Error Treatment

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Abstract

Error treatment is at issue in second language learning.   This paper discusses the effectiveness of error treatment, basing the arguments on theoretical backgrounds and empirical research evidence on this matter.   Effective error correction, which should be distinguished from its ineffective counterpart, seems to have reasonable grounds, but there is little evidence to prove it. This paper presents the elements of effective error treatment such as how to correct, what type of error is to be corrected, and learner training.   Furthermore, not only teachers' and researchers' view of error treatment but also learners' view is taken into consideration.

I believed that errors made by learners needed to be corrected by the teacher in the language classroom.   While I was teaching English at high school in Japan, I conformed to this belief.   As I had a number of opportunities to observe language lessons, however, I found that not all teachers corrected learners' errors in lessons.   This observation aroused my interest in error treatment, i.e., teachers' responses to learners' errors ranging from teacher feedback and grammar instruction to learner training.   I began to wonder if errors should be corrected or not, i.e., if error correction successfully leads learners to second language acquisition (SLA).   This question is very important and must be solved in order for language teachers, including myself, to teach language effectively.

In this paper, I explore a theoretical background that written error treatment may be necessary.   In order for L2 learner to promote their learning, teacher feedback including positive and negative evidence may play an important role because learners need to notice their errors to move on to a developmental path.   I also discuss research evidence about written error treatment and the importance of including a learners' perspective on error treatment.   Moreover, I analyze several elements of error correction if it is done.

Error treatment may be necessary for successful language learning because it can make learners notice a mismatch between their L2 production and the TL form, thereby focusing learners' attention on form.   Yet research evidence shows no agreement on this issue.   However, it is important to note the fact that learners generally think error treatment necessary and rely on it. Moreover, effective error correction should be distinguished from ineffective counterpart.   Effective error treatment considers how to correct, what type of error to correct, and learner training.

Mistake vs. Error

To begin with, the distinction needs to be made between mistakes and errors. Mistakes are made haphazardly. The learner who makes a mistake is able to detect and correct the mistake if necessary. That is, the learner can recognize the discrepancy between what he/she has written and the target language (TL). For instance, I sometimes make a mistake such as "Did you bought this?" This is a mistake since I know what I have written is deviant from the correct TL form. Errors, on the other hand, are made systematically and repeatedly because the learner doesn't notice that errors are made (Gass & Selinker, 2001). In other words, errors are part of the learner's interlanguage (IL); i.e., a linguistic system that a learner constructs in his/her mind. For example, I occasionally observe some L2 learners making the following error as in, "I would really appreciate if you could loan me the book" as opposed to the correct form "I would really appreciate it if you could loan me the book." As far as I observe, this error keeps occurring over and over again. This may be because such an error is part of the learners' ILs and because she doesn't know she is making an error. In addition, although they are also part of ILs, some errors may reflect learners' various developmental stages of acquiring the particular form. According to Corder (1981), errors are "indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn" (p. 11). That is, errors may not always suggest learners' failure of acquiring a particular thing.

Error treatment should not focus on mistakes because even native speakers sometimes make mistakes. Corder (1981) maintains that "it would be quite unreasonable to expect the learner of as second language not to exhibit such slips of the tongue (or pen) " (p. 10). I believe that the purpose of error correction should not be to make students writing totally free from mistakes. Correcting mistakes can be detrimental for effective language learning because they may be overwhelmed by too much correction. Rather, teachers should focus on errors, thereby promoting language learning. To do so, teachers first need to understand this distinction between error and mistake clearly.

Two Types of Evidence

What is necessary for correcting errors? Importantly, two types of external evidence (i.e., *positive evidence* and *negative evidence*) may play an important role for learners in order to formulate, test out, and confirm/reject hypotheses in the mind. Positive evidence is what learners

hear/read in the target language, thereby telling them what is possible. For instance, learners may hear/read the following linguistic data as in "I am writing an essay now." This will be positive evidence for learners because they are actually used in real life. Based on positive evidence, learners can construct their ILs. This positive evidence, however, never tells learners whether or not the following forms are incorrect: "I am write an essay now," or "I writing an essay now." Based on positive evidence only, it is likely that learners suppose that the three forms above might be possible although native speakers of the TL prefer to use the first utterance. As such, positive evidence alone is insufficient for successful SLA (White, 1991).

Negative evidence, on the other hand, tells learners that their particular utterances are not possible in the TL, including direct correction such as "That's not right" or indirect correction such as "Excuse me?" In order for learners to understand what is correct/incorrect, they seem to need negative evidence that indicates which form is deviant from the right one (s). To return to the example above, it is not until they are shown that the second and the third alike are impossible in English that learners recognize which is correct/incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 1990 ; White, 1991). Thus, negative evidence compensates for limitations of positive evidence, by showing what is not possible in the target language. As such, learners are able to reformulate part of their ILs with the help of negative evidence. Many researchers also maintain that negative evidence of this sort is a necessary condition for adult second language learning (Birdsong, 1989 ; Gass, 1988, Long, 1996 ; White, 1991).

Learners' Noticing

More importantly, learners need to notice their errors in order to incorporate feedback into their ILs (Schmidt, 1990). To notice errors means for learners to know there is need of revision in particular parts of their interlanguage that is deviant from the TL. Noticing errors can be a starting point of language learning. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) gives a good speech example in which negative evidence made a learner notice an error and thereby correct it by him/herself (p. 204):

NNS: He pass his house.

NS: Sorry?

NNS: He passed, he passed, ah, his sign.

In the example above, negative evidence provided by the NS seems to have forced the NNS learner

to reflect on his speech, notice an error, thereby ending up leading the learner to correct the error. As far as my learning experience is concerned, I have relied on negative evidence for L2 development. I often test out hypotheses and confirm/reject them based on feedback given from my interlocutors. Definitely, negative evidence has played a significant role in my L2 learning.

Thus, negative evidence provides learners with information that utterances are deviant and thereby enables learners to notice their errors. However, such type of negative evidence (i.e., Sorry?) cannot always make them notice their errors effectively because this type of negative evidence doesn't give learners specific information as to where they have made errors. In the example above the learner was likely to be in the process of acquiring the particular structure, thereby successfully noticing and correcting the error without specific information as to where an error is. Unless they know exactly where an error has been made, they will not be able to make use of such feedback even though learners receive plenty of negative evidence.

Gass and Varonis (1989) provide an example in which positive evidence also could successfully make learners' notice their errors (pp. 80-81):

Line 1 Hiroko : A man is uh drinking c-coffee or tea uh with uh the saucer of the uh uh coffee set is uh in his uh knee.

Line 2 Izumi : In him knee.

Line 3 Hiroko : Uh on his knee.

Line 4 Izumi : Yeah.

Line 5 Hiroko : On his knee.

Line 6 Izumi : So sorry. On his knee.

Izumi tried to provide a correct form as opposed to Hiroko's error (Line 1), ending up giving an incorrect form (Line 2). In spite of Izumi's incorrect feedback, Hiroko successfully noticed her error (Line 3). Izumi was also able to notice her error (Line 2) and thereby incorporate the correct form (Line 6) thanks to positive evidence supplied by her interlocutor.

Negative evidence can signal something is wrong with a learner's interlanguage. However, even though learners notice their errors in their interlanguages, they might not be able to correct their errors by themselves. In order for learners to correct errors, as mentioned in the example above, positive evidence including correct forms as opposed to errors can play a part. To sum up, it seems that learners first need to notice their errors and then search for correct linguistic data in order to reformulate their ILs. To do so, learners seem to need some feedback on their production.

Both positive and negative evidence may be good candidates for effective feedback, thereby enabling learners to notice their errors successfully. Therefore, some teacher feedback seems to play a significant role for language learning.

Research Evidence

Teacher correction of students' written errors is a controversial issue among L2 writing experts and SLA researchers. Some researchers argue against the effectiveness of error treatment. Truscott (1996) maintains that grammatical correction is clearly unproductive. There are several reasons why some researchers think error correction ineffective. Firstly, they point out that teacher feedback always varies because of teachers' ability and willingness to correct errors, meaning that teacher feedback is not always complete and accurate. Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) conducted a case study in which they carefully examined three teachers' feedback to nine different students (three beginners, three intermediates, and three advanced learners). They found that the teachers' feedback was incomprehensive, stating that the teachers "avoided or overlooked over twice as many problems as [they] commented on" (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990, pp. 160-161). Truscott (1996) also points out that "questions regarding grammar can be very difficult, even for experts" (p. 350). Ferris (1999) admits this argument, stating that "poorly done error correction will not help student writers and may even mislead them" (p. 4). She, however, insists that clear distinction should be made between effective and ineffective error correction. She argues that effective teacher feedback, which is "selective, prioritized, and clear," can make a difference although she doesn't provide any evidence on this argument.

Secondly, Truscott (1996) argues that learners tend to receive teacher feedback in vain and that correction causes stress and disheartens learners. Few studies demonstrate whether students incorporate teacher feedback on their errors in their original drafts and produce correct forms in their revised papers. However, Ferris (1999) argues that the subjects in the studies Truscott cited are not comparable because Truscott put together the results of some studies that include ESL and EFL settings. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) maintain that EFL students are less motivated to correct their errors and revise their papers because their classes often don't require them to do so.

Thirdly, there is also little evidence that teacher feedback assists students in improving their writing in the long run. Ferris (2002) states that:

While it is interesting to observe whether students attend to and successfully incorporate

teacher error feedback into papers they immediately revise, it is arguably more important to assess whether such intervention actually helps students to acquire correct language forms and improve their self-editing strategies, as measured through improved written accuracy over time. (p. 15)

Although it is important that research should show the effectiveness of error correction over time rather than an immediate effect, it is also difficult to prove it, using longitudinal studies. Even if studies demonstrate the immediate incorporation of teacher error correction in their subsequent papers, it doesn't necessarily insure the students' long-term progress. On the other hand, even longitudinal studies cannot conclusively prove the effectiveness of teacher feedback over time because many variables such as exposure to L2 and writing instructions intervene in such studies.

In addition, Truscott (1996) argues that "probably accuracy is improved through extensive experience with the target language" (p. 360), so that teachers should not abandon grammar correction at all. He concludes by stating that "teachers can help students' accuracy at least as much by doing nothing as by correcting their grammar" (p. 360). On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, it is obvious that learners utilize negative evidence as well positive evidence.

Ferris (2002), on the other hand, argues that short-term effect may not be irrelevant to long-term progress of student writing, stating that "such editing activities are necessary steps along that road" (p. 16). As she puts it, it must be true that immediate effect may be relating to long-term progress. However, teachers cannot always expect immediate effects of error correction. Rather, it is dangerous to seek for them. The reason for this is that learners need time to incorporate teacher feedback into their ILs. Moreover, even though learners correct their errors based on teacher feedback immediately, it doesn't necessarily mean that they restructure their ILs. Therefore, it should be careful to think that immediate effects are necessary steps for long-term progress.

She also maintains that there is no evidence demonstrating that teacher feedback deteriorates students' learning as Truscott (1996) argues ; rather, empirical studies show students' writing progress in accuracy. For example, a recent study (Ferris & Helt, 2000, cited in Ferris, 2002) investigated whether 92 ESL learners could correct errors based on written feedback given from their teachers. It was found that the learners successfully corrected about 85 percent of their errors in their revised papers. Another study conducted by Ferris (1997) also showed that learners could address more than 94 instances out of 109 error corrections in the original learners' papers

made by their teachers in the learners' revised papers.

As such, research evidence is insufficient in concluding that error treatment is instrumental in promoting effective L2 learning. However, Truscott's (1996) conclusion that error correction is ineffective and not necessary also appears to be too exaggerated because he neglects some counterevidence in research reports as mentioned in this paper. He doesn't explain anything in terms of those findings that contradict his position. Moreover, one of the weaknesses of his position is that he thinks all types of error correction are equal (Ferris, 2002, 2003). As stated earlier, successful error treatment may involve several components: e.g., feedback including positive and negative evidence and/or learners' noticing. Furthermore, SLA is very much influenced by contexts in which it takes place. Though I have thus far explored the possibility of error treatment for successful SLA from the teacher's perspective, another thing that I think is important is to consider this issue from the learner's perspective. It is worthwhile to know what learners think about error treatment.

Learners' Perspective

Learning is a voluntary activity done by a learner. A learner is the center of learning, whereas a teacher will be a facilitator or helper in learning. To take this perspective into account, error treatment will never be useful if learners think it unnecessary and useless, and worse, if error treatment discourages their learning as Truscott (1996) argues. As such, it is integral to effective teaching to know how learners perceive error treatment done by their teachers. As far as I am concerned, I truly appreciate feedback from teachers. For example, I took a graduate seminar on "Second Language Acquisition" in spring, 2003 in which I received my paper with a great deal of feedback from the teacher on it. The feedback helped me to notice forms and thoughts that I never realized until I received the feedback, scaffolded my thinking, and thereby led me to a better understanding of second language acquisition. The seminar was a content course, not a language course. Nonetheless, I believe that the effect of error treatment is also true of a language course. As evidence of my belief, many language learners strongly value the importance of thorough and helpful feedback on their errors (Cohen, 1987; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). According to Ferris (2002), her students repeatedly commented that "my English teachers always told me to work on my grammar, but this is the first time any one has ever told me exactly what kinds of problems I have" (p. 81). This means that her students think error treatment valuable. Furthermore, as I mentioned

that I appreciated my professor's comments in the above, instructor's giving detailed and attentive feedback can contribute to building a deep sense of trust and respect between learners and them, which can facilitate successful learning. As such, the fact that not a few learners consider effective feedback from teachers highly valuable must not be neglected in this field.

It seems that error treatment need to be examined further in detailed ways. One thing that further research need to do is to differentiate between effective and ineffective error treatment. If both types of teacher feedback are considered together, the outcomes of research can be unreasonable because ineffective feedback cannot produce desirable effects on student writing from the outset. Now we need to discuss what effective error treatment is like. There seems to be no almighty way of treating errors in all educational contexts. We need to consider how to correct, what types of error to correct, and when to correct errors.

How to treat errors

Error correction takes various forms. Clear distinction should be made between dichotomous types of feedback : direct and indirect feedback. *Direct feedback* is defined as teachers' explicit correction including correct forms as opposed to learners' erroneous forms (i.e., feedback including both positive and negative evidence). For example, if a learner writes the following sentence as "I gone to church yesterday," a teacher may give direct feedback as "I ~~gone~~ *went* to church yesterday." Thus, direct feedback includes the correct form as well as information as to exactly where the learner made an error. *Indirect feedback,* on the other hand, appears "when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error" (Ferris, 2002, p. 19). That is, indirect feedback includes negative evidence. Yet learners have to seek for correct forms by themselves. For instance, a teacher may give indirect feedback on the error above as "I ~~gone~~ to church yesterday."

Research evidence shows no agreement on which is better, indirect feedback or direct feedback. In a longitudinal study conducted by Lalande (1982), learners who received indirect feedback performed better than those with direct feedback. Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) compared one group who received direct feedback with three groups who received three different degrees of indirect feedback. However, they demonstrate that there was no significant difference between direct and indirect feedback. Importantly, both types of feedback improved the accuracy of student writing.

Ferris et al. (2000, cited in Ferris, 2002) conducted a longitudinal study in which they investigated two types of feedback both in the short term and in the long term. They report that direct feedback had a better effect on student writing accuracy in the short term whereas indirect feedback was superior to direct feedback in the long term. This study suggests that direct feedback is easier for learners to deal with because they could revise their errors in their subsequent papers. However, being able to correct errors effortlessly might not lead learners to reformulate their ILs because copying correct forms provided by their teacher doesn't require careful attention to form. This may be why students who received indirect feedback outperformed those who received direct feedback in the long run in Ferris' study.

Indirect feedback can take several forms according to explicitness. Several studies investigated the effects of two types of indirect feedback : coded feedback and uncoded feedback. Coded feedback indicates the type of error learners have made such as word choice error or article error. Uncoded error, on the other hand, indicates what is incorrect but doesn't tell exactly what type of error is made. Robb et al. (1986) compared the two types of indirect feedback and found that there was no statistically significant difference between them.

Research evidence again fails to provide solid evidence as to what type of feedback is effective. The both types of feedback mentioned above may facilitate learners' learning to some degree. In other words, teachers can adopt both types of feedback case by case. As Truscott (1996) argues, there are different kinds of errors in student writing. Therefore, it is dangerous to put all errors together and correct them in a single manner. It seems to me that how to treat errors depends on what type of error students have made. In other words, teachers also need to attend to what type of errors to correct.

What Type of Error to treat

Should teachers correct all errors their learners make? Practically speaking, it seems impossible for teachers to correct all errors made by their learners. Ferris and Helt (2000, cited in Ferris, 2002) conducted an interesting study in which three ESL composition teachers tried in vain to mark all errors made by their learners despite the fact that they sometimes marked over 100 errors on a two- to three-page paper. In addition to impracticality, correcting all errors is intimidating for students. It can be easily imagined that learners will be overwhelmed at the sight of the number of error corrections done by their teachers on their papers, which can be harmful for successful

language learning because they may have difficulty focusing on all errors and as a consequence they might lose their motivation (Truscott, 1996). Rather, teachers should prioritize errors by correcting two or three salient errors at a time (Ferris, 2002). They can focus their selective attention on a couple of salient errors teachers have chosen to correct. If the lessons have already covered particular grammatical topics student errors belong to, indirect feedback would suffice because students are likely to find correct answers by reflecting on the previous lessons. Yet, if not, teachers may give direct feedback to some errors because direct feedback can explicitly give target form beforehand that will eventually appear in the future lesson. I believe that correct forms or rules should be presented before learners are accustomed to ill forms or rules from my own learning experience.

For instance, there are two major categories of error as follows (Ferris, 2002, p. 58) :

1) The tension was at its pick.

2) Last summer I go to visit my grandmother in L.A.

In the first sentence, using pick for peak is a lexical error. It is also possible that the error isn't a lexical error, but rather a phonemic error. Whether lexical or a phonemic, this type of error known as a *global error* can cause a reader difficulty in comprehension (Ferris, 2002 ; 2003 ; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). In the second sentence, on the other hand, a verb tense error can be found. Yet, unlike the global error in the first sentence, a reader will not have trouble with it. This type of error known as a local error is a more minor error that doesn't obscure the overall meaning of the text as compared with global errors (Ferris, 2002 ; 2003 ; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Teachers should be recommended to correct errors in a learner's paper that cause misinterpretation or incomprehension from readers. However, teachers also may need to think of the current state of learners' ILs before deciding which type of error feedback to give as well. It can be expected that learners cannot incorporate too difficult structures.

According to findings from contrastive analysis, i.e., "a way of comparing two languages to determine similarities and dissimilarities" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 452), L2 learners are prone to make errors associated with first language transfer, i.e., "the use of the first language in a second language context" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 456). For instance, Chinese speakers may have difficulty with the English verb tense system. Since I am particularly concerned about Japanese speakers learning English, I turned to the literature and found that many Japanese speakers are likely to make errors on the English article system (Ferris, 2002 ; Hedgcock, personal communica-

tion, 2003 ; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). This is true to my own English learning experience. Results of an error analysis I conducted on the basis of the data I collected through the tutoring hours also support such an observation. I found evidence of negative transfer from the tutee's mother tongue in the errors she made. The following are the most salient grammatical categories to which her errors belonged : 1) case ; 2) third person singular "s" ; 3) preposition ; 4) articles. Although teachers should not be too biased toward common errors since not all Japanese speakers necessarily have trouble with them, it would be greatly helpful for teachers to know where their learners generally have difficulty so that they can design feedback and instruction aiming for specific linguistic points (Ferris, 2002).

To sum up the discussion, a key element of effective error treatment is to select errors to correct and give direct or indirect feedback according to learners' conditions. Additionally, it seems reasonable for teachers to ask students to indicate areas where they would like teacher feedback. Beginner learners may not know exactly where they need error correction, but intermediate or advanced learners would know their weakness in grammar. They can tell their teachers which grammar aspects they would like feedback on. Such communication can also facilitate relationship between learners and teachers, thereby generating effective side effects of language learning.

Raising Learners' Awareness of Errors

Feedback from teachers is not the only form of error treatment. Error treatment can take different forms. One of the forms of error treatment that I find are useful is self-editing training in writing (Ferris, 2002). ESL/EFL learners have a general tendency to depend on teachers' error correction. This might be because they don't have self-confidence in their second/foreign language or because they think editing unimportant. However, errors are regarded as more serious in academic discourse communities such as university, college, and particular fields of study (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). For instance, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which almost all ESL/EFL learners who hope to study in North American universities and colleges must take, requires a great deal of accurate grammatical knowledge. The combination of Structure and Writing sections on the TOEFL occupies one third of the total score. Test takers have to write a logically organized and grammatically accurate essay within the required 30-minute limit. This task could be the most difficult for many test takers. Learners, therefore, should think accurate

writing competence is vital to becoming a member of an American academic or professional community and try to avoid as many grammatical errors as possible.

In order to train learners for self-editing, teachers need to raise learners' awareness of their errors. I, as a teacher for Japanese EFL learners, would suggest that learners focus their selective attention on particular weak aspects such as articles, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement in speaking as well as writing, thereby paying selective attention to those areas while speaking and writing. As I have noted above, to notice an error may be the starting point of IL development. Selective attention helps learners to notice their errors and come by confirmatory/nonconfirmatory evidence (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Once learners' awareness is raised, they may be able to pay careful attention to any utterance spoken/written by themselves or others inside/outside the classroom.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the effectiveness of error treatment, setting aside my previous attitudes toward it. I have found that research evidence shows no agreement in terms of effectiveness of this issue. Error treatment may be effective when it meets several requirements : types of evidence, learners' noticing, and selection of errors. Furthermore, I have emphasized the importance of learners' independent phase of error correction and suggested that teachers help learners to raise their awareness to specific weak areas so that learners can extend opportunities to reinforce their specific defects inside/outside the classroom. Importantly, I have also stated that learners feel strongly about the values of error treatment from their teachers, which helps them to gain a deep sense of trust and respect for their teachers. However, further research is definitely needed in this field. Particularly, we need evidence of long-term effectiveness of error treatment as Truscott (1996) argues in order to come to more solid a conclusion. As Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) suggest, further research needs to involve the following factors :

(1) Is grammar feedback and instruction carried out selectively, systematically, and accurately?

(2) Are individual student differences (including language proficiency, learning styles, motivation and attitude, first language, etc.) adequately considered and accounted for? (3) Are studies which assess the effectiveness of error correction designed and executed appropriately? (p. 202)

I, by all means, would like to further investigate the effectiveness of error treatment, making the most of these findings in the real classroom, thereby contributing to language learning theory and pedagogy.

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言語学習においてのエラー指導

金　子　義　隆

概　　要

言語学習者のエラーに対する教師の対処の仕方は第二言語習得の分野において物議を醸し出す非常に難しい分野である。この論文は、この分野に関する理論的背景や今まで行われた研究結果に基づいて、学習者への言語エラーへの対処の有効性について論じるものである。効果的なエラー指導は、非効果的なそれとは違い、それを行うだけの妥当な論理的根拠があると言える。教師からのエラー指導は、学習者に自分の使う言語と本来使われている言語との違いに対する「気付き」を促がす。そして、効果的に学習者が「気付く」ことが第二言語習得には重要である。効果的なエラー指導には次のような要素が含まれるべきである。つまり、エラーの訂正の仕方やどんな種類のエラーを取り扱うべきか、そして、エラーに対する学習者指導である。しかし、残念ながら、エラー指導が第二言語習得に関して効果的であることを証明する研究結果はまだ十分ではない。更に、この論文は、教える立場からの見解だけでなく、学習者がエラー指導に対してどのように見ているかをも重要なこととして論じている。