

# A Review of Error Correction Techniques with a View Toward Correcting Language Learners in an ASEAN Context

Jet Saengngoen

Bangkok University International College

## Abstract

A controversial issue that has been discussed in the field of linguistics, psychology, and language teaching is error correction. The issue of correcting errors can be a problematic and prickly issue even for experienced teachers and accomplished linguists. In addition to the already existing controversy over error correction, globalization and the new global community which allow people to move across borders and cultures more easily will create additional problems for language instruction and error correction in particular. In Asia, the ASEAN Declaration promotes the increased mobilization of students and teachers within the ASEAN community. As a result, English language teachers will have to deal with additional challenges when giving corrective feedback in racially and culturally diverse classrooms.

This paper aims to review and analyze the literature on error correction in learning English as a second language and the implementation of error correction techniques in an ASEAN context.

*Keywords: Second Language Teaching, Error Correction Techniques, ASEAN Context*

## 1. Introduction

All language learners produce different types of errors, for example, grammatical, lexical, or phonological errors. In linguistics, errors are different from mistakes. Whereas mistakes are the nonsystematic misuse of language which learners are able to detect and self-correct, errors are likely to occur repeatedly and not be recognized by the learners. Errors had been viewed as the undesirable byproducts of language learning that needed to be eradicated in the Audio-lingual method. More recently, the view of errors has been transformed from “sins” to a natural process in second language learning (Oladejo, 1993, p. 71). Today, errors in language learning are also considered to be one of the indicators of language learning productivity (Hendrickson, 2002 p. 388). Errors are seen as windows to the learner’s knowledge of a second language. Gass and Selinker (2001) claim that errors are not the result of ill-formed language imitation, but instead are a reflection of the underlying rule-governed system.

English language learners, teachers, and researchers hold different viewpoints about error correction. Nunan (1998) stated that Australian adolescent learners highly valued error correction whereas their teachers did not. However, teachers are likely to provide feedback on phonological, lexical, and grammatical errors (cited in Richards, 2009). Lightbrown (1992) found

that learners who received corrective feedback promptly after the errors occurred were able to incorporate self-correction into their interlanguage development (Lightbrown, 1992 cited in Gass, S.M. and Selinker, L. 2001). Based on the interaction hypothesis, error corrections of second language by the instructor provide learners with negative evidence that facilitates their language development (Gass and Veronis, 1994 cited in Lyster, 2001, p. 268; Muranoi, 2000 cited in Andringa, de Gloppe and Hacquebord, 2011, p. 837)

It is apparent that various views of error correction are conflicting and in need of additional investigation. However, there are five error correction criteria that can be used as instructional guidelines for teachers and which also are the focus of this paper. These criteria are: whether the errors should be corrected; when errors should be corrected; which errors should be corrected; how errors should be corrected; and who should correct errors.

## 2. Content

Many linguists and language teaching practitioners believe in Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis that posits that learners can acquire a language unconsciously and that consciousness can only result in language learning. (Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2009; Henry, Culman and Van Patten, 2008). However, a number of researchers argue that learners' attention is beneficial to second language acquisition. (Ellis, 1991; Schmidt, 1990, 2001; Schmidt and Frota, 1986 as cited in Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2009, p. 83). Some of these researchers even argue that unconscious learning is impossible and that learning is the result of the awareness of forms. Ellis (1991) asserted that language acquisition must be set off by the process of learners noticing, comparing, and integrating the feedback (as cited in Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009, p. 92). Furthermore, the error correction should be carried out with the specific purpose to benefit the language learners. Hendrickson (2002) suggested that there are five fundamental questions that can serve as criteria for error correction: a) should learner errors be corrected? b) when should learner errors be corrected? c) which learner errors should be corrected? d) how should learner errors be corrected? e) who should correct learner errors?

The first criterion is whether errors should be corrected at all. Dekeyser (1993) stated that error correction has no positive effects for language development based on the results of his studies. Nevertheless, there are numerous research studies that found error correction in language learning to be beneficial to learners. Schultz (1996) claimed that 90 per cent of language learners thought that errors should be corrected while speaking in class while only 34 per cent of teachers thought so (as cited in Lowen, S. et al, 2009, p. 93). The data indicated that language learners indeed want their errors to be corrected as a part of learning. Bang (1999) asserted that most students believed that oral correction is beneficial to language learning, but there was no consensus on how and when it should be conducted. However, Oladejo noted that overcorrection at the early stages of language learning is counterproductive toward interlanguage development (1993, p. 72). Language practitioners should consider to what extent error correction can enhance the target of learners' language learning.

The next question criterion about error correction is when the errors should be corrected. Hendrickson (2002) suggested that the errors should be corrected when the learners do not recognize the flaws and when the errors interfere with the understandability of the message. Additionally, Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) asserted that error correction has a greater effect on learning during early developmental errors rather than late developmental errors due to the learners' typical readiness to notice and understand language features in the early phrases of acquisition (p. 94).

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) explained that errors in language learning can be divided into two categories: local and global errors (as cited in Hendrickson, 2002, p. 391). The global errors cause the listeners or readers to misunderstand the message whereas the local errors do not interfere with the perception of the message. It is noted that typical global errors made by L2 English learners in writing tasks are, for example, misuse of prepositions and pronouns, misapplication of articles, and gravely-misspelled lexical items. Common local errors are the misapplication of prepositions, and absence of subject-verb agreement. George (1972) suggested that frequently-occurring errors should be among the first errors that should be corrected. "Fossilized" errors are said to be a permanent impediment of interlanguage development, so they should also be corrected (Hendrickson, 2002, p. 392). Cathcart and Olsen (1976) reported that learners at different levels of proficiency believe that their pronunciation errors should receive priority in the correction of language errors (as cited in Hendrickson, 2002, p. 392).

Error correction approaches can be categorized as explicit and implicit correction. Researchers and teaching practitioners have not reached a consensus on what is the most effective approach to corrective feedback. Many researchers have asserted that explicit corrective feedback hinders learners' language internalization (Corder 1967; Hendrickson, 2002; Lyster, 2001). On the other hand, a number of researchers provide evidence of interlanguage development in L2 English learners who received explicit correction. Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen (2009) explain that since explicit feedback involves meta-discourse, it is perceived by learners as corrective feedback. On the contrary, implicit feedback is sometimes perceived as confirmation of the correctness of the learners' utterances. Gallagher (2007) believes that explicit correction has been proven to help adult ESL learners learn grammar quickly and effectively due to its negative evidence. Azizollah (2006) indicated that explicit correction of grammatical errors assists learners to internalize features of a language. This claim was based on the higher test scores of the students who received explicit correction compared with the students whose errors were corrected with implicit feedback.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) categorized types of teacher corrections of learners' errors as follows:

1. Explicit correction: the teacher intentionally indicates that what the student said was incorrect as well as supplies the correct answer.
2. Recast: the teacher indirectly indicates that what the student said was incorrect by reformulating errors.

3. Elicitation: the teacher explicitly asks the student for a correct form of the error by questions like “how do we say that in English?”
4. Metalinguistic clues: the teacher asks questions or provides comments on the student’s output.
5. Clarification request: the teacher asks questions to send a signal to the student. Such questions might be, for example, “Excuse me?” or “I don’t understand”
6. Repetition: the teacher repeats the student’s wrong output with adjusted intonation to signify the error (as cited in Lyster, 2001, p. 272).

Lyster (2001) also put elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification request, and repetition in a new classification called “the negotiation of form” Some researchers believed that the negotiation of form can facilitate the learners’ interlanguage development. Based on his study, Lyster (2001) claimed that that the negotiation of form provides learners with opportunities to analyze and internalize new knowledge of the target language into their memory. He indicated that recasts were normally applied to grammatical and phonological errors whereas negotiation of form usually was used to correct lexical errors. This notion has been supported by other researchers as well. Hawkes (2009) found that learners were able to self-correct after receiving recasts in previous group oral activities with the teacher. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) asserted that explicit correction is more effective for phonological errors than for syntactic errors and also more effective with easy rules than with difficult rules. On the other hand, they found that implicit feedback is more productive when given with difficult rules.

As the ASEAN community develops, future language teachers in Southeast Asia should be cognizant that Asian language learners might prefer explicit or recast error correction techniques due to cultural influences. Kamm (1990) indicated that Asian learners value harmonious relationships. Consequently, a direct approach, which is valued in western societies, might not work effectively with Asian learners, especially in language learning. Kamm (1990) also mentioned that Asian learners tend to agree with their teachers in order to keep harmony in the class. Consequently, confronting students with clarification requests might increase affective barriers that would be likely to negatively impact language learning.

Teachers’ and learners’ preference for the type of corrective feedback may also be a significant criterion for the success of error correction. Many teachers are aware of the dangers of overcorrection. However, this recognition sometimes causes teachers to decrease the number of error corrections. According to Cathcart and Olsen (1972), learners want to be corrected more often and comprehensively than some teachers assume (cited in Oladejo, 1993, p. 81). Lyster (2001) reported that teachers preferred negotiation of form to recasts to correct lexical errors in order to avoid the unintentional disclosure of answers.

Some new approaches to language teaching focus on the learners. For example, peer-correction has been increasingly integrated into class activities in conjunction with teacher corrections. Some research studies show that teachers need to be circumspect when correcting students’ errors to avoid causing them embarrassment and frustration (Holley and King 1971; Hendrickson, 2002). In addition, teachers should also be culturally sensitive for learners from

different backgrounds who hold different beliefs regarding being corrected. For instance, peer-correction is often viewed negatively in Singapore. Oladejo found that learners who were corrected by their peers might later risk being ridiculed by others (1993, p. 83).

The level of English language proficiency also needs to be considered in planning for error correction. Most advanced L2 English learners prefer to have their errors that are related to organization of ideas corrected by the teachers instead of by peer-correction. Meanwhile, Oladejo found that intermediate learners preferred the correction of their grammatical and lexical errors (1993, pp. 78-79). It was also noted that L2 English intermediate and advanced learners preferred the teachers to provide comments and cues to allow the learners to self-correct. Nevertheless, the intermediate L2 English learners also like to be provided with explicit correction as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

The techniques of error correction have been studied and discussed for several decades. However, there is no general consensus among language teachers and researchers on the usage and effects of error correction. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that overcorrection is counterproductive toward interlanguage development.

Many educators who believe in error correction propose that the errors that should be corrected are errors that occur frequently and global errors that cause misunderstanding of the message.

The literature reveals a wide variety of results regarding different types of error correction. However, there is some agreement among researchers concerning the effectiveness of explicit correction on phonological errors, and the notion that the most productive feedback needs to bring about the learner's self-correction for better interlanguage development. However, it appears that language teachers should not use a direct error correction approach to confront their learners' errors since it may increase the level of affective barriers to learning in the classroom.

It is noted that the teacher's feedback plays an important role in interlanguage development. Peer correction, however, should be applied to language classrooms with caution. Not all learners will benefit from peer correction as language learners from some cultures may have a negative attitude toward this type of error correction. Teachers also should consider the learner's level of language proficiency to guide their choice of error correction techniques to use as well.

#### 5. References

- Andringa, S., Gloppe, K.D. and Hacquebord, H. (2011). Effect of explicit and implicit instruction on free written response task performance. *Language Learning*, 61(3), 868-903.
- Azizollah, D. (2006). Error correction: Report on a study [Abstract]. *Language Learning Journal*. 34(1), 10-13. Retrieved from ProQuest Digital.

- Bang, Y. (1999). Reaction of EFL students to oral error correction. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 3, 39-51. Retrieved from Proquest Digital.
- Corder, S.P. (1967). The Significance of learner's errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, (5), 161-170.
- Dekeyser, R. (1993). The effect of error correction on L2 grammar knowledge and oral proficiency [Abstract]. *The Modern Language Journal*. 77(4), 501-514. Retrieved from ProQuest Didital. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00623.x
- Gallaher, A. (2007). Explicit grammar Instruction and the learning of phrasal verbs in English [Abstract]. Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertation. (AAI081822)
- Gass, S.M. and Selinker, L. (2001). Second language acquisition: an introductory course. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers: New Jersey.
- George, H.V. (1972). Common errors in language learning. Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers.
- Hawkes, L. (2009). Recasts revisited: The role of recasts in error detection and correction by adult ESL students [Abstract]. Retrieved from ProQuest Didital Dissertation. (AAIMR41152).
- Hendrickson, J.M. (2002). Error correction in foreign language teaching: Recent theory, research, and practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 62(8), 387-398. Retrieved from EBSCO.
- Henry, N., Culman, H. and VanPatten, B. (2008). More on the effects of explicit information in instructed SLA: A partial replication and a response to Fernández. *SSLA (Studies in Second Language Acquisition)*, 31, 559-575. doi: 10.1017/S0272263109990027.
- Holley, F.M. and King, J.K. (1971). Imitation and Correction in Foreign Language Learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, (55), 494-498.
- Kamm, R.A. (1990). *Reading attitudes in Asian ESL learners*. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov>
- Loewen, S., Li, S., Fei, F., Thompson, A., Nakatsukasa, K., Ahn, S. and Chen, X. (2009). Second language learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 91-104. Retrieved from EBSCO.
- Lyster, R. (2001). Negotiation of form, recasts, and explicit correction in relation to error types and learner repair in immersion classroom. *Language Learning*, 51, 265-301. Retrieved from ProQuest Didital.
- Oladejo, J.A. (1993). Error correction in ESL: Learners' Preferences. *TESL Canada Journal*. Vol. 10. 71-89.
- Richards, J.C. (2009). Reflective teaching in second language classrooms. Singapore: Cambridge University Press.
- Varnosfadrani, A.D. and Basturkmen, H. (2009). The effectiveness of implicit and explicit error correction on learners' performance. *System*, 37, 82-98. Retrieved from <http://sciencedirect.com>