CORRECTING ERRORS IN A COMMUNICATIVE SPEAKING CLASSES

Hairus Salikin
Universitas Jember, East Java

Abstract: The role of correcting errors in English teaching, especially in Speaking class has been debated for a long time. So far the effective method to correct the students' language errors has not been identified since every English learner has different perception toward the teacher's correction or feedback. Further, it has not been assured whether the learner's success in mastering English is solely affected by the correction given. However, there are still some linguists' views and research finding which can be used to assist the teachers in giving the correction in a Speaking class. At least, there are three ways of correcting errors: selective correction of errors, productive term of error correction and constructive error correction.

Keywords: errors, correcting, speaking class

The role of correction in foreign language (FL) learning and teaching has been an issue for quite some time and opinions vary as to whether is effective or not. This means that there is no a single answer of whether correction gives rise to the learners development in their learning FL. That is why, it is necessary to know the way of corrections errors. This concise paper elaborates how to correct learner errors in the communicative speaking class. Although there has been a small number of conducted on the reaction of the learners to the corrections of their errors (Chenoweth *et al*. 1983), there is a great need to hear what the learners think of error corrections in speaking classes. The teachers often correct the learner errors without considering what the learners think of error corrections.

As far as the teachers are concerned, in a foreign language teaching situation, most of the English teachers are not native speakers. Consequently, their accent, pronunciation, or even grammatical features are likely to be deviating from the English norms. Nevertheless, asking English native speakers to teach the students to converse in English does not guarantee success. This is due to the fact that they need to develop an understanding of what learning to converse an FL entails. They have to be able to develop a great variety of skills in classroom management as well as interpersonal and cross-cultural communication (Gebhard,2002:191). In this case, not every English native speaker has the ability to cope with this problem successfully in their teaching. The problems of how to handle learner errors have always perplexed foreign language teachers, and this situation becomes even more perplexing with the advent of Communicative Approach. Prior to this, during the Audiolingual,

Structural, and behaviorist period, classroom drills were designed so that the students would do their pattern drills without making mistakes. However, the Communicative Approach sends a different message to the teachers: "get your students to communicate at all cost (Mendelson, 1990). This means that teachers should be tolerant to the learner errors. The central discussion of this paper is that how should teachers handle errors when they occur in speaking classes. In the speaking classes the teachers are faced with the dilemma of how to correct the learner errors without causing the learners become hesitant or nervous about talking in the language they are learning.

PROBLEMS IN DEFINING ERRORS

Defining errors in L2 learning is not a simple matter because it is probably not seen in the same way by different observers and there might be disagreement among teachers about what errors is (Donald, 2004). This means that a universal definition of second language errors cannot be formulated since it could be defined according to situation, reference group, interlocutor, and style and pronunciation pressure. This idea seems to suggest that defining errors in L2 learning is a complex process since errors as such in a certain group of people might not be considered erroneous by other groups. Different situations might result in different errors, so that there could be several definitions of error in L2 learning. Even, defining errors in speaking could be more perplexing compared to writing (Lennon, 1991:182).

There are factors which need to be taken into account when defining errors in ELT. They are the immediate content of the utterances in question, understanding of the content of the lesson, the intent of the teacher or student, and the prior learning of the students (From Chaudron, cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991:86). These factors might even make the definition of errors in L2 learning more difficult because they may be seen differently by different observers. For example, Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) asked ten Greek teachers of English, ten native speaker teachers of English, and ten native speaker non-teachers to judge thirty-two erroneous and four correct sentences. They found that one of the correct sentences, *Neither of us feels quite happy,* was judged to be erroneous by two Greek teachers, three native-speaker teachers, and five non-teacher native speakers. Another correct sentence was, *the boy went off into a faint,* was also judged erroneous by two Greek teachers, nine native-speaker teachers, and nine native speaker non-teachers. What is interesting to note in that study is that native speakers (both teachers and non-teachers) judged correct sentences to be erroneous. This phenomenon is in line with Lennon (1991b:182) who claims that even among native speakers, the problems of defining errors in foreign language learning still exist.

In relation to these difficulties Allwright and Bailey (1991:84) argue that the practice of using departures from the native speaker norm to define errors is too narrow and inadequate. A great deal of the world's foreign language teaching is done by non-native speaking English teachers who provide a non-native model of the target language. As a consequence it is impractical, if not impossible, to define errors using a native speaker norm.

On the whole, there is no single theory that defines errors in L2 learning sufficiently. It is not a question of whether the definitions are right or wrong. All definitions could be right in their own way since people might view errors in a different way. Teachers must be careful when saying a particular form is wrong because a certain expression could be wrong in a certain area but perfectly acceptable in another one. It might be form that the teachers have never used but which in fact exists (Bartram and Walton, 1999:6). In addition, people might find harder to spot errors in spoken than in written or formal texts (Lennon, 1991; James, 1998).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ERRORS

There is a significant shift in attitude towards learner errors in ELT. If the traditional review of errors in L2 learning argues that errors are like sin, they should be avoided (Brooks cited in Hendrickson, 1978:387), today errors are viewed as integral parts of a language learning process and they are very significant. Some educators (Edge, 1989; Fauziati, 2003; Harsono, 2003;) believe that making errors is part of learning and it cannot be avoided since it is natural. Changes in pedagogy have also influenced people's attitude towards errors and error corrections in FL learning. With recent approach of FL learning and teaching, less emphasis has been placed on formal accuracy than was formally the case, and more importance is focused on fluency, especially in speaking classes (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 84).

In additions, it is worth noting that learners' errors are considered important because they shed light on learners' learning process that is why people should take more positive attitude towards them. Bartram and Walton (1999:12-13) propose several reasons that the learners should make errors. For them, making errors is natural and this happens in native speakers or non-native speakers of a certain language. When the learners are making errors, they might try their hypotheses about their beliefs of the language being learnt. This is one of the characteristics of good language learners (Harmer, 2002:42).

Since making errors is natural, this also occurs in the speech of adult talking together in their mother tongue and it is interesting to note that these errors are often ignored unless they cause some sort of breakdown in communication (Allwright and Bailey, 1991:88). As far as language is concerned, children also make errors when they are talking in their mother tongue but corrections are very rare and when corrections occur they tend to focus on meaning rather than form. It is very common that children, English native speakers, would say *Daddy goed* and *they comed* instead of *Daddy went* and *they came*. This also could happen to adult foreign language learners (Harmer, 2002:100) indicating that all learners of a language, whether it is a first language (F1) or a foreign language, they all make errors (Bartram and Walton, 1999:11).

Talking about the importance of errors in FL learning and teaching, James (1998:12) cited Corder's ideas stating that errors are significant in three respects. Errors tell the teacher what needs to be taught; they tell the researchers how learning proceeds and they are a means whereby learners try their hypotheses about the TL. It is worth noting that making errors is an

inescapable fact and it is an integral part of language learning and language use. Teachers and students may be able to eliminate them to a certain extent but they may never be eliminated altogether (Bartam and Walton, 1999:12).

CORRECTING ERRORS IN SPEAKING CLASSES

Though spoken error corrections can be very helpful during the oral work (Harmer, 2002:104), teachers should be very careful when dealing with those errors due to the fact that speaking in a foreign language is particularly anxiety-provoking. This could be because, learners are often expected to perform beyond their acquired competence. Consequently, they might not be able to perform what the teachers ask them to do. That is why dealing with errors when the learners are speaking should be taken carefully. When it is not carefully taken care, corrections might not work, or even they might destroy the learners' efforts to try the target language (TL). It is worth noting that in speaking classes, it should be clear for the learners and the teachers, that the activities will be focused on accuracy or fluency.

Teachers' reactions towards learners' errors when they are speaking in the TL should be based on the distinction between accuracy and fluency (Harmer, 2002:104). For him accuracy is a part of the lesson where the learners are encouraged to make their utterances as near to the TL norm as possible. The lesson could include the study of a piece of grammar and a pronunciation exercise in their speaking. In this case, there will be more intense corrections. Fluency, then, is defined as a part of lesson where the students work on their capacity to communicate within the TL and generally the teachers do not correct all errors the learners make during this activity. This distinction is so essential to be taken into consideration so that the teachers could decide how they have to react to learners' errors. This means that teachers need to decide whether a particular activity in the classroom is designed to expect learners' accuracy or whether the learners are asked to use the language as fluently as possible.

As far as the research on the teachers' response on learners' spoken errors is concerned, the results of some studies show that teachers do not correct all errors that do occur. The findings also reveal that teachers react to the learners' spoken errors in a wide variety of techniques. The important issue that should be taken into account when learners are making errors in speaking is whether teachers are going to correct the errors or let them pass without any comment. This is so essential to consider since as non-native speakers of the TL, teachers may have rather a special problem in terms of their abilities even to notice learners' errors. Non-native teachers cannot be expected to correct errors that they cannot detect because their own target language grammar may not include all the phonological, lexical, and syntactic or discourse rules needed to recognize and correct all the errors in the learners' output. They may ask what their own place is on the interlanguage continuum (Allwright and Bailey, 1991:100-102).

The next issue related to error corrections in speaking classes is that the time of corrections. The teachers may deal with learners' errors immediately, or delay corrections somewhat (for example, until the learners finish with the message they were trying to convey). The problem with immediate corrections is that these practices might interrupt the learners in their mid-sentence. This

could be disruptive and eventually inhibit the learners' willingness to speak in the TL. Inhibition, according to Spada and Lightbown (2001:55) in language learning could discourage risk-taking which is necessary for progress in language learning.

Alternately, teachers may postpone their corrections until they finish talking. Unfortunately the psychology research literature shows that this kind of corrections become less effective (Allwright and Bailey, 1991:103) since it is easy for the teachers to forget what the learners said (Harmer, 2002:108). In addition this practice might result in the confusion of other learners because they might realize that errors have been made but the teachers do not correct them. Though there is no single theory describing the whole story of when to correct the learners' spoken errors, it is still possible to find out some situations where teachers might prefer not to correct learners' spoken errors (in fluency work, for example). On the contrary, there are others situations when correcting learners' spoken errors is likely to be helpful (Ur, 1996:246) e.g. when the errors the learners made destroy or breakdown communication.

It is very essential to note that there are two types of errors: performance errors, and competence errors. Performance errors are those that can be corrected by the learners making errors and competence errors occur because of the using inaccurate rule or absence of that rule in the learner interlanguage (Mendelson, 1990). Teachers should always refer to learners and ask them to correct whatever they can before having other given their feedback, because a number of errors identified are bound to be performance errors.

Mendelson (1990) added that error correction is divided into two very broad categories; linguistic correction and sociolinguistic correction. The first includes correction of grammar, pronunciation and other linguistic system. Sociolinguistic correction covers register, tone of voice and body language. Providing linguistic and sociolinguistic corrections are important in the FL learning and teaching process. However it must be noted that sociolinguistic corrections is more important than linguistic one. In a normal communication even when people are talking in their mother tongue, linguistic errors often exist without destroying communication.

It is a conventional wisdom not to destroy the flow of communication by stopping the learners just to correct their errors. Teachers are encouraged not to interrupt communication exchange. This means postponement of error correction until the end of the exchange or interaction could be a good idea. There are, however, certain situations in which an immediate correction is necessary, and this is when communication has broken down because of some linguistic and sociolinguistic difficulties. It is very essential noting that the corrections must not make the learners lose their face so that they do not like to use the target language.

ERROR CORRECTION CRITERIA

Nunan (1989) asserts that one of the functions of the teachers in the learning and teaching process is to correct learner's errors. However, whether it is effective or not remains to discussion. That is why this concise paper tries proposing some criteria of error correction that might be effective. Mendelson

(1990) argues that there are three criteria for efficient and effective error correction; correct selectively, choose productive items, and correct constructively.

Selective Error Corrections

It is essential to note that it is impossible for the teachers to correct all errors the students made. When they are overcorrected they may become discouraged or confused and this would probably stifle communication. That is why, it is important to view errors from the learners' point of view. Chenoweth (1989) claimed that learner's preferences on error corrections are essential to note, since error correction is provided for the sake of the learners. Teachers are not encouraged to correct every error the learners make while they are talking. The teachers must understand the learner's preferences of errors that should be corrected. Cathcart and Olsen (1976) found that the learners preferred pronunciation to be corrected while talking. According to their finding, pronunciation is important to be corrected because when learners mispronounce certain words, communication can be confusing. In speaking classes, grammatical errors should be tolerated as long as they did not break communication.

Hendrickson (1978) believed that the learners do not like to be corrected for each minor error they made because this practice could destroy their confidence to use the target language. It is suggested that the teachers should be more tolerant to errors that do not destroy communication. Correction often creates a lack of confidence in speaking, and overt correction can lead to loss of face with may discourage the learner's attempts to practice (Allan, 1991). It is common knowledge that lots of learners do not care about accuracy as long as they get the message across.

Choice of Productive Items for Correction

The decision as to what to correct should be based on the rule that the teachers should concentrate on what will be most productive for the learners in their communication. This criterion applies to all aspects of language corrections; lexical, syntactic, phonological, etc. Regardless of those errors, the teachers should make a snap decision using the criterion of what will be most productive to the students and concentrate to those errors. This is not an easy job for the teachers because the teachers are usually not consistent in treating errors. It should be remembered that the role of correction in language learning is still far from clear. Chaudron (1988) argued that the effectiveness of error correction is difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate.

It is interesting to note that although the learners need correction (Holey and King, 1971, Cathcart and Olsen 1876, Cohen, 1990) it is not acceptable to correct every error when the learners are talking. Hendrickson (1978) found that the learners prefer not to be marked down for each minor speaking error and writing error because this practice could destroy their confidence and force them to spend so much effort on details that they lose overall to use the language. There is no a single theory that tells us the whole story of effective items of corrections. Nevertheless, it might be beneficial to present three types of errors

to be considered when correcting learner's errors. They are errors that impair communication significantly, errors that which have stigmizing effects on the listeners or readers, and errors which occur frequently in learner's spoken language.

Constructive Error Correction

Creating a very good atmosphere in the classroom is very essential to gain a successful language learning and teaching process. According to Mendelson (1990) this is connected to the classroom management, and the attitudes which develop in the classroom. It is strongly believed that the classroom atmosphere should be built on a premise of mutual respect. This means the learners and teachers should understand each other. This means that the classroom must be healthy, meaning that in speaking classes there should be a place where there is a lot laughing with others but there is never any laughing at anyone. The speaking classes should be a sheltered environment in which it is always safe to take risk for the students to try thing out without fear or ridicule. By this the learners might be more confident to use the language they are learning.

Correcting errors is a delicate matter because everyone has a fragile ego and not everyone responds positively to error correction. Some learners could respond to error correction positively but some others might react to error correction negatively. Therefore, correction must always be handled with care. The teachers should be careful when correcting errors since different learners will react to error correction provided by the teachers in different way.

CONCLUSION

In the speaking classes, the speaking teachers should consider priorities of errors corrections. This is because when the corrections are provided for the errors which the learners think unnecessary to be corrected, the FL learners might not benefit from error corrections. Relying on their preferences of which errors should be prioritized is essential to be taken into account for corrections are given for the sake of the learner TL improvement. The learners argue that mispronunciation is the first priority to be corrected in speaking classes. This is followed by grammatical errors and errors in vocabulary to be considered.

Since speaking in a FL, particularly in front of the classroom, is anxiety provoking, it is advisable that the teachers should be able to create encouraging classroom atmosphere so that the learners like to talk in the TL. That is why, the teachers should be more tolerant to the student errors. If speaking classes are encouraging, it is expected that the learners could learn English best. Eventually the ultimate goal of FL learning and teaching, particularly on speaking, will be obtained. The learners are not too worried about communicating in the TL.

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