Krashen and Terrell (1983:177), who developed the *Natural Approach*, error correction is aimed at learning which is aimed at a more formal knowledge of the language and at something which is learned consciously ("talking about the language"). In the Natural Approach the emphasis is on acquisition which is informal communication ("talking in the language"). Learning is not discarded, but can actually only take place after a considerable amount of L2 has been acquired. Error correction per se is avoided on these grounds, but the message and understanding of the message remain of the utmost importance. Therefore, reformulations and expansions are used to make sure that the communication is understood (Krashen and Terrell 1983:178).

On the other hand, the Natural Approach provides activities when the focus is on learning, i.e. the studying of the grammar, rules and the structure of the language in general. During these sessions errors may be looked at, but then it remains a question whether it really assists with accuracy. According to Robb and Ross (1986:85) both Corder (1981) and Brumfit (1980) believe that learners will retain feedback only if they are forced to approach error correction as a problem-solving activity. This means that pupils can discuss and tease out errors in a given piece and benefit from it.

In Suggestopedia overt error correction is avoided at all times because it inhibits and gives rise to a feeling of degradation in the pupils. Furthermore, in Suggestopedia it is very important to boost self-confidence and once again the focus is on communication and not on correct speech production (Botha 1986:142). It is believed that correctness (accuracy) will follow after enough of the L2 has been acquired and when the pupils can communicate quite freely and spontaneously. It is important for the teacher to be aware of errors and to adapt his/her teaching accordingly to model correct language in a very covert way.

But, because anxiety must be eliminated, a teacher will not avoid a direct question concerning an error or grammar in particular. Proponents of Suggestopedia feel that it is more important to provide the accurate answers and explanations of rules than to cause anxiety by avoiding these questions of pupils.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ERROR CORRECTION

The role of evaluation in L2 teaching and its effect on error correction must not be underestimated. Most schools demand of their teachers control of oral, as well as written work, and regular evaluation as measurable and visible end-results of the teachers' input. This encourages the already overworked (probably because of all the marking) teachers to kill two birds with one stone, viz to control (mark) and to evaluate simultaneously. This is a most unsatisfactory situation because evaluation becomes the main focus point while good, sound teaching receives less and less attention. Teachers setting written work, e.g. compositions, should not do that to accumulate marks, but should provide opportunities for the learners to practise written communication skills. Robb and Ross (1986) indicated in their article that the regular practising caused the improvement of the written skills of their subjects, and not the feedback coming from the teacher.

It is clear that all teachers, planners and advisers must think hard about where the emphasis, of

especially written communication, should fall. In communicative language teaching the focus should be (even more than other subjects) on the process, rather than on the end-product. Language is a developmental process and if we constantly measure (evaluate), we will surely stifle and inhibit this natural process of acquisition – especially in those pupils whose marks are not as promising at first.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From these studies it seems that the direct correction of both oral and written errors must be reconsidered. Improved strategies, replacing these time-consuming and futile exercises, could be developed to provide optimal teaching (input) to the learners which could promote optimal L2 acquisition and proficiency.

According to Krashen (1982:21) input is the best way to ensure acquisition and then the focus must be on meaning and not on accuracy. Input coming in the form of reading is probably one of the best ways to provide rich input in the written form. The learner will find the reading material an acceptable model to use as a norm for his/her own written language development – not his/her own “practice” attempts (compositions) with the teacher’s intruding red markings trying to perfect his efforts. That does not mean that students cannot read one another’s attempts. Surely that is a legitimate way of communicating with somebody and teachers should encourage more spontaneous written communication amongst the students where the focus is on the message. We put our students on lean diets of L2 input and expect miracles when we test and re-test. Krashen (1982:71) reacted as follows in response to this matter:

“. . . the profession has seriously underestimated the amount of comprehensible input necessary to achieve even moderate, or intermediate levels of proficiency in second language acquisition.”

Robb and Ross (1986:91) advised that the teacher must, instead of correcting errors, respond with comments that will turn the students back to the initial stages of writing the composition. Brumfit (1984:86) asked whether teachers of the L2 should not provide more opportunities for genuine writing which will allow more scope for creativity, rather than always focusing on accuracy. He referred to the gap between L1 writers and L2 writers with the mother tongue writers far more creative because they are not so bogged down by this mania to produce hundred percent accurate written work.

The most feasible strategy seems to be the following: Provide as many opportunities as possible to L2 learners to communicate in a real life situation in writing (as well as orally) without any attention given to accuracy, unless it hampers comprehensibility. For the teacher the errors are of paramount importance and correct models should be provided. Brumfit’s (1980) and Corder’s (1981) (in Robb and Ross 1986) suggestion could be built into the programme, viz to select short sections out of pupils’ work (warning the pupil(s) beforehand to avoid any embarrassment) and to get the class to analyze them in small groups. During this analysis the pupils will focus consciously on the errors and try and provide the correct words, structures or sentences. The piece remains nameless, it is short and manageable and the group works together to rectify it in an activity which is like a game. (There can be a competition between the groups to see who can rectify the most errors.)

It is strongly recommended that teaching oral and written communication should be separated from evaluating oral and written communication. Only after a significant amount of teaching has taken place, can one very cautiously consider covert, low-keyed evaluation which the pupils should be unaware of, because it really only tells the teacher how effective (or ineffective) his/her teaching has been.

For many years it was believed that the only way to master another language was to sit and memorize list upon list and to study the grammar in all its details. Those who “picked up” a language informally were considered the exceptions and lucky ones. Now we know that if you really want to teach a language properly, you must simulate communicative situations where the learners can be exposed to

real input with the focus on the message – understanding what is being communicated. It seems almost too easy and informal, though, research indicates more and more that it is at least the essential basis (and force behind communication) for the acquisition of another language.

Error correction could be equated to this same pattern. It was believed that long hours of marking (correcting all the errors) was part of the tremendously tedious work of getting perfection in oral and written communication. Perfection is now considered to be a relative accomplishment, and that communication in real life situations will probably do significantly more towards the improvement of the students' L2 proficiency.

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