

Error Treatment Revisited: Examining Learners' and Instructors' Preferences in Grammar Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Learners make mistakes or errors in the process of learning. Error treatment is very important as learners will get information on their performance and clear understanding of what should have been learned or acquired. This is because the treatment of errors can influence learners' motivational learning behaviour. However, what kind of treatment can best benefit the learners? This paper, thus, investigates both the learners' and instructors' preferences towards error treatment in English as a Second Language (ESL) grammar classroom as both parties have intuitive knowledge about the kind of treatment that can benefit learning the most. The interview and survey data reveal that both the learners and instructors have different preferences in the treatment of errors. The findings reveal that students preferred explicit corrections the most while the instructors preferred the providing clues for self-repair method of treatment. Pedagogically, the findings point out that instructors have to employ the appropriate measure for error treatment in the classroom for the benefit of learning.

Keywords: *classroom learning, error treatment, preference*

Introduction

Learners make mistakes or errors in the process of learning. In fact, errors are indispensable to learners in any stage or level of learning. In English as a Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, the errors that learners make are significant as they provide evidence of 'how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language' (Brown, 2000, p. 205). In this regard, a teacher's role is to point out the errors and provide corrections that can aid learners clarify their understanding of what they have learned and be informed of their performance. Error treatment is, thus, very important as learners will get information on their performance and clear understanding of what should have been learned or acquired.

However, what kind of treatment can best benefit the learners? The treatment of errors, especially in the form of feedback and assessment, can influence learners' motivational learning behaviour (Weinstein, 1989; Wheldall & Merrett, 1987). Yet, learners' perception on how their errors should be treated is rarely considered. Instructors often treat errors as how they think the errors should be treated without considering what the learners think or want. As a result, the efficacy of errors is not usually known. This paper, thus, investigates both the learners' and instructors' preferences towards error treatment as both parties have intuitive knowledge about the kind of treatment that can benefit learning the most. The findings will shed some lights on this issue and lead to a more beneficial classroom practice as instructors will understand the problem that can hinder effective treatment of errors.

Error Treatment

In this paper, the term error treatment, error corrections and error feedback are used interchangeably. One of the critical issues in the ESL/ EFL classroom is how and when errors should be treated. There has been no simple and conclusive answer to this. There is always a dichotomy of approach to errors that would invite debates among teachers: tactfully versus rudely, gently versus assertively, supportively versus condemningly, selectively versus comprehensively, or immediately versus delayed time. Other than that, research has also shown that not all teachers treat errors

in the same way, and no one has agreed to the best method of treating the errors.

For example, Ur (2000) attested that errors should be treated in tactful and encouraging ways. Teachers should take into account learners' preferences as to how errors should be treated. Teachers need to be sensitive to learners' personality, needs and preferences. Some learners are very sensitive, thus, tactless ways of approaching errors may upset them leading to loss of confidence or hating the subject, or worst, even the teacher. However, other researchers also suggested that negative feedback can also bring negative change in learners' behaviour if given constructively (Ur, 2000).

In writing classes, teachers are always faced with the issue of whether to mark all student errors. Although Hairston (1986) has warned that writing teachers should not be 'composition slaves' (p. 117), and be selective in treating the errors, many ESL teachers, unfortunately are still slaves to student writing (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 2002). To an extreme, some teachers only hunt for errors in their students' writing that they 'red-ink' student writing to a fatal hemorrhage (Noguchi, 1991).

Along the same line, Schmidt and Frota (1986) and Ma (2006) found that teachers tend to treat learners' immediately. This is in contrast with many other researchers' contention that learners should be given time to make sense of their mistake. Other researchers, on the other hand, support the notion that learners' self repair is more beneficial compared to teachers' immediate corrections (Van Lier, 1988; Zhou & Zhou, 2002).

In addition, classroom research has found contrasting preferences of error treatment between teachers and students. For example, Lyster and Ranta (1997) in their study found that teachers seemed to prefer recasts the most followed by elicitation feedback, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, explicit correction and repetition, in that order. In another study, Lee (2004) found that teachers in Hong Kong mainly used two types of error treatment: direct feedback where all the errors are marked and corrected, and indirect coded feedback where the location of errors is indicated and coded. Another common practice in error treatment is ignoring learners' errors. Fanselow (1977) reported that teachers often ignore students' errors although students' do not like this method in dealing with their errors.

Students, on the other hand, have their own preferences on how their errors are treated by teachers. For example, Leki (1991) investigated ESL students' preferences regarding error treatment in their writing and

found that the majority of the students prefer the teachers to do the corrections for them. Similarly, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) found that students valued their teachers' comments and corrections on grammatical, lexical, and mechanical features of their writing. This implies that students preferred the direct feedback style in treating their errors. However, Katayama' (2007) study on Japaneses EFL students on error treatment presented a different case. The study reported that the three most favoured types of error feedback were 1) indirect method where teachers give hints for students to find and self-correct the errors, 2) teacher explanation on the errors, and 3) teachers point the errors and provide the correct form. Katayama went further into investigating the least favoured types of error feedback among the students and found that students do not like it when teachers ignore their errors. Cathcart and Olsen (1976) and Oladejo (1993) also reported similar findings. Thus, despite the notion that 'teachers know the best', learners do have their own preferences about the kinds of treatment that can help them the most.

Common Approaches to Errors

What kind of treatment should be practised in the classroom? Although there has not been any contention as to how to best approach the errors, there seems to be some general techniques that can and have been adopted by teachers in treating the errors. For example, Bailey (1985) proposed the following taxonomy of treating errors:

- i. to treat or to ignore,
- ii. to treat immediately or to delay,
- iii. to transfer treatment or not,
- iv. to transfer to another individual, a subgroup, or the whole class,
- v. to return, or not, to original error maker after treatment,
- vi. to permit other learners to initiate treatment, and
- vii. to test for the efficacy of the treatment.

In the same vein, Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study in English immersion classroom in France found that six common feedback on errors, namely, explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic clues, elicitation and repetition. In addition, Ur's (2000, p. 249) classroom observation reveals the seven most adopted error treatment by teachers in the classroom. They are:

- i. do not react at all, i.e ignore the errors;
- ii. indicate there is a mistake, but do not provide any further information about what is wrong;
- iii. say what was wrong and provide a model of the acceptable version, i.e explicit correction;
- iv. indicate something was wrong, elicit acceptable version from the learner who made the mistake, i.e self-repair;
- v. indicate something was wrong, elicit acceptable version from another member of the class;
- vi. ask the learner who made the mistake to reproduce the corrected version; and
- vii. provide or elicit an explanation of why the mistake was made and how to avoid it.

Adopting and adapting these approaches as the framework for error treatment, the present study investigates the ones that are most preferred by learners and instructors for learning to be meaningful. However, the study focuses only on treatment on grammar errors as they (the errors) can exist in almost every component of language learning.

The Study

Studies on instructors' techniques in the treatment of errors in ESL/EFL classroom learning have been quite replete. The present study shifts the focus onto what can best benefit learning by looking at both students' and instructors' preferences of the treatment of errors in the classroom. Thus, the objective of the study is to find out both groups' preferences so that some techniques on more meaningful treatment of errors can be suggested. Hence, the research questions can be expressed as the following:

1. What are the common approaches employed by the instructors in the treatment of errors in ESL classroom?
2. What is the most preferred approach by the students and instructors in the treatment of errors in ESL classroom?
3. What is the least preferred approach by the students and instructors the treatment of errors in ESL classroom?

Methodology

Three ESL process writing classes at university level involving three instructors and sixty-two students became the subjects of the study. In particular, the focus was only on grammar errors committed by students in their writing.

Two sets of questionnaire, a set for the instructors and another for the students, were designed by the authors adapted from several empirical questionnaires and literature on error treatment preferences for data collection (Bailey, 1985; Ur, 2000; Lee, 2004; Ma, 2006). Each questionnaire consisted of Part 1: the students' and instructors' perception on the common practice on error treatment by instructors in the classroom, and Part 2: instructors' and students' preference and evaluation towards the treatment of errors in the classroom. For these questions, the respondents were asked to rate the given approaches to error treatment in the list from the highest as number 1, to the lowest as number 9.

The data were analysed using simple frequency counts. The number of preferences were calculated and averaged, and later ranked. A semi-structured interview was conducted with all the instructors involved and 15 students (five from each class) to complement the quantitative data.

Findings and Discussion

The research questions have clearly spelt out the main focus of the study: 1) the common approaches to error treatment in the classroom, 2) the students' preferences towards error treatment, and 3) the instructors' preferences towards error treatment in the classroom. Thus, the analysis of the data is reported and discussed under these topics.

Common Approaches to Error Treatment

The analysis of the data reveals that four most common approaches to error treatment in the classroom as perceived by the students and instructors. The students reported that the most common error treatments employed by the instructors were: 1) giving explicit corrections, 2) asking other students for the correct answer, 3) providing clues for self-repair, 4) ignoring errors, 5) indicating errors without correcting, 6) only giving coding of errors without indicating nor correcting, 7) asking students to

identify errors and correct them on their own, 8) asking students to refer to the textbook and notes, 9) recasting, in that order.

The instructors' response reveal quite similar pattern of approaches to error treatment: 1) giving explicit corrections, 2) providing clues for self-repair, 3) ignoring errors, 4) asking other students for the correct answer, 5) indicating errors without correcting, 6) asking students to refer to the textbook and notes, 7) only giving coding or errors without indicating nor correcting, 8) recasting, and 9), asking students to identify errors and correct them on their own, in that order. The findings in the present study are not much different from the previous studies done in other contexts of ESL classroom (Leki, 1991; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2004). The following Table 1 illustrates the common practice as perceived by these two groups.

Table 1: Common Practice to Error Treatment as Perceived by Students and Instructors

Error Treatment	Rank	
	Students' Perception	Instructors' Perception
1. Ignoring the errors	4	3
2. Giving explicit corrections	1	1
3. Providing clues for self-repair	3	2
4. Indicating errors without correcting	5	5
5. Only giving coding of errors without indicating nor correcting	6	7
6. Asking students to identify errors and correct them on their own	7	8
7. Asking other students for the correct answer	2	4
8. Asking students to refer to the textbook and notes	8	6
9. Recasting	9	8

The interview data provide very interesting views from the instructors as to why these are the most common approaches being practised in the classroom (although some of them claimed that they did not actually prefer some of the approaches). Although explicit corrections ranked first in the list, the instructors claimed that this was not the approach that they would have preferred if they had the choice. They used the explicit

corrections method because it was time-saving and useful in ensuring that students understand their errors. One instructor claimed that it was the method used when she did not want to spend so much time on correcting the errors that were bound to occur again in the students' writing. Another instructor claimed that she employed this method because she felt frustrated and fed up when the students did not seem to learn or remember anything thought. Thus, by giving direct and explicit corrections, she felt that she had done her part in explaining it to the students. The instructors' frustrations could also lead to the instructors' ignoring the errors. They claimed that some students did not seem to be interested in the corrections. Thus, at times, they felt it was pointless to correct the similar mistakes every time it occurred. If they did, they saw themselves being the slaves of correcting students' errors. There are, however, students who are more serious, interested and enthusiastic in their studies. Thus, the instructors also employed the other two approaches, namely, asking other students for the correct answer, and providing clues for self-repair. These two approaches would boost the students' confidence and enhance their skills and understanding. However, asking other students for the correct answer had to be done carefully. This is because if the students were not able to provide the correct answers, it can cause them embarrassment. Thus, the instructors only asked the students whom they knew could give the correct answers.

Preference to Error Treatment

The following Table 2 shows the order of preference to error treatment from the students' and instructors' point of view.

The results indicate that there is a conflict between the students' and instructors' preference for error treatment. While students show a preference for dependent learning, instructors' prefer a more independent style of learning for their students.

As can be seen from the findings, the students preferred direct, immediate and explicit corrections from the instructors. In the interview, a few students reported that they would like to be told of their mistakes and the corrections directly. Such approach would simply save time as they would have a proper and direct guidance for understanding. This explains why the approaches 'asking students to refer to textbooks and notes' and 'asking other students for the correct answer' were ranked second and third in their preference list. They did not seem to have

Table 2: Error Treatment Preference

		Error Treatment	
Students' Preference		Instructors' Preference	
1	Giving explicit corrections	1	Providing clues for self-repair
2	Asking students to refer to textbooks and notes	2	Indicating errors without correcting
3	Asking other students for the correct answer	3	Only giving coding of errors without indicating errors
4	Providing clues for self-repair	4	Asking students to refer to textbooks and notes
5	Indicating errors without correcting	5	Giving explicit corrections
6	Only giving coding of errors without indicating errors	6	Recasting
7	Recasting	7	Only giving coding of errors without indicating errors
8	Asking students to identify and correct the errors on their own	8	Asking students to identify and correct the errors on their own
9	Ignoring errors	9	Ignoring errors

confidence for their own learning if no guidance was provided for them. This also explains why they did not like it when instructors asked them to find and correct their own mistakes, thus, this approach was ranked among the least preferred approaches to error treatment.

However, it is very important to note that students with better English Language proficiency (indicated as students with Grade B and above in their demographic background) preferred the approaches 4 and 5 ('providing clues for self repair' and 'indicating errors without correcting') as they would have the chance to make sense of their mistakes and could develop their own progress outside the class.

On the other hand, the data reveal a different case for the instructors' preference. Although the instructors claimed that explicit correction had been widely practised in the treatment of errors, they felt that such approach could inhibit learners from developing their understanding of the language at their own effort. They felt that learners should internalise the language structure for deep understanding rather than being spoonfed which could only be good for short term solutions to the errors. Moreover, these students were at the college level and should be exposed to independent learning. Thus, the instructors felt that providing clues for

self-repair should be best benefit the students who made the error as they would internalise the structure and repair the errors themselves. Asking other students for repair would also be beneficial as they would also need to have a deep understanding of the language structure to enable them to do the repair.

However, it is important to note that both groups felt that no errors should go untreated. None of the students and instructors felt that ignoring errors as a desirable practice in the error treatment. They claimed that if the errors were untreated in one way or another, they are likely to stay and will definitely shape the learners' linguistic profile.

Possible Classroom Practice in Error Treatment

The results of this small scale study have established that treatment of errors should be taken seriously by instructors in the classroom. Any conflict between classroom practice and learner preferences should be avoided for the benefit of learning. However, instructors must be aware that they need not be slaves to correcting all the errors for the students themselves. Instead of correcting all errors, instructors can adopt some measures that can help students become independent editors for their own language production.

First, instructors must consider the level of the students before applying any techniques on correcting the errors. This is very important as some techniques that require independent learning or reflection on the language structures may only be suitable for matured students or those at a higher level of learning. Thus, providing clues for self-repair may not seem suitable for younger students or at the beginners' level.

Next, instructors need to focus on the learners. By identifying individual's needs and competence, instructors may be able to practice a variety of techniques with different students. This can help instructors identify students' preferences in the error treatment, and this, in turn, may help to reach more students.

Another important technique that can be adopted by instructors is to make the students be responsible in their own learning. Ferris (2002) suggested that error treatment should go beyond teacher error correction. He suggested the use of error logs by students. The logs can help students monitor and assess their own progress.

Conclusion

Students have their own inhibitive preferences in learning. Instructors, thus, should take this into account when adopting any approach in the error treatment. However, instructors should also consider what is appropriate for the benefit of learning. As Harmer attested, ‘teachers have to measure what is appropriate for a particular student in a particular situation’ (2000, p. 2). Teachers should also help students, through their error treatment approaches, take on greater and better responsibility in their learning.

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