

An analysis of contemporary error correction:

Who should do it, what should they focus on, and how should it occur?

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the controversy surrounding contemporary error correction as it is applied to the Communicative Teaching Approach. What error correction is and if it is effective to student learning is first discussed, followed by what type of errors should be corrected. Then the issue of whether it is more effective for teachers or students to conduct error correction is addressed, followed by which type of correction— direct or indirect— is preferred. Finally, when errors should be corrected— immediately or delayed— is also deliberated. The paper concludes by examining student opinions on the issue, and resolves that until more research can be conducted, teachers should take into account the individual preferences of their class in order to best facilitate language learning.

*Keywords:* error correction, corrective feedback, implicit vs. explicit, indirect vs. direct, self-correction, teacher vs. student centered techniques

### **Background on Contemporary Trends**

Educators have seen great changes in the overall approaches of teaching in the past century, from the drill-and-practice grammatical approach to the contemporary communicative student-centered approach. Current pedagogy has embraced communicative methods for Teaching English as a Second Language, such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This shift has greatly effected how error correction is viewed as well, changing from errors viewed as highly discouraged to a contemporary understanding that errors are a normal and even beneficial process of learning a new language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Waltz, 1982). Contemporary views on error correction are by no means agreed upon by the teaching or researching communities. Questions about whether error correction contributes to L2 acquisition, which errors should be corrected, whether it should be the teacher or student correcting the error, and what type of error correction is most effective are all disputed yet highly important components of contemporary error correction.

Error correction, also known as corrective feedback, is the pedagogical intention to provide someone with “information about the ungrammaticality of their utterances” (Ortega, 2009, p. 71). For decades, numerous research studies have produced conflicting results about how error correction contributes to second language learning. One classic opponent of written error correction is Truscott (1996; 1999; 2007), who believes it is a “clear and dramatic failure” (Truscott, 2007, p. 271). He explains that substantial research (Krashen, 1992; Leki, 1991; Truscott, 1999) indicates that there is no significant difference between correcting every error a student makes versus correcting only errors that have “produced communicative problems” (Truscott, 1996, p. 330), as in the student’s intended meaning unclear and must be negotiated. Educators who teach using Communicative Language Teaching might agree with this view of error correction because grammatical errors are viewed as a

natural outcome of learning to communicate and as such are tolerated. Often, as in the case of fluency practice, errors are not corrected at all (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). However, this view of error correction as something to be avoided in certain contexts is not supported in some other contemporary teaching methods. For example, in Content-Based Instruction (CBI) student errors are corrected in a variety of ways (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), the techniques of which will be discussed later in this paper. In a meta-analysis of the error correction effectiveness issue, Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) state that written error correction is becoming more popular due to a growing amount of affirmative evidence. For example, Sheen (2007), Bitchener (2008), and Hartshorn et al. (2010) all found similar evidence suggesting that error correction “can improve writing accuracy”, though with the caveat that this success in the research has been limited to specific contexts and further research is required (Evans et al., 2010, p. 446).

Increasingly, there has been a trend stressing the importance of taking into account specific variables that effect student learning, teaching, and research (Bitchener, 2008; Guenette, 2007), which in turn influences how error correction is viewed. Ferris (2003), a strong supporter of error correction, maintains that mixed research results are due to researchers failing to take into account learner, situational, and methodological variables. For example, factors such as learner motivation, first language, learning style, and instructional design all influence the outcome of error correction, as well as student learning in general. Research (Ferris, 2006; Guenette, 2007) also suggests that language proficiency level can greatly effect whether error correction is effective or not, because students with a low grasp of English may not have the knowledge, or linguistic awareness, to be able to make appropriate corrections. However, in a meta-analysis by Ferris (2004) of studies asking if students who receive error correction improve over time, there was only one recent study that was found to answer “No”, that of Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998). Current studies by Chandler (2003), Ferris and Helt (2000),

and Frantzen (1995) all found that error correction helped students improve in the long run. Though some researchers like Truscott (2007) still maintain that error correction does not contribute to L2 acquisition, the contemporary majority of educators seem to realize that it is a necessary part of teaching and learning: “Neither research nor common sense suggests that students will progress toward greater accuracy without feedback” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 447). While this may have the ring of pedagogical truth to some educators and researchers, there still remains great disagreement about what kind of errors warrant feedback.

### **What errors should be corrected?**

What is the best way to determine which student errors are corrected? If we turn to the pedagogy of the Communicative Approach, it seems as if determining which errors to correct depends on the purpose for interaction. Teachers are beginning to view errors as “a normal product of learning”, believing that trial and error in language learning is needed during the gradual language learning process (Burns & Richards, 2012, p. 2). For example, in CLT if the purpose of the activity is to practice fluency, then small errors of grammar or pronunciation will not be corrected during the conversation practice (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). To do so would interrupt the flow of conversation, and the intent of the exchange is to practice fluent, real-life communication. More and more, contemporary views on error correction are leaning toward this way of thinking— if stopping to correct a small error will upset the broader goal of the lesson, then the error can be noted by the teacher and addressed at a more appropriate time. As Celce-Murcia (1991) says:

As a result of the communicative revolution in language teaching, it has become increasingly clear that grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learned as an end in itself (p. 466).

While contemporary pedagogy does not demand that small grammatical errors must to be corrected, a distinction between kinds of errors has been made. The gravity of the error, or the degree to which it effects communication, is the priority now. Degree of gravity has been separated into two general categories— sentence-level errors and discourse-level errors (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Sentence-level errors are minimal and leave the general meaning of the statement clear. For example: *People around [the] world use writing to communicate with one another.* Though this ELL student omitted the article “the”, this is considered a minor error because it only affects the writing at the sentence-level, leaving the overall message clear. According to modern beliefs about error correction, it would be common for a teacher to ignore this error and focus on errors that “deserve our closest attention” (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 470). These errors, called discourse-level errors, are more serious because they interfere with communication and meaning. Because of this they often require immediate correction or clarification (Burt & Kiparsky, 1974; Frodesen, 1991; Tomiyama, 1990). For example, while omitted articles in a sentence such as above still make it possible to understand what the writer is trying to say, this sentence contains discourse-level errors: *The American culture use many people.* If a student were to say or write this statement in class some form of error correction would have to take place so that the audience would be able to continue understanding the exchange. This need for clarification raises the question of who should be responsible for correcting this error, the teacher or the student?

### **Who should correct errors?**

The pedagogy of the Communicative Approach is learner-centered, and stresses that the role of the teacher is to facilitate, rather than to dominate in a teacher-centered method (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 122). In this shift from structuralism, students have also gone from being seen as passive learners that should absorb their teacher’s lectures, to being “seen as responsible for their

own learning” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 122). This “learner autonomy” means that students have greater choice over how they learn (Burns & Richards, 2012; Jacobs & Farrell, 2001), a choice which also extends to error correction. Whereas in the structuralist past the answer to the question ‘Who should correct students’ errors?’ would have been clearly ‘the teacher’, today this is not so cut-and-dry (Burns & Richards, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Student self-correction is encouraged in methods like CBI (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 140) and also in places like Writing Centers (Bruce & Raford, 2009). Possible ways that teachers can facilitate self-correction is to recast the erroneous statement and then offer the student a choice. For example:

1. Learner: People has different analyzes for what other people write.

Interlocutor: Which sounds better, “People has different analyzes” or “People *have* different *analysis*”?

(McDonough, 2005)

Other ways of eliciting self-correction from language learners include signaling the error and giving them a chance to clarify:

2. Learner: What happen for the boat?

Interlocutor: What?

Learner: What’s wrong with the boat?

(McDonough, 2005)

Finally, teachers can repeat what the learner has said right up until the error, signaling that they have a chance to self-correct:

3. Learner: yesterday I walked to the store and seen a car accident.

Interlocutor: yesterday you walked to the store and...?

Learner: *saw* a car accident.

(McDonough, 2005)

There are many studies that have found self-correction to be a more effective way to approach error correction than explicit correction by the teacher (Chandler, 2003; Lee, 1997; Lizotte, 2001). Chandler

(2003) found that over a 10 week period students who were required to self-correct “improved significantly more” than those who were not required to do so (p. 279). Supporters of self-correction maintain that not only is there an increase in language accuracy over time, but also of fluency (Chandler, 2003; Lizotte, 2001; Rob et al., 1986). However, many educators view self-correction to only be effective for higher-proficiency students. Often, low-proficiency students have not yet learned enough about their second language to be able to determine if a sentence is grammatically correct, and if not, how to fix it (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Ferris (2004), for example, agrees that self-correction is the most appropriate form of error correction “in the majority of instances”, but lower level proficiency students are exceptions because they “may not possess the linguistic competence to self-correct” (p. 60).

If we follow this take on error correction, then it is the role of the teacher to error correct, at least some of the time. In both CBI and CLT errors are noted by the teacher and corrected at an appropriate time given the context, such as during a mini-lesson on that relevant grammar point (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Ferris (2004), both a researcher and language teacher, agrees that “Error treatment, including error feedback by teachers, is a necessary component of L2 writing instruction” (p. 59). Her conclusion is based in part on previous studies, including her own, in which error correction was found to be more effective than no error correction (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Walley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). True to the contemporary Communicative teaching approach which values authentic context and flexibility, modern error correction seems to be a give and take between students and teacher, adapting as needed to the context.

### **How should error correction be done?**

Contemporary error correction also offers a wide variety of options with which to communicate correction to students. Researchers and teachers both find what type of error



correction is most effective to be a controversial topic. The first issue is whether teachers should practice direct or indirect error correction. Direct error correction, also known as explicit, is when the teacher gives the student the correct linguistic or grammatical form or structure (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). In the context of written error correction, this would be written above or near the linguistic error. According to Bitchener and Knoch (2008), examples include 1) crossing out a frivolous word/phrase/morpheme 2) inserting a missing word/phrase/morpheme 3) providing the correct word form or sentence structure (p. 411).

Another part of direct error correction is giving students explicit feedback on the structures of English. This can be done through written and/or oral meta-linguistic explanation. In the case of written, the teacher could write grammar rules on the student's paper, with a reference to where in the paper they need to apply it. They could also give examples to help make the abstract grammatical concept more meaningful. For example, a student writes: *This paper will discuss about the writer's thoughts*. A teacher practicing direct error correction would first point out the possessive error by adding in the "'s" on "writer", such as the red in the above example. Then the teacher would give meta-linguistic feedback, such as:

*This should be "writer's" because the thoughts belong to the writer. When the noun is possessive like this you need an apostrophe+s ('s).*

The other way in which to communicate direct meta-linguistic feedback is orally, through a concept-specific grammar lesson. In this case, the teacher may meet individually with this student to give oral corrective feedback, or she may formatively notice many of her students making the same error, and decide to have a 30 minute mini-lesson about possessive nouns.

The other main type of error correction is indirect, or implicit, which only "indicates that in some way an error has been made" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, p. 414). Ways in which the teacher may

practice indirect error correction include 1) underlining or circling the error 2) recording the number of errors in a given line in the margin or 3) using a code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). An example of how to use number three in a classroom is teaching students symbols for error correction, such as three horizontal lines underneath a letter means it should be capitalized. To compare direct and indirect feedback, the same writing example from above will be corrected, this time using indirect feedback:

*This paper will discuss about the writer thoughts.*

Number of errors: 1

Unlike direct feedback, indirect would not have the teacher write any explicit meta-linguistic grammar rules about possessives on the student's paper, instead allowing the student an opportunity to try and self-correct using indirect error correction. In an oral context the teacher might offer a recast (Ellis, 2009), which signals the student to try and self-correct, much as a written symbol would. Ellis (2009) very succinctly sums up the differences between direct and indirect error correction:

Direct error correction provides input via explicit feedback and prompts output through metalinguistic explanation. Indirect error correction provides input through recasting and prompts output via repetition and clarification requests (p. 8).

The debate about which type of corrective feedback is more effective is still happening today. Ferris (2001) explains that this is because there is still "little evidence" as to how explicit teachers should be (p. 162). Those in support of indirect feedback, like Ferris (2004), say that "indirect feedback that engages students in cognitive problem-solving as they attempt to self-edit" is the best way to treat most written error correction (p. 60). From a pedagogical standpoint, she points out that labeling errors in such detail as direct feedback requires is "more time-consuming for teachers than just indicating that an error has been made", as in the case of indirect correction (Ferris, 2001, p. 162).

There is also the issue of metalinguistic awareness and native speakers of English. How many

general classroom teachers will be able to accurately explain the grammatical rules of English to their students? Ferris (2001) feels that there will be a higher chance of a teacher mislabeling a direct grammatical error than if they merely have to locate where it is. While these implications of direct versus indirect error correction are practical, they seem to be less of an error correction debate and more of a teacher competency issue. Nevertheless, the teacher's ability to practice explicit correction is an important factor to consider in the debate, and further supports that trained TESL/TEFL teachers should collaborate with general education teachers to best serve ELLs.

Interestingly, contemporary textbooks on how to teach ELLs reflect the opposite side of the debate. In a textbook designed for a general elementary education audience, it recommends a direct approach for effectively teaching English within a CBI context:

Giving explicit directions, emphasizing key words, and offering concrete examples all enhance the understanding of ELL students. Simple strategies such as emphasizing key words, [and] offering examples of your main points...can increase the understanding of ELL students.

(Sadker & Zittleman, 2007, p. 72)

Student teachers are not the only ones who are being encouraged to use direct feedback with their students. Many researchers (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Evans et al., 2010; Ferris, 2004) are in agreement that direct feedback is most appropriate for low proficiency students because they have not yet built a foundation of metalinguistic knowledge with which to draw upon when asked to self-correct.

Provided that the proficiency level of the students is intermediate to advanced, indirect feedback can be very effective (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Chandler (2003) found support for this in a study where the teacher practiced indirect feedback techniques with intermediate level EFL students. Specifically the teacher underlined the error only, and then allowed for self-correction, followed by a revision of the autobiographical writing. The results were a "significant improvement in both accuracy

and fluency in subsequent writing of the same type over the semester” (Chandler, 2003, p. 290). From a teaching standpoint, allowing our students to correct their own mistakes helps them learn by doing using meaningful material, as well as gives them ownership over their own work. This concept of taking responsibility for their own learning is important for fostering growth in our students, and is also a key value in the contemporary Communicative teaching method.

### **When should error correction be done?**

Another important question regarding types of error correction is *when* it should be done, immediately or delayed. In written error correction it is almost always delayed because teachers need time to collect written work and respond. Exceptions are in-class writing assignments when the teacher may be walking around the room acting as a guide, and at writing centers, where students are able to get individual, immediate feedback (Bruce & Rafoth, 2009). However, in oral contexts teachers must decide whether to give immediate feedback, or to wait for a more appropriate time. As previously discussed, methods like CLT that fall within the Communicative approach advocate for a time-delay, especially during fluency activities. After conducting a meta-analysis of course books and teacher guides, Hedge (2000) found that they frequently instruct teachers to follow this model, recommending they wait to correct until the end of an activity. Techniques that can be used for delayed error correction include:

1. Using a tape recorder to record the activity, then playing it for students and asking them to listen for their own mistakes.
2. Asking students to peer-correct by having them note their classmate’s errors during the activity and then discussing the results afterwards. (Hedge, 2000)

These are indirect error correction techniques, though they could be adapted to be more direct if a metalinguistic mini-lesson was accompanied with the discussion. These recommendations are within

a fluency activity context. For accuracy focused activities, “there is a general agreement” that correction “should be provided immediately” (Ellis, 2008, p. 11). From a practical standpoint, this makes sense because if the purpose of a lesson is grammatical accuracy, then immediate correction, whether direct or indirect, will work best for students so they do not assume an error is actually correct and develop a habit. It also helps the class to focus on the specific task at hand, because often it can be distracting to continuously notice errors a classmate is making— the temptation to get off task to peer correct becomes too great, and then class control can suffer.

### **Conclusions and implications for teaching**

Pedagogically speaking, corrective feedback is an essential part of teaching that happens often in most classrooms and is addressed at length in teacher handbooks, yet the research has not found a clear-cut direction on how to conduct it (Ellis, 2008). Therefore, it makes sense that we make use of our contemporary Communicative Approach and ask our students what works best for them. Student feedback should be the basis with which we decide how to use error correction. There has been substantial research conducted on this topic, and the results have been fairly consistent, with L2 learners reporting that they want, expect, and value their teachers’ written feedback on their writing (Ferris & Helt, 2000; Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991; Roberts, 1999). It seems as if student opinion on preferred type of error correction is divided, with some indicating they prefer indirect feedback with an opportunity for self-correction, and other students wanting direct teacher correction (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Factors that may affect students’ preferences regarding error correction could be level of proficiency and the purpose of the activity, as have been previously discussed, as well as cultural differences. Often, ELLs from other parts of the world are only familiar with direct teacher-centered corrective feedback because many school systems around the world still practice the structuralist Grammatical Approach. Because of the variety of factors that affect how best to practice error

correction, Ellis (2008) recommends that teachers find out their students' views and preferences of corrective feedback, and then negotiate how best to use error correction with them. This context-appropriate, learner-centered view of error correction fits nicely with today's Communicative teaching approach.

Overall, contemporary views on error correction are not set in stone for either teachers or researchers. Most teachers agree that error correction does contribute to L2 learning and that it is an essential part of teaching. However, the issues about which errors should be corrected, whether it's best for the teacher or student to correct, when correction should occur, and whether direct or indirect error correction is most effective are still being debated within the field. In order to best teach our students, it is important to use the modern day Communicative approach to teaching by discovering what forms of corrective feedback works best for the students' proficiency level, goals, and cultural background. In this way we can be sure that our students still improve and learn as more research about the subject is gathered.

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