Error Correction in Three EFL Classrooms in Turkey

Adnan Demir[1]

Mardin Artuklu University

Abstract

Acquiring or learning a second language is a process and all learners are expected to make errors as they go through stages of this process. Whether they are caused by the features of the L2 or by the differences between learners' L1 and the target language, errors are an inevitable part of second language acquisition. Researchers differ in their stance on feedback on learner errors. Proponents of error correction stress the failure to correct learner errors might cause fossilization of errors as learners will falsely assume their sentences or utterances are correct unless they are corrected by the teacher. Opponents of error correction, however, oppose error correction on the grounds that it is not beneficial and activates affective filter.The debates whether learner errors should be corrected or not aside, correcting errors in one form or another seems to be a common practice in foreign language classrooms. This study aims to examine the frequency of error correction, types of negative feedback used, and learner involvement in error correction procedures in three EFL class sessions in a university setting with three different teachers.

Keywords: Error correction, EFL classroom, second language acquisition.

[1]Corresponding Author. Email:adnanxdemir@gmail.com

Introduction

Acquiring or learning a second language is a process and all learners are expected to make errors as they go through stages of this process. Whether they are caused by the features of the L2 learnt or by the differences between learners' L1 and the target language, errors are an inevitable part of second language acquisition. As foreign or second language teachers, we sometimes get frustrated when learners make the same errors over and over despite long hours of teaching, and therefore we deliberately or inadvertently develop a habit of responding to learner errors through immediate negative feedback. Here lies the assumption that learner will fail to form a correct hypothesis regarding what is possible and what is not in the language solely by being exposed to positive feedback, and therefore should be provided with negative feedback.

Proponents of error correction stress the failure to correct learner errors might cause fossilization of errors as learners might falsely assume their sentences or utterances are correct unless they are corrected by the instructor. In Audiolingualism, an approach heavily shaped by the behaviourist theory of learning, errors are not tolerated and dealt with immediately through correction; otherwise, they will become a habit, it is argued. Another argument in favour of negative feedback is that learners are unlikely to notice an option that is absent in the target language but permitted in the first language (Long, Inagaki & Ortega, 1998). Opponents of error correction, on the other hand, oppose error correction on the grounds that it is not beneficial and activates affective filter, which causes high level of anxiety in learners (Schulz, 1996). Dekeyser (1993) states that there is no role that error correction could play in second language acquisition if it is like first language acquisition as learners will acquire the target language through positive feedback in the input and with the help of the language acquisition device. Whether errors should be corrected or not is the only aspect of research on error correction. The research into this issue has also tried to answer the following questions: When should learner errors be corrected? Which learner errors should be corrected? How should learner errors be corrected? And who should correct learner errors? (Hendrickson, 1978).

The debates whether learner errors should be corrected or not aside, correcting errors in one form or another seems to be a common practice in second and foreign language classrooms. One of the most widely practiced forms of error correction is recast. Long et al. (1998) define a recast reformulation of "all or part of a learner's utterance, thus providing relevant morpho-syntactic information that was obligatory but was either missing or wrongly

supplied, in the learner's rendition, while retaining its central meaning" (p. 358).Recasts are implicit in nature, and they provide learners both with positive evidence regarding what is possible in the target language and negative feedback in the form of covert correction. One advantage of recasts is they keep the focus on meaning without explicitly drawing learner's attention to form. Long, Inagaki and Ortega (1998) argue that recasts are effective in that they show learners how their productions are different from the target forms. Loewen and Philp (2006) state that recasts keep the flow of communication and serve two functions: they both confirm the meaning of learner utterance and correct the linguistic form. Others, however, suggest recasts are ambiguous since learners might treat them as confirmation of meaning rather than negative feedback on form (Lyster, 1998). To overcome such ambiguity in recasts, an initial attention-drawing stage could signal learners that what they are going to hear is not to confirm their message but to correct it (Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Elicitation is another form of teacher feedback on learner error. Instead of reformulating the whole or part of the learner utterance, a teacher turns the erroneous utterance into interrogative form or provides the learner with a prompt, expecting them to repair the error. By eliciting the correct response from the learner, the teacher initiates negotiation of form and tries to achieve not only comprehensible message but also the accurate form (Lyster, 1998). Elicitation involves learner engagement in error correction, while in recasts the teacher provides the target form, making the learner a passive recipient. In Lee's words (2008) "teacher-dominated feedback practices breed passive and dependent learners" (p. 157).Sometimes the teacher feedback on learner utterance does not aim to correct. A teacher might simply repeat what the learner has just said by non-corrective repetition. Such repetitions seem to serve no specific pedagogic purposes and learners generally perceive them as confirmation of meaning.

There is also explicit correction of learner errors. Explicit correction can be immediate, right after the learner produces an erroneous utterance or it can be delayed to after the completion of the utterance or conversation. In both forms, the teacher attracts learners' attention to incorrect utterances and explains why they are erroneous followed by provision of correct form. Unlike recasts, explicit correction is intrusive. It can break the flow of communication. However, a study by Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) revealed that explicit correction is actually more effective than implicit correction. The researchers argue that with explicit correction learners notice, compare, and integrate the feedback. In other words, restructuring of interlanguage takes place as triggered by negative feedback.

The present study aims to examine the frequency of error correction, types of negative feedback used, and learner involvement in error correction procedures. It is an exploratory study, and therefore does not seek to answer pre-set research questions. However, the following broad research question guided this research:

1. What kinds of negative feedback methods do EFL instructors employ?

Method

The current study employs qualitative research design as it is the logical choice for a study with limited number of participants and with no objective of generalizing the results. The qualitative design allows for a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of each case under study. Without the need and requirement to generalize the analysis results, the data for each participant could be analysed as unique.

Sampling and Data Collection

The participants were selected through convenience sampling among a group of EFL teachers at a public university where this researcher also works. The data for this study were collected at an English preparatory program at a public university in Southern Turkey. A total of three classrooms, each with 25-27 students, were tape-recorded for 45 minutes. There were in total 80 students in all three classrooms and the proportion of male and female learners was even. The majority of the learners were at high elementary level. The lessons that were recorded were named main course and the focus was on the form rather than meaning. The teachers, two females and one male, were all non-native speakers of English, with varying levels of teaching experience. The teachers will be referred to as *Teacher 1*, *Teacher 2*, and *Teacher 3*.More details about the participants could be found in Table 1. This researcher has worked with the teachers at the same institution for at least two years. All the participant teachers were informed about the purpose and the details of the study and they gave oral consent before the study began. No identifiable details regarding the participants were shared in the study and they were offered the opportunity to read the analysis of the data and comment on the interpretations.

Table 1. Details about Participants

Name	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Age	25	29	25
Teaching experience	5 years	2 years	2 years
Recording time	45 minutes	45 minutes	45 minutes
Class level	Elementary	Elementary	Elementary

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the three classes were transcribed word by word and then all the instances of error correction were marked on the data. The instances of different error correction methods used by the participant teachers were grouped under the categories recast, elicitation, and explicit correction. The frequency with which each teacher used the three error correction strategies was enumerated to find out which strategy was used more often. Furthermore, any variation in the way the teachers used any one of the correction method and the learners' reactions was noted. Every instance error correction was analysed for consistency, focus on form or meaning, and learner uptake. Significant instances of each strategy were provided in the findings section.

Results

Teacher 1

In the first tape-recorded class, *Teacher 1* is attempting to set the context with several questions to ease the transition to the reading text. The focus is mostly on form and the teacher attempts to correct almost all erroneous utterances. More than 30 instances of corrective and non corrective feedback were spotted in the recording and over 15 of them were recasts. Some of them were reformulation of learners' grammatical errors but the majority were correction of pronunciation errors. In Example 1, the teacher repeats the word the learner mispronounced with correct pronunciation.

Example 1

S: The restaurant was crowded so she had to sit with *someone* [mispronounced].
T: ˈsʌmwʌn
S: ˈsʌmwʌn
T: Good

Another instance of recast is Example 2 and 3, where the teacher reformulates the learner utterance by incorporating it in a longer statement. However, the teacher does not require the learner to repair the error and moves on to the next learner.

Example 2

T: What do you read on the Internet?
S: Poems
T: OK, you read poems.

Example 3

T: Why did she sit beside the man?
S: Restaurant crowded
T: Yes, because the restaurant was very crowded.

Apart from negative feedback in the form of recasts, *Teacher 1* also tried attention-getting strategy by eliciting the correction from the learners. In Example 4, the learner starts her reply but struggles and completes it in her first language, prompting the teacher to say "In English?" When the learner fails to do so, the teacher provides the correct response. In a separate instance, Example 5, the teacher asks the learners to choose between the correct pronunciations in response to the learner's pronunciation error.

Example 4

T:And where did she sit?
S: She sit…um…Bir adamın yanına oturdu.
                 [She sat next to a guy]
T: In English?
S: She sit…
T: She sat…
S: She sat a guy.
T: She sat beside a guy.

Example 5

S: Hi [hiː]
T: Hi [hiː] or [hʌɪ]?
S: [hʌɪ]

Although recasts and elicitation were the most widely practiced forms of negative feedback by *Teacher 1*, he explicitly corrected learner error in one instance (Example 6).There were also several instances where the teacher repeated learner utterances without making any correction (Example 7).

Example 6

(The learners mispronounce the word "laugh" several times, so the teacher decides to work on its pronunciation explicitly.)

T: Dear friends, this is not [lʌv]. It is pronounced like the Turkish word "laf". Can you repeat?
All students: [lɑːf]

Example 7

T: Sarah didn't say anything. Why? Because? Ramazan?
Ramazan: She was very embarrassed.
T: Yes, she was very embarrassed.

Teacher 2

About 40 instances of corrective and non-corrective teacher feedback were counted with elicitation and explicit correction being the most frequent forms of feedback followed by recasts. *Teacher 2* frequently attracted the learners' attention to their errors and tried to elicit repair from them as exemplified in Example 8 and 9.

Example 8

Zeynep: Every week I don't a lot of homework.
T: So, where is your verb? I don't…."Don't" is your helping verb. Where is your verb?

Example 9

T: And how about this? İbrahim, can you make it negative?
İbrahim: Last week I didn't a lot of homework.
T: Oh, again the same mistake. Last week….What's helping verb for past?
Several students: Did

T:Did. Last week I didn't…now is it past? Yeah. Is it negative? Yeah. After this [pointing to "didn't" on the board] where is your verb? This is helping verb.
Several students: Do

Instead of immediately supplying the correct form, *Teacher 2* frequently provided the learners with prompts and asked them to repair their erroneous utterances. Example 10 and 11 show how the teacher used elicitation feedback.

Example 10

T: Volkan, what did you do last weekend?
Volkan: I sleep… I ill…I go….
T: I go or I went?
Several students: Went

Example 11

T: You do homework. OK. What else? Do you go out with your friends?
Doğan: Yes
T: Make a sentence. We go out… Do you cook at home?
Doğan: Yes
T: Make a sentence. Yeah, I…

There were also 9 counts of recasts and most of them were in response to pronunciation errors. In Example 12, the teacher reformulates the learner utterance by inserting a missing auxiliary verb but does not require any repair from the learner. And in Example 13, the teacher first repeats the learner utterance to correct a pronunciation error and then reformulates the learner's second utterance to correct a grammatical error regarding the choice of tense.

Example 12

T: And Savaş, what are they doing?
Savaş: They going to a party.
T: Yeah, they are going to a party. Alright.

Example 13

T: What do you do on the weekends?
Doğan: I go….home with *friends* [mispronounced]
T: You go home with friends.

Doğan: Then I did homework
T: You do homework. OK.

Teacher 3

Out of 22 instances of feedback *Teacher 3* provided 17 were in the form of recasts with fourcounts of elicitation and one repetition. The teacher frequently resorted to recasts to correct the learners' pronunciation and grammar errors as shown in Example 14 and 15. In Example 14, the learner perceives the recast as a confirmation of his utterance and therefore does not repair his message.

Example 14

T: Do you like rainy days?
S: Yes. I hate sunny.
T: You hate sun?
S: Yes

Example 15

T: What do you usually do during the weekdays?
Ercan: I usually cook weekday.
T: You usually cook on weekdays.

In several instances, the teacher provides the learners with prompts to correct their own utterances. In Example 16 and 17, the teacher tries to elicit the correct response from the learners but reformulates the erroneous utterance when the learners fail to do so.

Example 16

T: First picture, what are they doing?
S: She playing guitar.
T: She is…
S: She is playing.
T: She is playing guitar.

Example 17

T: What about Josh? What did he do last night?
Azime: Played games
T: Sorry?

Azime: Played games
T: Yes, he played games.

Discussion

When the types of error correction utilized by the three teachers are compared, recasts appear to be the most common type overall. They made up the majority of corrections of *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 3*, while they followed explicit correction and elicitation for *Teacher 2*. Furthermore, most of the recasts were aimed at learners' pronunciation and grammatical errors. Judging by the examples above, we can conclude that learners sometimes perceive recasts as the confirmation of their utterances. The failure on the part of the learners to repair their message after implicit negative feedback from the teacher lends support to the arguments that recasts are ambiguous. Another point to consider regarding the effectiveness of recasts is whether learners have learnt how to use a particular linguistic structure and whether they have the competency to choose between different linguistic alternatives (Nicholas et al., 2001). The fact that all the corrections made by the three teachers were oral suggests if oral correction of grammar is effective at all. Truscott (as cited in Russell & Spada, 2006) argues against oral correction, saying it fails to develop learners' ability to speak accurately.

Teacher 2, who is more cautious about the use of recasts, chooses explicit correction when she realizes the recast has failed to serve its purpose. Lyster (1998) argues recasts could be made more effective if learners' attention is attracted to the correction. *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 2*, however, did not encourage the learners to correct their own erroneous utterances after recasts but only expected them to repeat the corrected reformulation in certain instances.

Explicitly correcting learner errors was not favoured by *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 3*, while it was the most frequent type of error correction used by *Teacher 2*. Explicit negative feedback tells learners what is unacceptable in the target language, and it involves the learner in the error correction procedure. *Teacher 2* drew the learners' attention to their erroneous utterances and encouraged them to repair their messages by prompts or cues. *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 3,* on the other hand, rarely resorted to explicit correction but rather preferred elicitation and recasts. Learners' repairing their messages could be interpreted in favour of effectiveness of explicit correction over recasts. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) list attention-getting feature of explicit correction and creating a contrast with learners' interlanguage forms among reasons why explicit correction could be more effective.

Conclusion

Positive feedback in the input alone is not enough for learners to acquire a second language. They need to notice the absence of certain morpho-syntactic features in the L2 that are present in the L1. This could be done by providing learners with negative feedback such as recasts, elicitation and explicit correction. The analysis of the data from three teachers yields the conclusion that explicit correction results in more frequent learner repair as it makes learners notice their erroneous utterances. However, the data also revealed that recasts could be made less ambiguous if learner attention is drawn to the error or if they are accompanied by prompts.

It should be noted that the effectiveness of any error correction method is dependent on a number of factors, among others the instructional context and the learners' linguistic background. Therefore, combined with the small sampling size, the generalizability of the results of this study is limited. Further research could diversify data collection tools and include different instructional contexts such as meaning-focused versus form-focused to test effectiveness of various types of error correction across different contexts. Any study that investigates learner attitudes regarding error correction as well as effectiveness of types of error correction might produce valuable findings.

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