Treating Students' Errors in Oral Production

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> Student: *I can to play the guitar.*
> Teacher: *You can play the guitar?*
> Student: *Yes, I can to play the guitar very well.*

Error treatment negotiations like the above are not always successful. In fact, teachers often fail to help their students notice and correct their errors simply because they lack the necessary understanding of error treatment. Even though different studies have been conducted in this area of Classroom-Centered Research, many instructors are not informed about the different aspects of error treatment. According to Burt and Kiparsky: "the teacher has no guide but his intuition to tell him which kind of mistakes are most important to correct."[1]

In order to treat errors effectively, teachers must make informed decisions. This implies that not only should teachers be aware of existing research on this area, but they should also acknowledge students' preferences for error treatment. And in order to discover students' preferences, it is worth devoting some time at the beginning of the semester to either interview or survey the students on their preferences for error treatment.

Teachers are daily faced with the problem of whether to treat errors or not. Then they must also consider what types of errors are

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1.   M. Burt, C. Kiparsky, "Global and Local Mistakes," *New Frontiers in Second Language Learning,* eds. J. Schumann and N. Stenson (Massachussetts: Newbury House Publishers, 1974) 71.

most important to be treated, how often these should be treated. Furthermore, teachers must decide how to treat errors, and what techniques to use for this purpose. Finally, but not less importantly, educators have to decide who should treat the errors in class. Before addressing each of these aspects, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the concept of errors as such.

Errors Defined

Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes ... Learning [involves] a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes, by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment and with that feedback to make new attempts which successively more closely approximate desire goals.[2]

This view of human learning has led researchers of second language acquisition to view errors as positive to language learning:

Researchers and teachers of second languages soon came to realize that the mistakes a person made in this process of constructing a new system of language needed to be analyzed carefully, for they possibly held in them some of the keys to the understanding of the process of second language acquisition.[3]

Errors have been defined as "noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner," in contrast with mistake, "performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip,' in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly."[4]

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2.   Douglas Brown, *Principles of language learning and teaching* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1987) 169-170.
3.   Brown, 170.
4.   Brown, 170.

Different types of errors have been classified in lexical (word choice), phonological (pronunciation), semantic (meaning), syntactic (grammar), and pragmatic (content) errors. Beretta classifies errors as linguistic, morphosyntactic or phonological, and content errors, "any response by a student to a teacher's question that was unsatisfactory to in terms of its propositional content."[5] Thus, "categories of errors range from strictly 'linguistic' (phonological, morphological, syntactic), to subject matter 'content' (factual and conceptual knowledge) and lexical items, to errors of classroom interaction and discourse."[6] Being clear on the definition of errors enables us to consider the decisions teachers have to make regarding error treatment.

Should teachers treat students' errors?

There is no doubt that errors must be treated at some point; otherwise we would surely lead students to their repetition, and "though errors in grammar and pronunciation can not be prevented, repetition of them may be."[7] Students need to be able to first identify the errors in order to be able correct them.

It is not surprising that most students want to be corrected when they make mistakes. They want to be corrected more than most teachers think they do. Pupils feel very disappointed when they are not corrected, they even think that they are not learning when their errors are not treated. Something that teachers do have to decide is what type of errors they should treat, when is the appropriate timing and how to treat errors, among others.

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5.   A. Beretta, "Attention to Form or Meaning? Error Treatment in the Bangalore Project," *TESOL Quarterly, XXIII,* 2, (1989) 292.

6.   A. Chaudron, "A Descriptive Model of Discourse in the Corrective Treatment of Learners' Error," *Language Learning, XXVII* (1977) 32.

7.   John Fanselow, "The Treatment of Error in Oral Work," *Foreign Language Annals, X* (1977) 287.

What type of errors should be treated?

It is my belief that all types of errors need to be treated at some time. However, whether the teacher decides to treat a certain type of error or not largely depends on the type of group and the seriousness of the error. Pronunciation errors, for example, would seem insignificant in a reading class whereas they would be of great importance in a conversation or pronunciation class. Similarly, in a conversation class, the educator might decide not to treat any errors except for those that interfere with communication.

Teachers, in my opinion should always treat any type of error which results in miscommunication or that disrupts communication. Students must be allowed to talk, to transmit their messages, this is after all the main goal of communication, and then the errors can be treated. "If teachers want accuracy above all things and never mind what ideas the students express, then that teachers will get attempts at accuracy: no mistakes and not learning steps."[8] Teachers should also treat any type of error that is so recurrent that it could cause communication problems in the future.

When should errors be treated?

Instructors must also decide the specific moment for error treatment. In other words, they have to decide if errors are to be treated immediately after they are made, or at the end of the interaction, when the student has already finished expressing his/her ideas. There are other alternatives to consider: errors could be treated at the end of the class period, at the end of the week, the next day, or any other particular time during the semester.

Once again the timing of the treatment largely depends on the type of error and whether it interferes with communication or not. When

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8.   W. Edge, *Mistakes and Correction* (London: Longman, 1989) 16.

the error, for example, prevents the rest of the students from understanding the ideas being expressed, I would recommend immediate treatment. In the case of Spanish speakers using English together, they will understand each other in spite of the errors because of the common source of the error. In this case, the error treatment negotiation can be postponed to a variety of times during the lesson and the course. However, the same errors would cause a complete breakdown of communication with any English native speaker who does not speak Spanish. This is an important aspect to consider when treating the errors, and it is necessary to make sure the students understand this fact.

When a student makes a mistake and it is a type of mistake that many students are having a problem with, the instructor might consider treating it immediately in order for everyone to benefit from the treatment transaction. However, treating the errors immediately is something that must be done very carefully. Interrupting students might not only embarrass them, but also make them forget their ideas.

Teachers can always take notes and treat errors either individually or as a group. In other words, errors can be treated privately with every single student or they could also be treated error by error with the class. This alternative has been very beneficial especially for shy students who might feel embarrassed even if we mention their errors to the group. There are certain times, however, when all students' errors could be treated at once, especially when the same type of error is reoccurring. In this case similar errors can be group together and then treated. It might be worth to create a mini-lesson on error correction and start the next class by treating them.

Educators should never ignore or neglect the students' preferences for error treatment; therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to explore the students' likes, dislikes and needs for time of treatment. We ought to be very careful since there might be certain students who express their desire to postpone the error treatment negotiation but they later refuse to believe that they actually have made such a simple error.

These particular students need to be "caught in the act" sometimes. Treating the error at an appropriate time is as important as treating them at an appropriate frequency.

How often should errors be treated?

Although the frequency of error treatment is difficult to establish, it is clear that it is not always possible to treat errors always, nor is it appropriate to leave them all untreated. If the teacher corrected students for every single error, then the students would not be able to express themselves, and they would certainly feel intimidated.

Educators must not feel obligated to treat errors every time they occur, but they must analyze whether they can slip the correction in without breaking up the communication. In a few seconds, we have to decide if we can make the correction and keep the conversation going. In addition, it is very important to consider the feelings and wishes of the students; before making the decision, we have to decide whether the student is receptive to the correction.

Moreover, the frequency of treatment can be also negotiated with the students, and can vary from one type of activity to another. The students' preferences for frequency of treatment could give the educators a hint that together with their beliefs and knowledge would guide them regarding the frequency of treatment.

How should teachers treat errors?

There is no magic formula on how to treat errors, but variety is highly recommended. In other words, there are many varied techniques educators have available for this purpose. Whether the professor chooses one technique or another depends greatly on the particular class, the type of error, the students' preferences, and other aspects mentioned before. It is even necessary to consider the students' age, temper and level in order to choose an appropriate technique for the error treatment

negotiation to be successful. Finally, but not less importantly, the students need to be aware that an error treatment negotiation is going on and know what technique the educator is using in order to avoid inconsistencies.

Not surprisingly, a number of research studies have been conducted on the types of treatment that teachers use for treating students' errors. Researchers such as Fanselow, Nystrom, Cohen and Robins and Allwright have found that the teachers are inconsistent and ambiguous in the correction of errors, because these educators have not taken the time to discuss error treatment with their students, this discussion at the beginning of the term might be time consuming, but it is worthwhile. In addition, instructions often lack the necessary information on error treatment.

The types of treatment given to the learners' errors have been classified in a number of ways by these researchers. Fanselow, for instance, discovered sixteen different error treatment techniques, some of which are "no treatment," "acceptance of response containing error," "giving the correct answer orally," and "indicating 'no' with a gesture."[9]

There are a variety of techniques that educators can carefully study in order to decide which to use. It is extremely important to consider the students' interests and preferences when selecting the error treatment techniques for a particular class. By letting the learners select the techniques they like and dislike from a given list with specific examples, the teacher will certainly facilitate error treatment negotiations. The students will be aware of the techniques being used and the type of response they are expected to provide. Given the importance of being aware of the variety of techniques that can be used for treating errors, a complete list including twenty-six different techniques is provided below. This list cannot only help educators identify the different techniques used, but familiarize them with other ways to treat errors that could be used in class. In addition, the list

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9.   Fanselow, 1987.

Figure 1. Error correction techniques

Technique	Example
No correction	S: I didn't *went* to the movies. T: Why?
Indicating the source of error	T: What's your name? S: *Very well, thanks.* T: That's not what I asked you.
Disapproval gesture	S: I can *to* play the guitar. T: The teacher moves his head indicating 'no' (incorrect answer)
Asking for repetition or clarification	S: *Teacher at 9:30.* T: I don't understand. What did you say?
Giving a clue to correction	S: I *go* to the movies last night. T: You need to use the past tense. I ____ to the movies last night.
Giving the correct form	S: Toro, *what have you*? T: What do you have?
Giving options to choose the correct form	S: I didn't *to* go to Church yesterday. T: You didn't *to* go? Or: *You didn't go*?
Repeating the error	S: My mother *dead* last year. T: Your mother *dead*? S: Yes, my mother dead last year.
Interrupting the speaker	S: Infrastructure is *determined* by... structure. T: Determined. (pronunciation)
Commenting on the error	S: Alice can *sings* very well. T: Many of you seem to have forgotten the proper use of modal auxiliaries. This is something you need to study again.

Grammatical explanation	T: How can we prevent AIDS? S: Not having *a* sex. T: Okay, you don't really need an "a" there because sex is a non-count noun…
Treating the errors on the board	S: I have *much* friends. T: The teacher writes on the board: Many: friends-bananas-apples (count) Much: time-money-sugar (non-count)
Individual treatment	S: Everyone *know* the answer. T: Pronouns such as "everyone, no one, everybody" are singular. You need to say, "everyone knows."
Writing the correction for each student	S: I have two beautifuls daughters. T: I have two BEAUTIFUL daughters.
Creating a story using the correct form	S: I *have* twenty years old. T: This is my friend Susan. She is twenty years old. She has a son. Her son is two years old. …
Paraphrasing using the correct form	S: I used to *went* to *the* church everyday when I was *children*. T: How interesting! You used to go to church everyday when you were a child.
Treating errors as homework where the students have to correct their errors	S: *I'm liking* to listen to music. T: Homework. Correct the following sentences: 1. *I'm liking* to listen to …
Doing a class activity to reinforce the correct for	S: I *have* twenty years old. T: Today we're going to play "20 questions" in order to find out how old each student is…
Listening to a recording	S: Who *want* something to eat? T: The teacher stops the tape when there's a mistake to be treated. And the students either write down or say the correct form.

Asking the original question	T: Juan, how old are you? S: *I am fine, and you?* T: Juan, listen carefully, how old are you?
Asking questions using the correct form	S: Teacher, did you *saw* Ana? T: Did I see Ana? No, what about you? Did you see Ana?
Watching a video of any activity videotaped from the class	S: I *wish* it doesn't rain tomorrow. T: Stop the videotape when there's a mistake: I wish it doesn't rain ... (And everyone can come up with the correct form.)
Repeating sentence correctly	S: The police in C.R. *is* not paid well. T: You're right. The police are not well paid in our country.
Providing correct examples	S: My mother can *cooks* really well. T: Ana can play the piano./Juan can cook very well./The teacher can speak Japanese.
Spelling the correct form	S: I eat *cone* for dinner. T: *Cone*? You eat *cones*? S: Corn, I eat corn. T: You eat corn, C-O-R-N. I wasn't getting the R sound.
Repeating the correct form	S: Pronunciation errors: *Island/you* T: Please repeat after me: island/you
Grouping errors made by different students	S1: I can *to* go. S2: I will *to* study. S3: He would *to* work. T: Never use *to* with modals.

could even be given to the students so that they can select some of the techniques they are familiar with and some others they would like to try in a particular class.

Variety, I repeat, is very important when selecting those techniques that will be used in a particular class. Instead of just prescribing the "correct form," we can offer the students the chance to think and come up with their own corrections.

Who should treat errors in class?

The teacher is not the only person in the class capable of correcting the errors. The errors can also be self-corrected, or could be just as well be treated by another student, by a group of students, or the whole class. There is also the possibility of letting the students do some research to find out the correct forms or even ask someone outside the classroom (such as another teacher or a foreign student).

In any case, it is very important to give the students the opportunity for self-correction as well as peer and class correction. They need to learn from each other, and they can learn a lot from their own mistakes. Students should then be permitted to join the error treatment negotiations. However, teachers must be careful because some students might resent being corrected by their peers. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, learners need to be very clear on the importance and usefulness of learning from each other's errors.

Conclusion and Implications

At this point it is evident that errors are no longer considered negative for the learning process. On the contrary, "learning [involves] a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment."[10] Figure 2 provides

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10.   Brown, 170.

Figure 2. Guide for Error Treatment

Time of treatment	Type of error	Treatment techniques	Who	Frequency
• Immediate	• Lexical	• Not treating the errors	• Teacher	• Always
		• Indicating source of error		
• Delayed	• Phonological	• Using gestures of	• Student	• Most of
		disapproval	who made	the time
• End of	• Semantic	• Asking for repetition or	the error	
the class		clarification		• Often
	• Syntactic	• Giving a clue to correction	• Other	
• Next day		• Giving correct form	student(s)	• Some-
	• Pragmatic	• Giving different options		times
• Other time		to choose the correct form	• Whole	
		• Repeating the error	class	• Seldom
• Not		• Interrupting		
applicable		• Commenting on the error	• Groups of	• Never
		• Providing a grammatical	students	
		explanation		
		• Treating errors on the board	• Other	
		• Treating errors with		
		individual students	• Not	
		• Treating errors one by one	applicable	
		• Correcting errors in writing		
		• Creating a story using the correct form		
		• Paraphrasing		
		• Treating errors as homework		
		• Treating errors as a class activity		
		• Listening to a recording		
		• Repeating the original question		
		• Asking questions with correct forms		
		• Watching a video of a class		
		• Repeating the sentence correctly		
		• Giving examples with the correct form		
		• Providing the correct spelling		

a guide for error treatment taking into consideration all the aspects mentioned above.

It has been suggested that it is the teachers' responsibility to be familiar with existing error correction research. Being informed about different possibilities not only facilitates the error treatment negotiations, but also makes them more successful. Instead of giving students "the correct forms," students should be permitted to contribute to the correction.

In addition, being informed helps educators become more aware of their own teaching behaviors. Teachers could also observe their own way of treating errors. They might consider recording sections of their teaching and studying those aspects in which they are interested or that seem to be problematic, as a basis for alternatives for improvement. At the end of this article an observation guide has been included for this purpose.

It is imperative for the educators to agree with the students about the way errors will be treated in class: the techniques that will be used, the frequency of treatment, and so forth. Cohen and Robins affirm that frequently there is no correction of learners' errors and sometimes "the corrections [are] too general to be of value as a remedial tool."[11]

One aspect of error treatment that has not been given the importance it deserves is the students' ideas about error treatment. According to Chaudron: "the use of feedback in repairing their utterances, and involvement in repairing their interlocutor's utterance may constitute the most potent source of improvement both in target language development and other subject matter knowledge."[12]

Studying this area of Classroom-Centered Research benefits the researcher, the teacher, the field, but also, and most importantly, the students. As Cathcart and Olsen suggest, the study of error correction

11.   A. Cohen and M. Robins, "Toward Assessing Performance: The Relationship between Selected Errors, Learners' Characteristics, and Learners' Explanations," *Language Learning, XXVI,1* (1976) 51.

12.   C. Chaudron, *Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 133.

is a "consciousness-raising tool" which permits the students as well as the teachers to become more interested in the subject."[13]

Probably the most important idea about error treatment is the fact that errors are an important part of the teaching-learning process. "In the treatment of student language we have to change our attitude toward mistakes. We must not think of them as something negative which needs some kind of punishment,"[14] but rather as some writer has called them "happy accidents." This term is especially appropriate because it leaves the feeling of something positive in the learning process.

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13.   R. Cathcart and J. Olsen, "Teachers' and Students' Preferences for Correction of Classroom Conversation Errors," *TESOL '76* (1976) 52-53.

14.   Edge, 17.