EFL Learners' Preferences for Error Correction in Speaking

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Abstract

The present article reports a case study on learners' preferred ways of error correction in speaking. A questionnaire was given to university students who study English as a foreign language to find out how they preferred to be corrected in both fluency and accuracy activities. The main results showed that the subjects valued two ways in accuracy-based practice: teacher correction and self-correction. In fluency, however, all the participants preferred teacher correction. In both types of activities, peer correction was viewed as less important. The main implication centered around how to make error correction conducive to learner autonomy.

Key words: correction, teacher, learner, speaking, fluency, accuracy.

Bio

Anissa Khaldi is a teacher at Tlemcen University. Her areas of specialization include: TEFL, listening comprehension, research methodology, teacher training. She previously published articles dealing with English language teaching and learning. Her current interests center around effective teaching and learner autonomy.

Introduction

Mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. They are evidence that learners are taking risks to experiment with language. In order to help learners develop their interlanguage system, errors should be corrected (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). Corrective feedback is a response to learners' utterances that contain errors, with the aim of making learners aware that they did not produce the target form correctly (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). This type of feedback differs according to the aim of the activity, whether it is fluency or accuracy. While the former is supposed to develop language fluency, the latter seeks to ensure correctness (Harmer, 2007). During fluency, teachers are not expected to correct their learners' errors so as not to "discourage students who are trying to communicate their ideas and feelings and in fact, people often get their point across even when they make mistakes." (Bailey, 2004,p. 172). Hence, correction is delayed unless there is a breakdown in communication. In accuracy practice, the teacher stops the learner to make the necessary correction. There are different strategies for correcting learners, including: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic comments, elicitation, repetition (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). Errors can be corrected by the teacher, the learner who made the error, or another learner. Katayama (2007) found that Japanese students preferred self-correction with the help of hints by the teacher. Azar and Molavi (2012) found that their participants wanted their teachers to correct their mistakes. They did not want their classmates to correct them. The literature on students' perceptions regarding Algerian learners' preferences for error correction is limited. The importance of this study also stems from the fact that mismatches between teachers' behaviours and learners' preferences influence learning negatively (Nunan, 1989). Hence, the central research question guiding this article is: what are the learners' preferences for error correction during speaking activities? The secondary research questions include: how do learners prefer to be corrected during fluency? How do learners prefer to be corrected in accuracy practice? The main hypothesis is that learners may prefer their teacher to correct them in both types of activities.

Method

The participants in this study were 18 second-year students studying English as a foreign language, at Tlemcen University. They had to complete a questionnaire which comprised closed items, namely rating scales. Learners were asked how often they preferred

teacher correction and peer correction in fluency. In accuracy practice, they were asked about teacher correction, self-correction, and peer correction.

Results and Discussion

As far as fluency practice is concerned, all the participants stated that they preferred teacher correction. Half of them also preferred peer-correction.

Table 1. Learners' Preferred Ways of Correction during Fluency.

Preferred way of correction	**Frequency**	
	Sometimes/ always	*never*
Teacher correction	18	0
Peer correction	9	0

In accuracy, all the subjects expressed their preference for teacher correction. The same number of learners also favoured self-correction. Half of the sample added peer correction.

Table 2. Learners' Preferred Ways of Correction during Accuracy.

Preferred way of correction	**Frequency**	
	Sometimes/ always	*never*
Teacher correction	18	0
Self-correction	18	0
Peer correction	9	0

The results confirm the hypothesis that learners prefer teacher correction, as in both accuracy and fluency practice the subjects wanted their teachers to correct them. These results are compatible with previous research mentioned in the review of literature concerning learners' preferences for correction to be made by the teacher; probably because the teacher is seen as the most competent person. Self-correction was also favoured during accuracy

activities. This implies that learners also sought to take responsibility on their learning. As for peer correction, it is less appreciated in both accuracy and fluency-based practice, because of the potential dangers which lead to a negative impact on the student being corrected (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Some students fear to lose face or feel less competent when their classmates correct them. Hence, their self-esteem is negatively influenced.

Pedagogical Implications

Error correction should be done sensitively. The teacher should take learners' preferences for correcting feedback (Harmer, 2007). This depends on learners' fragility, anxiety level, confidence, and willingness to accept correction. In this context, Ellis and Shintani (2014, p. 275) point out that "teachers need to monitor the extent to which their corrective feedback causes individual anxiety and adjust their feedback accordingly." When correcting their learners, teachers need to make sure that the student who initially makes the error produces the correct form, as this has been found to be beneficial (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). This can be done through giving the learner a clue (like reminding the learner that he is using the third person singular 'she') to make him aware of the error to correct himself. This, then, can be followed with teacher correction if the learner fails to recognize the correct answer. This strategy which includes, both teacher correction and learner correction, is more effective because it makes learners more involved in the learning process, helping them become autonomous.

Research reveals that peer interaction in conducive to language development. The study of Sato & Lyster (2012) showed that feedback provided by peers was positively correlated with their scores. In order to compensate for the drawback of peer correction, students can be trained to correct each other. The teachers should establish an atmosphere that supports mutual tolerance and objectivity in correcting mistakes.

Finally, it is of crucial importance to mention that despite the advantages of feedback, over correction is harmful. Thus, teachers can resort to focus correction, in which they plan in advance the linguistic points to be corrected in accuracy practice. In fluency, feedback should be delayed, unless there is a breakdown in the message.

Conclusion

This study confirmed the view that some learners are highly resistant to being corrected by someone other than the teacher. This latter was viewed as the primary and the preferred source of feedback, in addition to self-correction. In order to help learners take an

active role in the learning process, it was suggested that teachers can help students correct themselves, then providing the correct form if the learner fails to produce it. The article also suggested training students to correct each other as peer correction is another way of making students responsible for their own learning.

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