

## Error Correction in the EFL Classroom

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**Resumen:** Cuando los estudiantes comienzan el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, se encuentran en un proceso de inter-lenguaje: una etapa en la cual no están usando su lengua materna pero tampoco la forma estándar del lenguaje meta. Es en este intento por usar el lenguaje meta donde aparecen diferentes tipos de errores que pueden ser lexicales, fonéticos o gramaticales, entre otros. Los errores juegan un papel muy importante en el aprendizaje de una lengua, porque estos muestran como el estudiante atraviesa el proceso de adquirir las formas correctas del idioma y así lograr comunicarse. El docente de idioma extranjero enfrenta entonces decisiones tales como: cuáles errores se deben corregir, como debe llevarse a cabo la corrección, cuál es el momento apropiado para dar retroalimentación, y quién debe participar corrigiendo errores. El presente estudio de caso pretende analizar cómo se da la corrección de errores en el aula de lengua extranjera a nivel de enseñanza primaria. Por medio de una guía de observación, se determinaron y compararon las técnicas de corrección utilizadas por docentes novatos y docentes más experimentados para establecer diferencias y similitudes entre ambos tipos de docentes. Se encontró que las técnicas varían según la actividad que se realiza, no obstante la tendencia general de ambos fue proveer la respuesta correcta a los estudiantes como recurso para ahorrar tiempo. Sin embargo, los novatos usaron más variedad de técnicas de corrección que dan oportunidad a los estudiantes de analizar sus errores y autocorregirse.

**Descriptores:** aprendizaje de una lengua, errores, equivocaciones corrección de errores, técnicas.

**Abstract:** When students start learning a foreign language, they find themselves in an 'interlanguage continuum', a stage in which they are using neither their first language nor the 'standard' form of the target language. It is in this attempt to use the target language where lexical, phonetic, or grammatical errors, among others take place. Errors play an important role in language learning because they show how the learner goes through the process of acquiring the correct forms of the language to achieve communication. The EFL teacher, then, faces decisions such as, which learner errors should be addressed, how correction should be carried out, what the appropriate time to give feedback on errors is, and who should participate

in correcting errors. The present case study aimed to analyze how error correction was taking place within the foreign language classroom at primary schools. By means of an observation guide, the techniques used for error correction by novice and experienced teachers were determined, and compared to establish differences and similarities between the two types of teachers. It was found that correction techniques vary according to the activity being practiced, but the general tendency for both types of teachers is to provide the correct answer to students as a means of saving time. Nonetheless, the novice teacher used a wider variety of correction techniques giving students the opportunity to analyze their errors and self-correct.

**Key words:** language learning, error, mistakes, error correction, techniques.

## I Introduction

Learning a foreign language encounters students with a series of complex mental processes in which they attempt to use the standard form of the target language, but they are not always successful. Thus, students will find themselves in an ‘interlanguage continuum,’ a stage in which they use neither their first language nor the ‘standard’ form of the target language. The testing of the target language rules result in lexical, phonetic, or grammatical errors, among others. Different reasons have been proposed to explain this linguistic state, but indistinctively of the cognitive reasons, errors are relevant to language learning because they give insights to teachers of the students’ progress and the weak areas that must be addressed during the lesson in order to achieve successful communication in the target language. Approaching error correction appropriately can serve as an aid for learners to recognize their weaknesses and strengths by means of the feedback they receive.

Given the importance of errors in language learning, it becomes necessary for teachers to draw attention to the error correction that takes place in their classroom. Many questions, then, arise as to what is the best way to give feedback when errors occur. For this reason, the present case study aims to analyze how error correction is taking place within the foreign language classroom at primary public schools. Four English teachers from three different schools were observed to determine the error correction techniques they were using during the lesson. During the research, lessons with different grade levels, ranging from first to sixth grade were recorded. The study focused on the teachers’ approach to error correction, not a specific group of students. A further distinction was made between the teachers observed, 2 novice and 2 experienced teachers took part in the study. The novice teachers have no more than three years working and the experienced teachers have more than 8 years.

More specifically, the case study examined the decisions made by teachers with regard to error correction in primary public schools. Different questions were explored such as:

- Who is participating in correcting errors?
- How is correction carried out in the English class?
- What kind of feedback on errors is the teacher giving?
- Which learner errors are being addressed in the language classroom?

- During which part of the lesson are errors corrected?

The research also compared the techniques used by novice and experienced teachers regarding error correction in the EFL classroom. This objective aimed to answer how the novice and experienced teachers differ in the way they correct errors, and what they have in common.

## II Literature Review

### 2.1 Importance of Error Correction in the Language Classroom

When students start learning a second or foreign language, they enter a series of complex mental processes related to the different tasks they will be expected and required to perform. In 1972, Selinker described an interlanguage continuum where a learner's output is representative of neither the first language nor the "standard" form of the target language. In other words, the learner attempts to use the target language, but there is an inevitable sort of interference from the mother tongue or overgeneralization of the target language rules. Based on Selinker's concept of interlanguage, Barron (2001) noted that the interlanguage is a transitory stage and that it mirrors the learner's understanding of the target language form because it represents the learner's hypothesis about the appropriate norm.

This suggestion of testing hypothesis through an interlanguage continuum gives relevance to the errors that take place when learners attempt to communicate because it allows teachers to identify the inappropriate rules that students have constructed regarding the target language. These errors can be produced in different areas of language such as lexical, phonetic, or grammatical. Of course, not all students' errors are caused because of the influence of their first language or overgeneralization of the target language norms. Sometimes students' failures may be just "slips of the tongue", in which case they are defined as mistakes since students already know the correct rule, but they simply do not perform it well. When learners make mistakes, they are conscious of them because they know the appropriate norm in the target language. Contrary to mistakes, errors take place for different reasons such as lack of knowledge of the correct rule or fossilization of mistakes, among other reasons. Richards (1985) referred to errors as intralingual and developmental. To this regard he explained:

A different class of errors is represented by sentences like *did he comed [and] I can to speak French*. Errors of this nature are frequent, regardless of the learner's language background. [...] Rather than reflecting the learner's inability to separate two languages, intralingual and developmental errors reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. (46-47)

On the other hand, Corder (1981) explained the existence of a trial and error approach in which errors evidence that the learner is constantly creating and testing hypothesis about the grammar and the second language in general. If the learner's utterance is accepted without comment or misunderstanding, then he can predict that it is correct, but if communication is not possible or correction takes place, then the utterance is incorrect.

The two points of view about error occurrence in language learning suggest the importance of these, and thus, the necessity of error correction in language teaching. Zhu

(2010) explained that errors are beneficial to teaching because they provide feedback on the materials and techniques that are being employed and they give valuable information to make decisions that can improve the syllabus, content development and lesson planning.

## **2.2 Approach to Error Correction**

Considering the importance of error correction in the process of language teaching and learning, teachers are confronted with decisions as to whom should make corrections in the classroom, and which manner is more suitable to help the learner acquire the correct forms of the target language.

Different studies (Hinkel, 2011; Zhu, 2010; Walz, 1982) have drawn diverse conclusions about the best way to approach error correction. The research has distinguished three different sources capable of giving corrective feedback. These are teacher correction, peer correction and self correction. The studies have tried to define which source is more effective, but Hinkel (2011) stated that there is no guideline to indicate which type is more appropriate for every classroom activity. It will depend more on the context and task being carried out.

Besides this, teachers need to determine the manner in which correction will be given. Several studies (Hinkel, 2011; Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009) have addressed two different manners of providing feedback, explicit and implicit. Explicit corrective feedback is when the student is given a grammatical explanation or overt error correction. This includes techniques like didactic recasts, explicit correction, explicit correction with metalinguistic explanation, metalinguistic clue, elicitation, and paralinguistic signal. Furthermore, implicit corrective feedback is when the teacher requests clarification of the incorrect utterance. Some the techniques include repetitions, clarification requests, silence, and even facial expressions indicating confusion. We have to remember that the use of techniques will depend on the teacher and on the learning conditions that his students present.

## **III Results and Inventory of Error correction used by the teachers**

The present analysis takes into account three main sections. First, there will be a description of the topics and activities that were being developed by the students in order for the reader to understand the context in which errors occurred. Then, the account of the decisions made by the teachers with regards to error correction will follow. These decisions have to deal with the types of errors teachers corrected, who participated in correcting errors, the way in which they carried out the correction, and the lesson period in which this was done. Finally, the correction techniques applied by the novice and the experience teacher will be compared in order to determine the similarities and differences found among them. In order to keep a record of what was taking place in the classrooms with the different teachers, an observation guide was used as the main instrument. In this way, it was possible to analyze and compare the data collected once all the observations were done (see appendices for more information).

### **3.1 The class**

The observations took place in three different primary schools. Likewise, the teachers were observed while working with different levels or grades. Therefore, the topics and activities developed varied from one class to another.

The topics being developed during the observations were addressed to enhance students' knowledge on hobbies and leisure activities; different ways to express likes and dislikes, description of natural resources, and forms to give opinions about people and places.

Regarding the main activities, some students were required to work in pairs to make up dialogues; others had to make small groups in order to exchange information about likes and dislikes. A group of sixth graders had to describe pictures in oral and written form. Finally, two of the groups observed were orally answering the teacher's questions either individually or as a whole group.

It is important to take into account that as the activities and topics changed from one group to another, the mistakes and errors students had and the correction techniques that teachers made use of differed too.

### **3.2 Which learner errors were addressed in the language classroom?**

During the lessons a considerable amount of errors had to do with pronunciation due to the fact that in most of the lessons, students were developing oral activities. The second most common type of error was related to word order or sentence structure where the learners had to construct sentences to give opinions, or ask for information. Spelling mistakes where students skipped or changed one letter were also found in the written exercises. Finally, some students did not know the required vocabulary so they used Spanish instead.

In some cases, students did not know the rule that they had to apply to use the language appropriately. In other cases, they seemed to have forgotten about such a rule because they quickly recalled it with the help of the teachers. In most cases students reacted positively to correction. There were a few students who kept on making the same error or avoided using the language after being corrected.

Finally, there were some occasions in which the teachers decided not to correct a specific error as they considered that this type of errors did not interfere much with the students' communication or that this went beyond the learner's expected knowledge. In this latter case, the teachers explained that students could later on learn the appropriate rule and correct the error they had committed.

### **3.3 Who was responsible for correcting errors?**

A very important aspect to analyze when talking about errors has to do with the fact that the teacher is not always responsible for carrying out the correction. Students can also participate in this task either in the form of self-correction or peer correction.

After comparing the results, it was seen that most correction came from the teachers' part. However, as the different groups were observed, it was noted that correction on the students' part increased according to the level they were placed in. Thus, the higher the level, the more participation they had correcting themselves or their classmates. Lower

grade students (first and second graders) joined basically in correcting pronunciation mistakes since they are just starting to build their linguistic knowledge.

The language ability that students presented was another relevant feature to consider. Some learners were able to find the errors and corrected themselves or their peers. However, there were other students who could not do any type of correction at all.

### **3.4 How were errors corrected? Which techniques were applied?**

During the lessons observed, the most common technique to correct students was to *provide the correct answer*. This was mostly done on the teachers' part. In this way, the teachers could save time and get students to not only know the appropriate use of the language quickly, but to move on to the next activity.

*Peer correction* was noted as the second most applied technique. However, in most cases, this was done without the teachers' intervention. They did not ask the learners to correct their classmates. Students did it on their own. During pair and group activities, it was possible for the learners to help each other. Then, peer correction was also carried out during the time that some teachers' required their students to participate individually to answer teacher's questions

Third, the novice teachers used strategies such as: discrimination exercises, rephrasing questions, and stressing words in order to help students correct themselves and their peers, especially during individual written work or oral practice.

Fourth, the teachers implemented the use of gestures in order to give students clues about a word they had to use or about the structure they needed to follow. Gestures served to catch students' attention and allowed for more interactive learning.

### **3.4 When did correction take place?**

The decision on when to carry out the correction varied from one teacher to another. Experienced teachers usually corrected their students' errors as soon as they occurred. In a few cases they waited to give correction some time later. Novice teachers, on the other hand, decided to provide general feedback on student's errors and mistakes specially when dealing with students oral presentations in order not to interrupt the flow of the conversation.

In the case of peer correction, this occurred spontaneously. That is, students corrected their classmates as soon as they discovered what was wrong. This was commonly done when dealing with pronunciation mistakes. It was interesting to note that in such cases several students provided the correct pronunciation of the word or words at the same time, in a "chorus" style. This event reveals that, at that point, it might have been a requirement for the group to already manage the correct pronunciation of such words.

Regarding lesson stages, most correction took place during the consolidation since this was when students were required to use the language more actively, putting into practice what they had learned.

### 3.5 Novice teachers vs. experienced teachers

3.5.1 What do the observed teachers have in common with regards to correction techniques?

Both kinds of teachers seemed to prefer *giving the correct answer* as the most appropriate technique. In many cases, they gave the right answer immediately after the mistake was made. They also set pair work activities and motivated students to give support to their peers if needed. That is, all of them promoted peer correction. Teachers provided explanations about spelling, word formation, sentence structure, and pronunciation for the whole group and not only for the person who had made the mistake.

3.5.2 In which ways do corrections techniques differ from one type of teacher to another? The novice teachers used more corrections techniques than the experienced ones. This might indicate that the former might have been exposed to other types of correction techniques more recently, so they were trying to implement these in the classroom.

The novice teachers corrected most of the mistakes they found. The fact that they wanted to correct everything might have worried students. The experienced teacher, on the other hand, did not correct too many mistakes and skipped some errors that he considered irrelevant at the moment.

## IV Conclusions

Analyzing error correction from different perspectives lead to a set of important conclusions:

- Time plays an important role in error correction in the EFL classroom. The fact that the most common technique used by the teachers was to provide the correct answer was closely related to the teachers' desire of saving time.
- Providing students with the correct answer is not always the best choice. As it was observed, learners do not have to do much thinking on why something is written or said in a specific way. This lack of mental effort might cause the learners to quickly forget about the correction they received.
- The use of diverse correction techniques gives students the possibility to achieve more meaningful learning. Students are challenged to do more thinking so that they can finally be able to correct their own mistakes.
- The amount and type of correction techniques applied depend closely on the kind of activity being developed. The more controlled the activity, the more correction students will receive. On the other hand, when students perform less controlled tasks such as dialogues or role-plays, it becomes impossible for teachers to be aware of every error their pupils have.
- Experience becomes valuable when choosing when to correct or to skip errors. As seen before, novice teachers wanted to correct every mistake while the experienced ones decided that it was good to let some errors pass. Only through practice can teachers learn to be flexible, taking into account the students' real

learning needs. Overcorrection might reduce the students' desire to say anything at all.

- Explicit correction is predominant in the EFL classroom. Errors were pointed out and the correct form of the language was given. Implicit correction, on the contrary, was sporadic. Again, time plays a determinant role since it takes longer for students to understand one rule through implicit methods.
- We have to remember that the use of techniques will depend on the teacher and on the learning conditions that his students present. These techniques should aid the teacher to make students correct their errors and achieve good and meaningful use of the language. Thus, there is not an only and magic way to carry out correction in the foreign language classroom.

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**Appendices**

<b>Observation Guide</b>	
School _____	Date: _____
Teacher: _____	Level: _____
Teacher's experience: _____	
Topic being developed: _____	
Observer: _____	

Lesson phase	Learner's error	Teacher's response	Technique