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IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD CORRECTION OF ORAL ERRORS

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Abstract

The correction of learner's oral errors in classroom has always been the main concern of many researchers and educators. Based on the ideas of learner-centered approach toward language teaching process, it needs to consider learners' reactions and feelings toward error correction as we do in other aspects of learning. This study discusses the findings of a questionnaire administered to 13 EFL learners at the university level in Iran. The study tries to answer to the questions about 1) EFL learners' attitude toward error correction, 2) their preferences about the correction of different types of errors, and 3) their preferences about different methods of correction. The results showed that EFL learners have strongly positive attitudes toward correction of all errors by their teacher and they prefer correction of phonology and grammar errors more than others and they would rather self-correction among methods.

Keywords: Error, EFL Learner's attitude, error correction methods

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1. Introduction

As many language educators and researchers (e.g., Edge, 1989; Hendrickson, 1987 as cited in Katayama 2007) maintain, making errors is a necessary and natural process of language learning. Inevitably, learner errors and feedback to errors have been of great interest to language teachers and researchers. And in this regard EFL learner's attitude toward the error correction is of utmost importance and it can facilitate the language learning process.

It is important to understand that learners have different preferences, that is to say styles in the way they like to be corrected. Some students favor a focus on form, while others do not. Teaching methods differ as well. Some teachers tend to correct all the errors while some tend to be tolerant and still some others do not correct at all (Riazi & Riasti, 2007; Noora, 2006). According to the relevant literature on teachers' and students' preferences and attitudes towards error correction, many studies show that while teachers and students share such common views as the importance of error correction and the types of errors that require correcting, there exist considerable differences as to the techniques of error correction (Lee, 2005; Wang, 2010).

While there are considerable number of studies that focus on the issue of error correction and error analysis, relatively few studies have been carried out related to EFL learner's attitude toward error correction methods during the class time (i.e. especially in Iran context). But it is believed that in order to have a successful learning and teaching process it is necessary to consider EFL learners' perceptions. The role of correction in language teaching has been an issue for quite some time and opinions vary as to whether correction is effective or not. For the time being, people rarely consider the learners' perception on oral error correction. And that is why it is necessary to do research associated with their opinion about oral error correction.

1.1. Related review of literature

On the related literature of error and error correction, it becomes clear that learning and teaching process is significantly bound with the way teachers and learners react toward the errors and how they try to correct them. Before correcting errors language teachers need to consider the cause of errors. As it has been suggested, errors may occur in three types of cases (Chastain, 1988). First, some errors occur because learners are not aware of the rules. Second, some errors creep into student's language because they do not attach any great importance to linguistic accuracy. Third, some errors result from temporary overload on the student's cognitive processes due to fatigue, embarrassment, illness, and so on. Correction in the first case will be beneficial, if the teacher can make the error and way of correcting it, clear to the

students. Correction in the second case will be counterproductive, unless the teacher can convince the students to change their attitude toward accuracy. Correction in the third case cannot prevent future errors because they do not result from inadequate knowledge. The overload of the cognitive processes probably indicates that the student needs to have more communication practice than correction.

According to Spillner (1991), Errors are information. In contrastive linguistics, they are thought to be caused by unconscious transfer of mother tongue structures to the system of the target language and give information about both systems. In the interlanguage hypothesis of second language acquisition, errors are indicative of the different intermediate learning levels and are useful pedagogical feedback. In both cases error analysis is an essential methodological tool for diagnosis and evaluation of the language acquisition process. Errors, too, give information in psychoanalysis (e.g., the Freudian slip), in language universal research, and in other fields of linguistics, such as linguistic change.

Truscott (1999) believed that, in order to provide effective correction for a student's error, the teacher must first determine exactly what that error is. Most teachers now share the assumption that effective instruction requires a communicative focus in the classroom. But reconciling this assumption with the use of correction creates difficulties for the teacher. He further mentioned that correction, by its nature, interrupts classroom activities, disturbing the ongoing communication process. It diverts the teacher's attention from the essential tasks involved in managing a communicative activity. It moves students' attention away from the task of communicating. It can discourage them from freely expressing themselves, or from using the kinds of forms that might lead to correction.

Oral grammar correction is an extremely complex process, as can be seen, for example, in Chaudron's (1977 as cited in Truscott 1999) model. It is not surprising, then, that teachers who wish to provide effective grammar correction face enormous problems. Some of the difficulties are at least partly manageable, at least for a skilled teacher who is very serious about dealing with them. Classroom studies indicate, however, that teachers are generally not very successful in their attempts to provide high-quality oral corrections (e.g., Chaudron, 1988; Fanselow, 1977 as cited in Truscott 1999).

Karra (2006) in her article, mentioned the major concepts introduced by S. P. Corder (1967) "The significance of learners' errors", the following points are some of these concepts:

a) It is the learner who determines what the input is. The teacher can present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.

b) Keeping the above point in mind, learners' needs should be considered when teachers/linguists plan their syllabuses. Before Corder's work, syllabuses were based on

theories and not so much on learners' needs. c) Mager (1962 as cited in Karra, 2006) pointed out that the learners' built-in syllabus is more efficient than the teacher's syllabus. Corder (1967) added that if such a built-in syllabus exists, then learners' errors would confirm its existence and would be systematic.

d) Corder (1967) introduced the distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors. Unsystematic errors occur in one's native language; Corder (1967) called these "mistakes" and stated that they are not significant to the process of language learning. He kept the term "errors" for the systematic ones, which occur in a second language. e) Errors are significant to teachers, researchers and learners. f) Many errors are due to that the learner uses structures from his native language. Corder (1967) claimed that possession of one's native language is facilitative. Errors in this case are not inhibitory, but rather evidence of one's learning strategies (Karra, 2006).

As Shaffer (2008) mentioned, one of the questions facing every ESL/EFL teacher is how to correct oral errors and how much to correct. Researcher opinions vary widely on this: from no correction to extensive correction, from immediate to delayed correction, and from implicit to explicit correction. Language learners also have their own opinions on how and whether they wish to have their oral errors corrected by their teacher in the classroom setting. These opinions may be at odds with those of the experts, leaving the classroom instructor with more questions about error correction than answers.

In his article, Moss (2000) supported this position and claimed that, when deciding how to respond to students' oral errors there are a number of questions we need to ask ourselves. First of all, 'Should learners' errors be corrected?' In this regard, there are wide differences of opinion, but perhaps one of the most forceful reasons for carrying out correction is that many learners expect their errors to be corrected and can feel disappointed or resentful if they are ignored. The second reason is that, there is the danger that by leaving errors untreated, the defective language might serve as an input model and be acquired by other students in the class. Thirdly, the provision of corrective feedback can speed up the process of language learning by providing information about rules and the limits of language use, which would otherwise take students a long time to deduce on their own. In spite of the potential benefit of feedback and correction, however, it will only be effective if students are amenable to the idea and are willing to take on board teachers' comments. Hence, in order to ensure that EFL learners are receptive to error treatment, it is necessary to find out their preferences and attitudes towards correction and feedback, as well as how sensitive or resilient they are.

2. Research questions

In order to examine the Iranian learner's attitude toward oral error correction at the university level a questionnaire has been employed and the following questions are addressed:

- 1) What is Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward classroom oral error correction?
- 2) What do learners prefer in correcting their error of different types (e.g. grammatical errors)?
- 3) What are the students' preferences for particular types of error correction methods?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The data was collected from 13 EFL learners at Maragheh Islamic Azad University, Iran. The participants were at pre-intermediate level and studying for BA degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). With regarding to gender, all of the participants are female.

3.2. Instruments

A questionnaire is used to identify learner's preferences about correction of oral errors. In order to have a standard questionnaire for this study and due to the time limitations in developing a questionnaire by the researchers, the one used in this research is adapted and then modified from the questionnaire used in Japan (Katayama, 2007).

In the first part of questionnaire EFL learners were asked to fill out this section about their own particulars. In second part it questions the learner's general attitudes toward correction of oral errors in the classroom. Response options were coded to 5-point scales, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree.

In the other section the students were asked how often they wanted classroom error correction of different types of errors: grammar, phonology, vocabulary, pragmatics, and discourse. Because it was assumed that learners may have difficulty in understanding the specialist terms, instead of the term phonology, the words "pronunciation, accent, and intonation," were used in the questionnaire and errors in pragmatics were presented as "inappropriate expressions," and discourse errors as "organization of discourse." Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing never and 5 representing always with respect to the frequency of correction.

The last section asks about students' preferences for particular types of error correction methods. The students were asked to rate ten different methods of error correction provided by teachers, first as feedback to students' grammatical errors, and then as feedback to students' pronunciation errors for each technique. In order to help learners in better understanding of questions, examples of errors were presented in the questionnaire. The rating for students' opinions about each method was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 representing no good to 5 representing very good.

3.3. Design

The design of this study was descriptive and a questionnaire was administered. In order to answer the research questions frequency distributions were calculated to analyze the Likert-scale responses for (1) general attitudes toward classroom oral error correction, (2) general preferences for correction of different types of errors (e.g., pronunciation and grammar), and (3) general preferences for particular types of correction methods of classroom oral errors.

3.4. Procedure

This study started by selecting a group of female students which were at pre-intermediate level and studying TEFL major at the university level in Maragheh, Iran. They were selected randomly and there was just one group. The students were encouraged by their teacher and an extra mark was devoted for those who have participated enthusiastically and completely in responding the questionnaire. No proficiency test was administered because based on the university's placement test it was assumed that all of the learners are at pre-intermediate level. There was no control group and no male learners in this study. The questionnaire was given to the learners and some points were mentioned and explained to them so that they could respond easily although the questionnaire itself had some extra explanations and examples. Also, some points about error correction and different methods of correction were presented to the participants.

The learners were given time to take the questionnaires home and answer them very carefully the next sessions they were supposed to bring back the questionnaire. Although a lot of cautions were mentioned to learners about responding the questions carefully, and an extra mark was given to them, still few of them did not take the task seriously and answered the questionnaire in hurry. After the questionnaires were collected the data analysis started and the result of it is in the following section.

4. Result

The results obtained from this study shows that learners have positive attitudes toward error correction and they believe that it is essential part of teaching and learning procedure. The following tables are the result of first section of questionnaire which contains four questions about the learners general perception about error correction and it is an answer to the first research question.

The first question deals with whether or not errors should be corrected in speaking in the form of, “I want teachers to correct my errors in speaking English”. Based on the result of this table (Table 1) which is the first question of part A, 7.7 percent of students chose 2, 7.7 percent chose 3, 23.1 percent chose 4 and 61.5 percent chose 5. Therefore, it becomes clear that most of the learners wanted teacher to correct their errors and 61.5 percent of them strongly agree with the statement.

Table 1. Part A, Question No.1

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 2.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 7.7 |
| 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 15.4 |
| 4.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 38.5 |
| 5.00 | 8 | 61.5 | 61.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The question of second part deals with correction of all or some of the errors, the question is in the form of “Teachers should correct all errors that learners make in speaking English”.

Based on the result of the table (Table 2) which is the second question of part A, 23.1 percent of students chose 2, 7.7 percent chose 3, 69.2 percent chose 4. Therefore, it becomes clear that 69.2 percent of the learners agreed that teacher should correct all errors.

Table 2. Part A, Question No. 2

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 2.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 23.1 |
| 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 30.8 |
| 4.00 | 9 | 69.2 | 69.2 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The third question of this part is in the form of “Teachers should correct only the errors that interfere with communication”. Based on the result of table 3 which is the third question of part A, 15.4 percent of students chose 1, 69.2 percent chose 2, 7.7 percent chose 4, and 7.7 percent chose 5. So, it becomes clear that most of the learners disagreed with the point that teachers should correct only errors that interfere with communication.

Table 3. Part A, Question No.3

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 1.00 | 2 | 15.4 | 15.4 | 15.4 |
| 2.00 | 9 | 69.2 | 69.2 | 84.6 |
| 4.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 92.3 |
| 5.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The last question of this section is about peer-correction in the form of this statement, “I want my classmates to correct my oral errors in group work”. Based on the result of table 4 which is the last question of part A, 38.5 percent of students choose 1, 7.7 percent chose 3, 30.8 percent chose 4, and 23.1 percent chose 5. Thus, it becomes clear that 30.8 percent of the learners agreed that their classmates correct their errors in group work and it can be inferred that Iranian learners are not interested in peer-correction.

Table 4. Part A, Question No. 4

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 1.00 | 5 | 38.5 | 38.5 | 38.5 |
| 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 46.2 |
| 4.00 | 4 | 30.8 | 30.8 | 76.9 |
| 5.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The second section of questionnaire is related to types of errors learners want to be corrected. The first type is grammar. According to the following table (Table 5) which shows the result of the first question of part B, 7.7 percent of learners chose 3, 38.5 percent chose 4, and 53.8 percent chose 5. Therefore, it is obvious that 53.8 percent of the learners wanted teacher to correct their errors in grammar most of the times and this percentage is more than half of students.

Table 5. Part B, Question No.1

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 7.7 |
| 4.00 | 5 | 38.5 | 38.5 | 46.2 |
| 5.00 | 7 | 53.8 | 53.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The second type of error is pronunciation, accent and intonation. According to the following table 6 which shows the result of the second question of part B, 15.4 percent of learners chose 2, 7.7 percent chose 3, and 23.1 percent chose 4, and 53.8 percent chose 5. So, it is obvious that 53.8 percent of learners wanted teacher to correct phonology errors most of the times and they have positive attitude toward this type of error correction and the percentage is the same as grammar part, that is learners' attitude towards these two types are nearly the same.

Table 6. Part B, Question No.2

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 2.00 | 2 | 15.4 | 15.4 | 15.4 |
| 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 23.1 |
| 4.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 46.2 |
| 5.00 | 7 | 53.8 | 53.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The third type is vocabulary usage. According to the following table 7 which shows the result of the third question of part B, 61.5 percent of learners chose 4, 38.5 percent chose 5. Hence, it is obvious that 61.5 percent of learners wanted teacher to correct their vocabulary errors most of the times and this is more than their preference toward grammar and phonology.

Table 7. Part B, Question No.3

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 4.00 | 8 | 61.5 | 61.5 | 61.5 |
| 5.00 | 5 | 38.5 | 38.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The fourth type is inappropriate expressions. According to the following table 8 which shows the result of the fourth question of part B, 15.4 percent of learners chose 2, 23.1 percent chose 3, 23.1 percent chose 4 and 38.5 percent chose 5. Hence, it is obvious that 38.5 percent

of learners wanted teacher to correct their inappropriate expressions most of the times and this is less than half of them.

Table 8. Part B, Question No.4

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 2.00 | 2 | 15.4 | 15.4 | 15.4 |
| 3.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 38.5 |
| 4.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 61.5 |
| 5.00 | 5 | 38.5 | 38.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

And finally, the last type is about discourse organization. According to the following table (Table 9) which shows the result of the last question of part B, 23.1 percent of learners chose 3, 69.2 percent chose 4, and 7.7 percent 5. Therefore, it is obvious that 69.2 percent of learners wanted teacher to correct their discourse errors most of the times and this is more than other types that is learners have a very positive feelings toward discourse organization and they give priority to this type.

Table 9. Part B, Question No.5

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 3.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 23.1 |
| 4.00 | 9 | 69.2 | 69.2 | 92.3 |
| 5.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The last section of the questionnaire (part C) contains questions about the method of correction in both grammatical errors and pronunciation ones. Here, it should be noted that those questions which are very important and influential has been considered and stated. The first question is in the form of "teacher ignores student's error". Based on the findings, which is about the first question of part C, 69.2 percent of learners chose 1, 15.4 percent chose 2, and 15.4 percent chose 3. So, it shows that 69.2 percent of learners believed that it is not good that teachers ignore the errors.

The second question is in the form of "teacher presents the correct response or part of response". Based on the finding which is about the second question (grammatical error) of part C, 23.1 percent of learners chose 2, 46.2 percent chose 3, and 30.8 percent chose 5. So it shows

that 46.2 percent of learners believed that it is not very good that teachers present correct response.

Based on the finding which is about the second question (pronunciation error) of part C, 38.5 percent of learners chose 2, 30.8 percent chose 3, 7.7 percent chose 4, and 23.1 percent chose 5. As a result, it shows that 38.5 percent of learners believed that it is not good that teachers present correct response.

The third question deals with the way that teacher provides the correct response. Based on the finding, which is about the third question part C, 23.1 percent of learners chose 1, 7.7 percent 2, 30.8 percent chose 4, and 38.5 percent chose 5. So, it shows that 38.5 percent of learners believed that it is very good that teachers point out the error and provide the correct response.

Based on the finding which is about the seventh question (pronunciation error) of part C, 7.7 percent of learners chose 3, 46.2 percent chose 4, 46.2 percent chose 5. So, it shows that 46.2 percent of learners believed that it is very good that teachers give students a hint which might enable them to notice the error and self-correct (see table 10).

Table 10. Part C, Question “pronunciation error”

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 3.00 | 1 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 7.7 |
| 4.00 | 6 | 46.2 | 46.2 | 53.8 |
| 5.00 | 6 | 46.2 | 46.2 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The eighth method is in the form of "teacher repeats student's utterance up to the error and waits for self-correction". Based on the findings of this table 11 which is about the eighth question (grammatical error) of part C, 30.8 percent of learners chose 3, 46.2 percent chose 4, 23.1 percent chose 5. Therefore, it shows that 46.2 percent of learners believed that it is very good that teachers repeat student's utterance up to the error and wait for self-correction.

Table 11. Part C, Question 8 “grammatical error”

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 3.00 | 4 | 30.8 | 30.8 | 30.8 |
| 4.00 | 6 | 46.2 | 46.2 | 76.9 |
| 5.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Finally, the last method is about the explanation of error in the form of "teacher explains why the response is incorrect". Based on the findings of the following table which is about the tenth question (grammatical error) of part C, 30.8 percent of learners chose 2, 15.4 percent chose 3, 23.1 percent chose 4, and 30.8 percent chose 5. Therefore, it shows that 30.8 percent of learners believed that it is very good that teachers explain why the response is incorrect.

Table 12. Part C, Question No.10 “grammatical error”

| Chosen items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid 2.00 | 4 | 30.8 | 30.8 | 30.8 |
| 3.00 | 2 | 15.4 | 15.4 | 46.2 |
| 4.00 | 3 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 69.2 |
| 5.00 | 4 | 30.8 | 30.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 13 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

5. Conclusions

As the results suggest there seems to be some differences between teachers and learners attitude and preferences related to correction of oral errors in classroom. But these differences must be considered and remedied so that the expectations of learners and teachers become closer and the learning process will be more successful and useful for both sides. According to the results, the majority of students participated in this study have extremely positive attitude toward the correction of errors by teacher and they want teacher to correct all errors that they make during speaking not just those which interfere with communication. And they do not agree strongly about peer-correction that is they do not want their classmates to correct their errors in group work.

Considering the second research question, students of this study prefer correction of their errors in grammar and phonology which contain errors in pronunciation, accent, and intonations. It becomes clear that they find these two parts more important than the others. They also have some tendency toward correction of vocabulary usage but their interest in correction of inappropriate expressions and discourse organization is somehow less than other types.

And the results of last section which deals with methods of correction and is related to the last research question suggests that the students mostly like self-correction and they somehow prefer explanation of errors and, repetition of utterance. But they do not prefer with the methods in which teachers ignore the error, present the correct response and repeat the original question. To sum up, the findings of this study and studies like this can be useful for

language teachers and learners so that they can take it for granted in their language teaching and learning procedures. It can be concluded that EFL learner's attitude toward the error correction is of utmost importance, and it can facilitate the language learning process.

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