Error Correction Techniques and their Impact on Beginner EFL Learners at Universidad Nacional, Coto Branch

Karla María Fonseca Sánchez
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
karla.fonseca.sanchez@una.cr

Federico Soto Peralta
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
fd24p@hotmail.com

Resumen

El análisis y la corrección de errores han arrojado luz sobre los procesos que conlleva el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. En el pasado los errores eran estigmatizados y vistos de manera despectiva por los profesores. Hoy por hoy tal perspectiva ha cambiado; los errores son considerados como una fuente valiosa de información. La aceptación de esta nueva visión radica en el cambio de las perspectivas tradicionales acerca de la adquisición de una segunda lengua. Debido a la importancia de los conceptos anteriores en el campo de la adquisición de una segunda lengua (ASL), el presente estudio tiene la finalidad de 1) identificar las diferentes técnicas de corrección de errores empleadas por los profesores de la Universidad Nacional Campus Coto en el curso Inglés Integrado II, 2) determinar si la técnica realmente ayuda a los estudiantes a internalizar un segundo idioma. A la luz del paradigma cualitativo, esta investigación sigue el método de estudio de caso, ya que se examinó la situación particular de un grupo de estudiantes dentro de su contexto natural: el aula. No obstante, es imperativo mencionar que también se utilizaron métodos cuantitativos para recolectar datos de manera más exacta y confiable. Los métodos de recolección de datos empleados fueron observaciones, un cuestionario y una entrevista semi estructurada. En relación con los resultados obtenidos, se descubrió que los estudiantes prefieren ser corregidos al final de las actividades orales. También, los estudiantes están a favor de las técnicas de reformulación, corrección posterior y señalamiento puesto que ellos consideran que esas son las técnicas más adecuadas para su aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: técnicas para corrección de errores, señalamiento, rectificar, reformulación, enseñanza del inglés.

Abstract

Error analysis and correction have been very productive fields that have shed light on the processes involved in learning a second language. In the past, errors were highly stigmatized and pejoratively seen by teachers, but now they are viewed as a valuable source of information. The acceptance of such errors nowadays has to do with a shift from the traditional view of how a second language is acquired to a more integrative perspective. Due to the importance of this topic in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the present study aims at 1) identifying the different error correction techniques employed in the

Integrated English II course at Universidad Nacional of Costa Rica, Coto Extension and 2) determining to which extent those techniques contribute to beginners' second language development. In the light of the qualitative research paradigm, this investigation followed the case study approach due to the fact that the specific situation of a small group of learners was examined in their naturally occurring setting, the classroom. Notwithstanding, it is necessary to point out that some quantitative data gathering methods were also used for the purpose of collecting more accurate and reliable data, which in turn contributed to a better understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny. The data-collection instruments employed were classroom observations, questionnaires and a semistructured interview. Among the findings obtained, students overtly expressed that they liked being corrected at the end of their performance tasks. They were in favor of reformulation, recast, delayed correction, reactive teaching and pinpointing since they thought that these techniques were appropriate and nonthreatening.

1. Introduction

This study was conducted at Universidad Nacional, Coto Branch with first-year students of the English Teaching Major who were enrolled in the course Integrated English II and their professors. The rationale for this investigation lies in the need to address the treatment that has been commonly given to learners' errors. In past decades, errors were highly stigmatized, seen sometimes as terminal diseases, and, unfortunately, they are still considered as such by some instructors. However, the notion of completely freeing students from errors has changed thanks to the different studies conducted by remarkable scholars such as Pit Corder, Jack C. Richards, Rod Ellis, and Douglas Brown. Now, there is a more open perspective about the way errors should be treated in the classroom. In today's new language teaching models, errors are an indication of the active learning progress being made by a student (Yule, 1996, p. 166). Above all, an error shows that something in the learner's cognitive process is developing to ultimately become like the target language form.

1.1. Research Questions

- What are the techniques used by professors to address learners' errors in the classroom?

- In what ways do these error correction techniques contribute to students' learning?

- How do students perceive the error correction techniques employed by professors?

1.2. General Objective

To inquire into the nature of the error correction techniques employed in the course Integrated English II for the purpose of offering suggestions for error correction techniques for English Teaching beginner majors.

1.3. Specific Objectives

- To identify the error correction techniques used in Integrated English II.

- To determine if the error correction techniques used by professors aid students' learning.

- To analyze students' perceptions about the error correction techniques used by their professors.

2. Literature Review

According to Ellis (2002), errors give good reasons for paying attention to learners' errors (p. 14). He mentions that errors are noticeable features of learners' language and making errors can facilitate learning when learners correct errors they commit by themselves. In addition, errors are important for both teachers and learners. Corder (1981) states that the making of errors benefits learners in that they are allowed to test their hypothesis about the nature of the language they are learning (p. 11). Also, Smith, as cited by Ellis (1997), states that when learners test a hypothesis, there must be the possibility of being wrong (p. 15). A wrong hypothesis leads to errors. This makes learners know what they have not learned from the target language.

2.1. Types of Errors

When learning a second language, people tend to commit many different types of errors when they speak. Such errors are seen as important for linguists because they think mistakes reflect the learners' development in the language they are exposed to. Before mentioning the types of errors that are going to be presented in this paper, it is important to clarify that there are what linguists call *interlanguage errors*, which are the errors caused by the interference of the mother tongue and *intralingual and developmental errors*, which reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage.

2.2. Intralingual and Developmental Errors

These intralingual and developmental errors are the type of errors expected from any individual learning a second language. They are the errors that persist from week to week. In some cases such errors reflect the final grammatical competence of the individual; in other instances, they may be indicators of transitional competence. Among the most well-known developmental and intralingual errors, there are four types of errors, which are overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false - concept hypothesis.

Overgeneralization errors are those errors that take place when the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of other structures in the target language. For instance, *he can sings*, *it is occurs*, and so on. According to Richards (1970),

overgeneralization generally involves the creation of one deviant structure in place of two regular structures; this may be the result of the learner incapacity to handle all the grammatical forms and linguistic burden (p. 6).

The other type of error is the **ignorance of rule restrictions**. This one occurs when the learner applies a rule in a context where it does not apply. For instance, *the man who I saw him*, *I make him to do it*, or *he explained me the book*. In the first case, the learner violates the limitations on subjects in structures with *who*, then in the second one the learner ignores the restrictions of the verb *make*, and in the third case what happens is what Richards calls a "misuse in preposition." A misuse in prepositions happens when the learner encounters a particular preposition with one type of verb and then he attempts by analogy to use the same preposition with similar verbs; another example could be *he said to me and he ask to me*.

Incomplete application of rules shows that the learner's deviancy represents the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterances. For instance, when making questions the learner may ask *How long it takes?* or when replying to questions the learner may answer *"what was she saying?"* (teacher) *"she saying she would ask him*(student). According to Richards (1970), the second language learner is mainly interested in communication. He realizes that he can achieve efficient communication without the need of mastering the necessary rules of question usage; motivation to achieve communication may exceed motivation to produce grammatically correct sentences and questions (p. 12). These are some more examples:

Teacher's questions	*Student's Response*
1. *What does she tell him?*	*She tell him to hurry*
2. *What does he have to do?*	*He have to do write the address*

Finally, there is the fourth type of error which is the **false-concept hypothesis**. A contrastive approach carried out by Richards (1970) shows that there is a class of developmental errors that derives from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language, in better terms there is a building of false systems and concepts by the learner (p. 14). For instance, some teachers may think that a good way to introduce the simple and continuous forms is by showing its contrast as in *is = present state, is+ing = present action*, but when the past is introduced it is often introduced as a past state as in *I was sick*. Thus, the learner completes his understanding by analogy:

is = present state

is+ ing= present action

was= past state

was+ing= past action

Thus, past state = I was sick

Past action = *he was climbed the tree* instead of *he climbed the tree*, and *I was going downtown yesterday* instead of *I went downtown yesterday.*

Ellis (2002) has also shed light on this type of error when he says that in some classroom contexts teachers or textbooks can lead the students to make faulty hypotheses about the language and Stenson, as cited in Ellis (2002), termed this as *induced errors* (p. 179).

2.3. Interlanguage Errors

One major exponent of these types of errors is Stephen Pit Corder, who established the steps to be followed in order to analyze errors. According to him, the first stage is the selection of the corpus (real world texts). Then, the following stage has to do with the identification of errors. The third stage is concerned with their analysis. The fourth focuses on their classification, while the fifth concentrates on their evaluation (Corder, 1981, p. 11).

Dulay and Burt, cited in Alonso (1997), refer to only one type of interlingual error, which they call interference errors, which are defined as those reflecting mother tongue structures and which do not appear in the L2 acquisition data of the target language (p.8). Nevertheless, neither Corder's, nor Dulay and Burt's classification are thorough enough to take into account every type of interlingual error.

In contrast, Lott, as cited by Corder (1981), proposes a more precise classification. Three types of Interference errors are distinguished (p. 37). They are overextension of analogy, transfer of structure, and interlingual/intralingual structures. The first one is defined as overextension of analogy, and it occurs when the student misuses a vocabulary item because it is similar, either phonetically, orthographically, semantically or syntactically, to another form in the Ll. For instance, the word *actually*, which is really similar to the Spanish word "actualmente."

Transfer of structure deviant forms constitutes the second group. This happens when the student commits a grammar error because the mother tongue rules are followed. Learners may make errors because they assume that the target language and their native language are similar, and they are not. Among some examples are the followings:

a. *because the parents of the two boys robed in a Institute some papers very important.*

b. *this woman visited his girlfriend for speaking other boyfriend.*

c. *the rector wanted that Leone was in prison for ever and made him a lot of bad things.*

According to Alonso (1997), the word order is altered, sentence two shows the translation of the Spanish structure *para hablar de* instead of the English one to speak about (p. 10). In example number three, the verb form wanted should be followed by the preposition to + infinitive, but instead the Spanish structure que + infinitive is employed.

Pronouns are the second reason for transfer of structure errors. The syntactic and morphological complexity of this word class in Spanish makes it difficult for students to cope with its use in English. (Alonso, 1997, p. 10).

2.4. In the Classroom Error Correction Virgil Oller's Model

There are many strategies and styles of error correction that teachers can use; this choice usually matches the teaching method that the language professional is using. While early L2 teaching methods focused on rote learning, emphasized students creating perfect output (for example the Audio-Lingual Method), and used error correction excessively, newer models based on a natural approach emphasize communicative competence and recognize that not correcting all student errors is more productive. (Fang & Xue-Mei, 2007, p. 23).

2.5. When and How?

When correcting errors it is important to highlight the positive in learners' journeys to success. Notwithstanding, it is up to the teacher to discern when to or not to correct the student. One of the criteria when deciding when to correct student errors is whether the error is global or local. Burt as cited in Ellis (2002) defines global errors as those that hinder communication; they prevent the hearer from comprehending some aspect of language (p.194). On the other hand, a local error, at the decision of the teacher, can often be overlooked for the purpose of not hindering students' learning process. This is because "local errors do not prevent the message from being heard, usually because there is only a minor violation of one segment of a sentence, allowing the hearer/reader to make an accurate guess about the intended meaning" (Ellis, 2002, p. 194). On the other hand, when a student makes a global error, this is probably an error that should be corrected. This is because, as it was previously mentioned, global errors hinder communication, so they need to be corrected in some way since the message may otherwise remain distorted (Ellis, 2002, p. 194).

Notwithstanding, Ellis (2002), highlights that the matter of how and when to correct errors has turned exceedingly complex. He adds that research on error correction methods is not at all conclusive on the most effective methods or techniques for error correction (p. 194).

2.6. Error Correction Techniques

Some teachers correct every mistake made by their students. Other teachers rarely or never correct their students' mistakes. Depending on the approach the teacher uses, this may make students nervous, lead them to a lack of fluency and, in worst cases, this can lead students to speak, but using an English that is hard to understand.

It is better to avoid either extreme. Teachers should try to find an in-between approach. They need to choose the right time to correct and the right time to let students speak freely. In this line, Ramirez (2007) recommends the following techniques:

a. **Avoid negative feedback:** Teachers must avoid negative feedback. For instance, saying "No" gives no clues to a student of what he/she did wrong. Besides, such technique may have a negative effect on the students' affective filter.

b. **Utterance repair:** This is a correction in which the teacher corrects the student's erroneous utterance; it is a correction in the strictest sense of the word. Teachers might do this because they are interested in maintaining the flow of the conversation, but at the same time remind students that they also have to focus on form (Ramírez, 2007, p. 117).

c. **Pinpointing:** This is another widely used technique in which the teacher is expected to repeat the sentence for the student to identify the error. Knop suggests that the best way to do this is by emphasizing the last word before the error (cited in Ramírez, 2007, p. 117). There is also a brief change in the tone of voice, and some teachers tend to lengthen the vowel to allow students to catch the idea that the fragment needs to be refined or corrected.

d. **Request for clarification:** Some common expressions used by teachers using this technique are *I'm sorry, I didn't understand, He what?, Excuse me?* This technique is very friendly to students. Research suggests that when learners re-cast their message after receiving a clarification request, the message tends to improve despite not giving any explicit explanation of the mistake (Thornbury, 2000, p. 20).

e. **Literal interpretation:** This has to do with the literal interpretation of the student's erroneous form in order to show the unintended meaning expressed. The teacher expects that the learner appreciates the difference between the erroneous form and the correct form (Ramírez, 2007, p. 119). For example:

> S: He has a long hair.
> T: Just one like this (draws a bald man with one hair)
> Or
> S: He had a heart (pronounced as hair) attack.
> T: The teacher points at girl's hair and changes his intonation in the word attACK?

f. **Reactive teaching:** This takes place when the teacher usually takes the students' mistakes to make an impromptu teaching point. In betters terms, part of the class is going to be based on the mistakes the students make. (Ramírez, 2007, p. 119)

g. **Reformulation:** This is basically what parents do with children. Parents have a tendency to correct their children and provide a correct version of what the child has said.

h. **Delayed Correction:** In this type of technique, the teacher writes down the students' errors for future reference and discussion. The purpose is to provide feedback in order not to disrupt students' fluency.

3. Data Analysis

For the purpose of this investigation, the researchers conducted a series of classroom observations of professors' and students' behavior in their natural setting, which was the Integrated English II class, so as to record the type of errors that students made and the different correction techniques that were used to address them. Students' insights into the implementation and effectiveness of error correction techniques in this particular course were also analyzed since it is always relevant to tackle the participants' own appraisal of the processes into which they are immersed when attempting to learn a second language.

A discussion of the main findings, as obtained through the different data-collection instruments employed as well as the triangulation technique, follows in the next sections with respect to the order in which the research questions that guided this study were formulated.

3.1. Types of Error Observed

Among the most common types of errors observed, interlanguage errors were present in all the observations conducted. L1 interference was also present at the morphosyntactic and phonological level.

At the morphosyntactic level, for instance, when giving a speech that they prepared at home, some students said the following:

peoples instead of *people*

electrics appliances instead of *electrical appliances*

comprobate instead of *to prove*

talk about of instead of *talk about*

actually instead of *currently / nowadays*

for receive instead of *to receive*

At the phonological level, errors were more frequent, with instances like these:

chi<u>l</u>d pronounced with /i/

<u>ou</u>r pronounced with /ɔu/

f<u>ir</u>st pronounced with /i/

s<u>au</u>sage pronounced with /au/

b<u>e</u>cause pronounced with /ɛ/

socialize pronounced with /s/

ghost pronounced with /ɔ/

danger pronounced with /eɪ/

met pronounced with /i/

took pronounced with /ɔ/

exam pronounced with /ks/

karate pronounced with /e/

weather pronounced with flap /ɾ/

lasted omission of /ɪd/

since pronounced with /aɪ/

lived with extra vowel /d/

Then, among the intralingual and developmental errors, students frequently said:

They are fallen in love instead of *They are falling in love* (**overgeneralization**)

He is a house wife instead of *She is a house wife* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

Many people thinks instead of *Many people think* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

They wants instead of *They want* (**overgeneralization**)

places which teach instead of *places where teaching* (**overgeneralization**)

Old TVs was instead of *Old TVs were* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

To don't harm instead of *not to harm* (**overgeneralization**)

They have them still instead of *They still have them* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

We was working instead of *We were working* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

He didn't the homework instead of *He did not do homework* (**false-concept hypothesis**)

He can to play instead of *He can play* (**overgeneralization**)

I don't like children too instead of *I don't like children either* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

I like teach instead of *I like to teach* (**incomplete application of rule**)

I've studied a lot of things last week instead of *I've studied a lot of things since last week* (**ignorance of rule restriction**)

Some errors were committed only once and others were repeated very often; mainly those pronunciations errors caused by L1 interference such as *child*, *our*, *first*. The type of error that was rarely perceived was the false - concept hypothesis category.

3.2. Types of Error Correction Techniques

The first technique observed was delayed correction. While the students were giving speeches, the professor sat at one side of the students and wrote down the mistakes they committed. Such procedure, according to Ramirez (2007), is recommended when students are involved in communicative activities (p. 120).

On some occasions and with some students, the professor asked them for clarification. Perhaps, the purpose was to 1) tell them in a friendly way that a mistake had been made and 2) prompt more interaction. Never did the professor interrupt students nor correct their erroneous utterances during an oral presentation.

Another technique employed was reactive teaching. When the students finished their impromptu talks, the professor wrote on the board all the errors committed by the students and started to give a sort of magistral class. Among the expressions or corrections he made are the following:

T: *What is wrong here guys? "Impact"*

SS: *The stress, Professor*

T: *Career is different from major, when you start working, you develop your career.*

T: *The word "Job" is not used as a verb. It is "work."*

Utterance repair in which the teacher corrected the student's erroneous utterance was also observed. This is a correction in the strictest sense of the word. For instance, when a student mispronounced a word such as took as /tɔk/, she immediately corrected the erroneous utterance by saying /tuːk/; you have to say / tuːk/. This type of direct correction probably took place in order to save time.
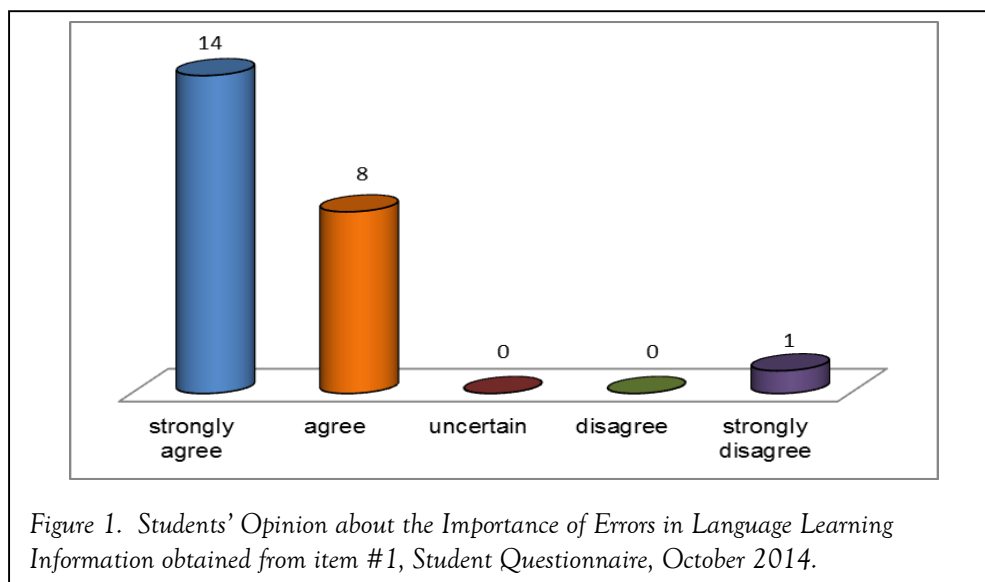
The last error correction technique implemented was pinpointing. For example, when a student said a present perfect tense sentence without the word *since*, the professor repeated the same sentence for the student to identify the error and provided the right sentence by emphasizing the word *since*.

3.3. Students' Perceptions

A questionnaire was given to students for the purpose of eliciting their perceptions and attitudes about 1) the role of errors in language learning, 2) the importance of error correction as a tool to improve their English proficiency level, and 3) the way their professors correct errors in the classroom.
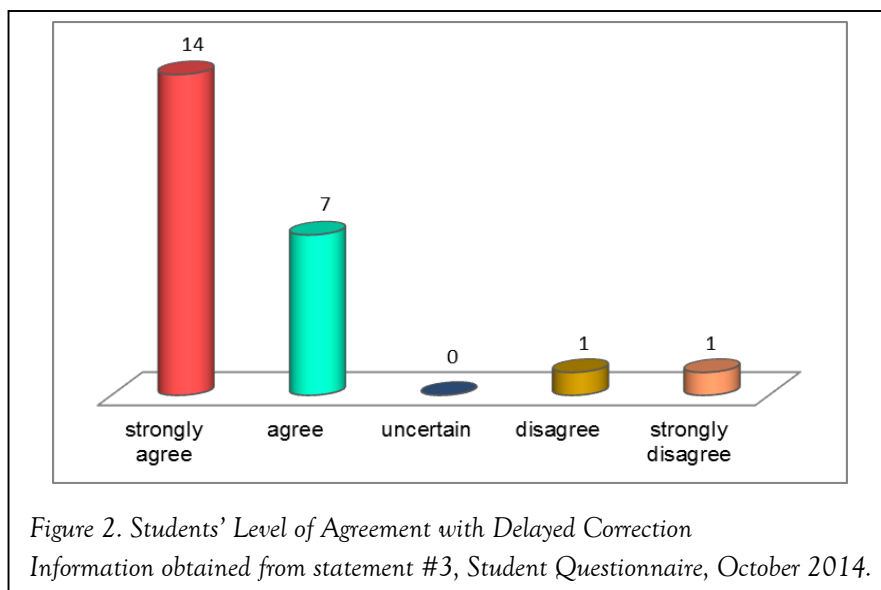
The results obtained suggest that these learners were aware of the fact that errors are relevant and necessary for language learning to take place. The following graph shows that the students' responses were highly positive in this case:

Figure 1. Students' Opinion about the Importance of Errors in Language Learning Information obtained from item #1, Student Questionnaire, October 2014.

They also manifested that they like to be corrected and that they like this to be done right on the spot, which in turn was supported by their negative appreciation toward delayed correction techniques. This is illustrated in the graph below.

The last section of the student questionnaire contained three open-ended questions which asked the participants to state exhaustive information about 1) their favorite error correction technique, 2) their appraisal of the way their professors corrected errors, and 3) suggestions for improvement.

With regard to the specific way learners liked to be corrected when they made an error, two contrasting patterns were found. The most common one was immediate correction in oral form in front of peers. Many students found it useful when the professor addressed their error right on the spot. They also asked for clarification of the type of error they had made and an explanation of the rule that they had failed to apply. The other pattern identified was discrete error correction. In this case, some learners explained that they preferred to be corrected in person, with the professor approaching them to inform them about the error that they had committed. These pupils emphasized that they felt embarrassed when corrections were conducted in front of peers.

Figure 2. Students' Level of Agreement with Delayed Correction
Information obtained from statement #3, Student Questionnaire, October 2014.

A new pattern, which was not expected though it became recurrent, was found in terms of the way such corrections, be it oral or written or whole-class or personal, had better be made. Many students were emphatic that any sort of error correction needs to be sensitive to the person's feelings; in other words, professors have to try to correct pupils in a polite and cordial way so that they do not feel "ignorant" or "stupid."

On account of the students' appreciation of the techniques employed by their professors, the majority of them said that they were satisfied with the way they had done it so far because they thought that their learning had benefited from such corrections. Only one participant suggested alternate ways to address errors on the grounds that s/he thought that professors could use several resources and techniques to foster learning. These are the most salient recommendations for professors of Integrated English II as reported by learners:

- Use oral error correction techniques

- Be polite

- Explain the rules

- Be patient

- Handle students' confidence

In general terms, it can be said that this particular group of learners were quite satisfied with the error correction techniques employed in the classroom, but they were more concerned about the affective variables that resulted from such practices. This interpretation is supported by the fact that most of the suggestions that they provided dealt with patience, time, politeness, and confidence, which are factors that can bring about emotional consequences of various sorts in students.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the information gathered from the different data-collection instruments, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Beginner students seem to have a preference for immediate error correction.

- A great amount of students were in favor of the following techniques because they consider them appropriate and non-threatening: reformulation, delayed correction, and reactive teaching and pinpointing.

- This study shed light on different areas that need further examination, namely, fossilization and its prevention.

- In order to answer research question 2, it is the necessary to conduct a new study with a different research design because the one adopted by this investigation did not allow the researchers to determine how the error correction techniques used by the course professors contribute to students' learning.

- Students are highly aware of the way they should be corrected without affecting their dignity. Teachers should therefore ask them how they want to be corrected so that affective variables can be accounted for while correcting errors in the language classroom.

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