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The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 62, No. 8. (Dec., 1978), pp. 387-398.

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*Error Correction in Foreign Language Teaching: Recent Theory, Research, and Practice**

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An Historical Perspective of Learner Errors[1]

Audiolingualism and Error Prevention

THROUGHOUT the 1950s and well into the 1960s, the audiolingual approach to teaching foreign languages was in full swing. Language students were supposed to spend many hours memorizing dialogs, manipulating pattern drills, and studying all sorts of grammatical generalizations. The assumed or explicit aim of this teaching method could be called "practice makes perfect," and presumably some day, when students needed to use a foreign language to communicate with native speakers, they would do so fluently and accurately.

We now realize that this was not what in most cases occurred. Some highly motivated students from audiolingual classrooms managed to become fairly proficient in a foreign language, but only after they had used the language in communicative situations. Predictably, most students who could not or did not take the effort to transfer audiolingual training to communicative use soon forgot the dialog lines, the pattern drills, and the grammatical generalizations that they had studied or practiced in school. Put simply, the students had learned what they were taught—and soon forgot most of it.

Not only did many supporters of audiolingualism overestimate learning outcomes for most language students, but some of them regarded second language errors from a somewhat puritanical perspective. For example, in his book, *Language and Language Learning,* which became a manifesto of the language teaching profession of the 1960s, Nelson Brooks (1960) considered error to have a relationship to learning resembling that of sin to virtue: "Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected" (p. 58). Brooks suggested an instructional procedure that would, ostensibly, help language students produce error-free utterances: "The principal method of *avoiding* error in language learning is to observe and practice the right model a sufficient number of times; the principal way of *overcoming* it is to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model" (p. 58). If students continued to produce errors using this stimulus-response method, inadequate teaching techniques or unsequenced instructional materials were to blame

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*The author wishes to thank the following people for their helpful comments in the preparation of this paper: Robert H. Bentley, George R. Bramer, Andrew D. Cohen, S. Pit Corder, Gerard L. Ervin, John F. Fanselow, Victor E. Hanzeli, Elizabeth G. Joiner, and Linda R. Peckham. The author alone assumes responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations herein.

[1]The definition of an "error," a word derived from Latin *errare* meaning "to wander, roam or stray," depends on its use for a particular purpose or objective. For the purpose of a discussion on error correction in foreign language teaching, this writer defines an error as an utterance, form, or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in real-life discourse.

(Corder 1967, p. 163). Appearing one year later in 1961, *The Teacher's Manual for German, Level One,* prepared by the Modern Language Materials Development Center (1961), provided specific guidelines for correction of student errors. The *Manual* states that teachers should correct all errors immediately (p. 3, 17, 21, 26), and that students should be neither required nor permitted to discover and correct their own mistakes (p. 28, 32).

Many foreign language educators never questioned the validity of this mechanistic approach to error prevention and error correction. In fact, well into this decade some of them continued to endorse it. The following statement, for example, is found in the introduction to an elementary English course published in 1970: "One of the teacher's aims should be to prevent mistakes from occurring. In the early stages while the pupils are wholly dependent on the teacher for what they learn, it should be possible to achieve this aim" (Lee 1970). Similar advice was given to teachers in a first-year Spanish textbook, published four years later. Under the rubric "Suggestions for classroom procedure," the authors list suggestion No. 5: "Whenever a mistake is made, the teacher should correct it at once and then repeat the correct pattern or question for the benefit of the entire class" (Hansen and Wilkins 1974, p. xvii).

Structural linguists introduced another mechanism for helping language teachers deal with students' errors. This mechanism, called contrastive analysis, assumed that interference from students' first language caused errors to occur in their target language speech. Many linguists believed that once a teacher had a systematic knowledge of the differences between the two languages, he or she could begin developing appropriate instructional techniques and materials that would help students avoid producing errors. However, considerable empirical evidence indicates that although interference from students' native language is the major source of *phonological* errors, interference errors are only one of many types of errors found in the lexicon, syntax, morphology, and orthography of students' utterances in the target language (Wolfe 1967, Falk 1968, Wilkins 1968, Dušková 1969, Selinker 1969, Buteau 1970, Ervin-Tripp 1970, Grauberg 1971, Hussein 1971, George 1972, Politzer and Ramirez 1973, Richards 1973a, 1973b, Burt 1975, Hanzeli 1975, and Hendrickson 1977b).

Communicative Competence and the Value of Errors

Since the late 1960s studies in transformational-generative grammar, first language acquisition, and especially cognitive psychology have contributed to a trend away from audiolingualism and toward making language teaching more humanistic and less mechanistic. Foreign language teachers have begun to respond to this attitudinal change by examining the learning styles of their students and by stressing the use of language for communication. These new directions in language teaching are gradually changing the focus of foreign language learning objectives, instructional materials, and pedagogical strategies. Instead of expecting students to produce flawless sentences in a foreign language, for example, many of today's students are encouraged to *communicate* in the target language about things that matter to *them.* As Chastain wrote in 1971, "More important than error-free speech is the creation of an atmosphere in which the students want to talk" (p. 249).

This positive perspective toward second language errors is based partly upon analogy to the fact that children everywhere produce numerous errors while acquiring their first language—errors that their parents expect and accept as a natural and necessary part of child development. Many language educators propose that foreign language teachers also should expect many errors from their students, and should accept those errors as a natural phenomenon integral to the process of learning a second language. When teachers tolerate *some* student errors, students often feel more confident about using the target language than if *all* their errors are corrected. Teachers are reminded that people make mistakes when learning any new skill, but that people learn from their mistakes when they receive periodic, supportive feedback.

Not only do all language learners necessarily produce errors when they communicate, but systematic analyses of errors can provide useful insights into the processes of language acquisition. Because errors are signals that actual learning is taking place, they can indicate students' progress and success in language learning (Corder 1967,

Zydatiss 1974, Lange 1977, and Lantolf 1977). Studying students' errors also has immediate practical applications for foreign language teachers (Corder 1973, p. 265):

> Errors provide feedback, they tell the teacher something about the effectiveness of his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the syllabus he has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him to decide whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors. But in terms of broader planning and with a new group of learners they provide the information for designing a remedial syllabus or a programme of reteaching.

To summarize, over the past three decades there has been a significant change in foreign language methodologies and materials. There has also been a shift in pedagogical focus from preventing errors to learning from errors—a fact that is reflected in George's (1972) statement that, "It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the sixties the word 'error' was associated with *correction,* at the end with *learning*" (p. 189). Education is becoming increasingly oriented toward meeting the needs and interests of individual learners. Many foreign language teachers already have responded to their students' needs by implementing innovative methods and materials that encourage creative self-expression and by not insisting on error-free communication. Furthermore, the results of many studies in first and second language acquisition have important implications for teaching foreign languages efficiently and for developing effective instructional materials.

A Review of the Literature on Error Correction

A review of the literature on error correction in foreign language teaching reveals that (a) no current standards exist on whether, when, which, or how student errors should be corrected or who should correct them (Burt 1975, p. 53), (b) there are few widely-accepted linguistic criteria of grammatical and lexical correction in foreign language teaching (Robinson 1971, p. 261), and (c) much of what has been published on error correction is speculative, and needs to be validated by a great deal of empirical experimentation (Hendrickson 1977b, p. 17). Despite these limitations, a sufficient body of literature on error correction exists to merit a systematic review. The information reported herein addresses five fundamental questions:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which learner errors should be corrected?
4. How should learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?

Should Learner Errors Be Corrected?

Before correcting student errors, teachers need to consider whether the errors should be corrected at all, and, if so, why (Gorbet 1974, p. 55). When students are not able to recognize their own errors, they need the assistance of someone more proficient in the language than they are (George 1972, Corder 1973, and Allwright 1975). A recent survey on college students' attitudes toward error correction reveals that the students not only want to be corrected, but also they wish to be corrected more than teachers feel they should be (Cathcart and Olsen 1976)! All teachers probably provide some means of correcting oral and written errors, just as parents correct their childrens' errors in a natural language learning environment. Correcting learners' errors helps them discover the functions and limitations of the syntactical and lexical forms of the target language (Kennedy 1973). Error correction is especially useful to *adult* second language learners because it helps them learn the exact environment in which to apply rules and discover the precise semantic range of lexical items (Krashen and Seliger 1975).

When Should Learner Errors Be Corrected?

Perhaps the most difficult challenge of language teaching is determining when to correct and when to ignore student errors (Gorbet 1974, p. 19). The literature on error correction reveals clearly that many foreign language educators have rejected the obsessive concern with error avoidance that generally characterizes audiolingually-oriented language instruction (Corder 1967, Grittner 1969, Chastain 1971, Holley and King 1971, George 1972, Dresdner 1973, Dulay 1974, Gorbet 1974, Burt 1975, Krashen and Seliger 1975, Valdman 1975, Hendrickson 1977b, Lange 1977, Lantolf 1977, and Terrell

1977). These educators hold that producing errors is a natural and necessary phenomenon in language learning, and they recommend that teachers accept a wide margin of deviance from so-called "standard" forms and structures of the target language.

There appears to be affective as well as cognitive justification for tolerating some errors produced by language learners. Foreign language educators generally agree that tolerating some oral and written errors helps learners communicate more confidently in a foreign language. Because language learners take many risks in producing incorrect utterances when communicating, teachers need to consider whether or not their corrective techniques instill a feeling of success in students. Perhaps teachers should reserve error correction for manipulative grammar practice, and should tolerate more errors during communicative practice (Birckbichler 1977). A fairly recent survey of 1,200 university students of foreign language was conducted partly to determine their reactions to having their errors corrected by their teachers. It was found that the "students prefer not to be marked down for each minor speaking and writing error because this practice destroys their confidence and forces them to expend so much effort on details that they lose the overall ability to use language" (Walker 1973, p. 103). In other words, the students who were surveyed believed that it was more important to communicate *successfully* in a foreign language rather than to try to communicate *perfectly* in it. Stressing the need to consider the "economics of intervention," George (1972) recommends that teachers initially determine how likely it is that correcting learners' errors will improve their speech or written work, and how strongly the learners will sense their achievement. George suggests that drawing students' attention to every error they produce on their written compositions not only wastes time, but also it provides no guarantee that they will learn from their mistakes, as evidenced by similar errors that may reappear on their subsequent written work.

There has been little empirical evidence to suggest when to correct second language errors. More descriptive research is needed to determine the attitudes of students and teachers toward producing and correcting errors in the classroom. Experimental research should focus on the cognitive effects of error correction based on different levels of language proficiency and relevant personality factors such as willingness to take risks. For the present, teachers can consider which student errors should be corrected first and which ones should be allowed to remain uncorrected.

Which Learner Errors Should Be Corrected?

An increasing number of foreign language educators suggest that errors that impede the intelligibility of a message should receive top priority for correction. Powell (1975b) analyzed speech samples collected in individual oral interviews of 223 American high school students at the end of their second year of French. She found that the greatest number of errors resulted from reduction, especially in tense markers. In sentences that were to be marked for tense or mood, students reduced the marker to the present indicative in at least 55 percent of the cases. According to Powell, "the fact that reductions seemed to be influenced by the need to communicate, suggests that correcting student errors in terms of their comprehensibility to a native speaker might result in a more advanced grammar" (p. 38). Elsewhere, she notes that "if error correction by the teacher results in a more adult grammar, it is possible that correction in terms of communication requirements might be more fruitful than any other kind, since this seems to be important to students" (Powell 1973, p. 91). She further suggests that error in word order is perhaps the most serious threat to the communication of a message in French (Powell 1975a, p. 12).

Hanzeli (1975) agrees that errors that interfere with the meaning of a message should be corrected more promptly and systematically than any other. He adds, however, that teachers who are native speakers of the target language would have difficulty establishing standard criteria for distinguishing communicative errors from noncommunicative errors, because these teachers often have learned to interpret their own students' "Pidgin" (p. 431). The problem of correcting student errors consistently according to their effect on the comprehensibility of students' messages, would be an ever greater dilemma for teachers who are nonnative speakers of the target language (Powell 1973, p. 92). George (1972) observes that learners will anticipate or correct

their errors according to the response they expect from the person who is listening to them or who is reading their work. Although he endorses the priority of correcting communicative errors, George believes that teachers often overestimate the degree to which such errors impair communication. He hypothesizes that native speakers would be able to understand the majority of students' deviant sentences. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence to support this assumption. An experiment was conducted to determine which deviations in passive voice sentences produced by 240 adolescent Swedish learners would most likely be misinterpreted by native Englishmen. It was found that the Englishmen understood nearly 70 percent of the 1,000 utterances, and that generally, semantic errors blocked communication more than syntactic ones (Olsson 1972).

An attempt has been made to distinguish communicative errors from non-communicative errors. Burt and Kiparsky (1972) classify students' second language errors into two distinct categories: those errors that cause a listener or reader to misunderstand a message or to consider a sentence incomprehensible (global errors), and those errors that do not significantly hinder communication of a sentence's message (local errors). On the basis of how errors affect the comprehensibility of whole sentences, one could build a local-to-global hierarchy of errors that would potentially guide teachers to correct students' mistakes (Burt 1971, Burt and Kiparsky 1972, and Valdman 1975). In an investigation on the effects of error correction treatments upon students' writing proficiency, this writer modified Burt and Kiparsky's global/local error distinction. He defined a *global* error as a communicative error that causes a proficient speaker of a foreign language either to misinterpret an oral or written message or to consider the message incomprehensible with the textual content of the error. On the other hand, a *local* error is a linguistic error that makes a form or structure in a sentence appear awkward but, nevertheless, causes a proficient speaker of a foreign language little or no difficulty in understanding the intended meaning of a sentence, given its contextual framework. It was found that most global errors included in compositions written by intermediate students of English as a second language resulted from inadequate lexical knowledge, misuse of prepositions and pronouns, and seriously misspelled lexical items. Most local errors were caused by misuse and omission of prepositions, lack of subject-verb agreement, misspelled words, and faulty lexical choice (Hendrickson 1977b). Burt (1975) argues persuasively that the global/local distinction is the most pervasive criterion for determining the communicative importance of errors (p. 58). She claims that the correction of one global error in a sentence clarifies the intended message more than the correction of several local errors in the same sentence (p. 62). Furthermore, she states that limiting correction to communicative errors allows students to increase their motivation and self-confidence toward learning the target language. Burt suggests that only when their production in the foreign language begins to become relatively free of communicative errors, should learners begin to concentrate on remediating local errors, if the learners are to approach near-native fluency (p. 58).

A number of language educators suggest that errors that stigmatize the learner from the perspective of native speakers should be among the first corrected (Johansson 1973, Richards 1973a, Sternglass 1974, Corder 1975, Hanzeli 1975, and Birckbichler 1977). Undoubtedly, attitudes toward language influence human behavior. As Richards (1973a) points out, for example, "deviancy from grammatical or phonological norms of a speech community elicits evaluational reactions that may classify a person unfavorably" (p. 131). This hypothesis has been substantiated by a great deal of research on stereotyped judgements made on various features of Black English (Labov 1972a, 1972b, Williams and Whitehead 1973). Furthermore, sociolinguistic research in first language acquisition indicates that grammatical features tend to elicit more unfavorable reactions than phonological variables (Wolfram 1973). This writer found several recent studies that relate to native speakers' reactions toward the errors of *second* language learners. In Guntermann's study (1977) thirty native speakers of Spanish listened to a tape recording of 43 sentences containing errors that American students most frequently produced on an oral test. The native informants were asked to interpret each sentence according to what they thought the speaker had meant to say. Of the 1,290 interpretations given, 22 per-

cent were inaccurate. The least comprehensible sentences were those containing multiple errors (32 percent misinterpreted), especially sentences that contained multiple errors of the *same* subtype. It was found that among the highest frequency errors produced by American students of Spanish, errors in article omissions were more acceptable to native speakers than errors in article agreement. The results also revealed that person errors were generally less acceptable by native speakers than the other two categories, and tense errors were generally preferred. Another recent study on the acceptability of second language utterances was conducted by Ervin (1977) who investigated how proficient speakers of Russian would accept (i.e., comprehend) language communication strategies used by American students based on their oral narrations of picture stories. Although there were no statistically significant differences in the informants' rankings of the students, there were systematic differences in the judges' numerical evaluations: The non-teacher native speakers of Russian were most accepting of the narrations of the mid- and high-proficiency students; the teachers of Russian who were native speakers of English were most accepting of the narrations of low proficiency students; and the teachers of Russian who were native speakers of Russian were the least accepting of the narrations overall.

There are excellent social motivations for teachers' drawing their students' attention to errors that appear to have become a permanent rather than a transitional feature of nonnatives' speech and writing (Richards 1973a, Valdman 1975). These so-called "fossilized" errors should be corrected based on their degree of incomprehensibility and unacceptability as judged by native speakers. Clearly, a great deal of research is needed in these two important areas of sociolinguistics. Researchers need to investigate the degree of stigma that native speakers attach to lexically, grammatically, phonologically, and orthographically deviant forms and structures that nonnative learners produce frequently in their speech or writing. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to determine whether or not the degree of stigma would differ depending on the social status of native speakers.

Several additional criteria have been suggested by language educators for establishing priorities of error correction. It has been suggested that high-frequency errors should be among the first errors that teachers should correct in students' oral and written communication (Holley and King 1971, George 1972, Dresdner 1973, Bhatia 1974, and Allwright 1975). Research is needed to determine which errors occur most frequently at various stages of second language learning among learners of varying native languages. The results of this research could serve as a basis for building hierarchies of language learning features; these hierarchies would have multiple applications including the establishment of priorities for correcting errors selectively and systematically. It has also been suggested that errors relevant to a specific pedagogic focus deserve to be corrected before other less important errors (Cohen 1975), and that errors involving general grammatical rules are more deserving of attention than errors involving lexical exceptions (Johansson 1973). Interestingly, language learners appear to have differing priorities of error correction than do language educators and teachers. Recently, a group of 188 college students were asked which errors they thought were the most important to correct. Students at all levels of proficiency agreed that pronunciation and grammar errors ranked highest, with pronunciation slightly higher than grammar errors (Cathcart and Olsen 1976).

To sum, there appears to be a consensus among many language educators that correcting three types of errors can be quite useful to second language learners: errors that impair communication significantly; errors that have highly stigmatizing effects on the listener or reader; and errors that occur frequently in students' speech and writing. A great deal more research needs to be conducted to determine the degree to which errors actually impede communication, which errors carry more social stigma than others, and which ones students produce often.

How Should Learner Errors Be Corrected?

Teachers need to be keenly aware of how they correct student errors and to avoid using correction strategies that might embarrass or frustrate students (Holley and King 1971). However, most teacher training programs fail to prepare teachers to handle the variety of errors that occur inevitably in students' speech and writing (Burt 1975). Nevertheless, the literature on error correction does contain some information on re-

cent theory, research, and practical suggestions for correcting students' errors.

Fanselow (1977) attempted to determine how experienced teachers of English as a second language actually treated spoken errors in their regular classes. After videotaping eleven teachers who presented the same lesson to their students, transcripts containing both verbal and nonverbal behaviors were made. The analysis of the tapes showed similarities among the teachers both in the types of errors treated and in the treatment used; specifically, the teachers seemed less concerned with errors of grammar than with incorrect meaning, and giving the right answer was the most popular treatment. The process of analysis led Fanselow to develop four alternative treatments to correcting students' spoken errors for the purpose of reducing students' uncertainty about how language works. Fanselow concludes that time spent on doing these kinds of feedback tasks in class "is probably at least as well spent as time spent giving answers alone," and that "errors are part of learning—mistaken hypotheses and wrong connections are normal" (p. 591). Chaudron (1977) developed a structural model for observing and describing the effectiveness of teachers' corrections of linguistic errors. The model enables teachers to analyze their own corrective techniques and decide which of these are most effective in their classrooms. Robbins (1977) investigated the effectiveness of eliciting explanations of incorrect verb forms produced by students of English as a second language (ESL). Eight intermediate adult ESL learners were randomly placed into a control group or an experimental group. For one trisemester the experimental subjects were given weekly error explanation sessions during which they attempted to locate their errors, correct them, and then were asked to provide an explanation for each error; the control group received other kinds of feedback on their errors. Robbins found that the experimental technique was ineffective in reducing the frequency of students' verb errors. She concluded that the technique appears to be dependent on external variables, such as a learner's attitude and motivation, personality, and past language learning history.

Many language teachers provide students with the correct form or structure of their written errors. Some foreign language educators assert, however, that this procedure is ineffective when helping students learn from their mistakes (Corder 1967, Gorbet 1974, and Valdman 1975). They propose that a *discovery* approach to error correction might help students to make inferences and formulate concepts about the target language, and to help them fix this information in their long-term memories. This writer conducted an experiment to determine what effects direct teacher correction would have upon foreign students' communicative and linguistic proficiency in English. He found that supplying the correct lexical forms and grammatical structures of students' errors had no statistically significant effect upon the writing proficiency of either high or low communicative groups of students (Hendrickson 1976, 1977b).

There is some controversy on whether or not student errors should be corrected in some sort of systematic manner. Many teachers correct students' written work, for example, so imprecisely and inconsistently that it is often difficult for students to distinguish their major errors from their minor ones (Allwright 1975). Indeed, recent research indicates that a major reason that the correction of students' compositions has no significant effect on reducing errors, is that teachers correct compositions inconsistently. It was hypothesized, therefore, that a systematic approach to error correction would be more effective than random correction (Cohen and Robbins 1976). Dulay and Burt (1977) see, however, no reason to expect significantly different results with systematic correction techniques. They propose that "more *selective* feedback, tailored to the learner's internal level of linguistic development, may be more effective" than systematic feedback (p. 108).[2]

[2]Interestingly, several researchers have found that second language errors appear to occur systematically in students' written work. Dušková (1969), for example, found that 75.1 percent of the errors in the written assignments of Czech university students studying English as foreign language were systematic. More recently, Ghadessy (1976) discovered that 77.3 percent of the writings of 370 Iranian university freshmen learning English contained systematic errors most of which were caused by the lack of reducing sentences by either conjunction or embedding (p. 80). Ghadessy concludes that because the majority of student written errors occur in systematic patterns, these patterns could serve as a basis for developing instructional materials for individual learners (p. 81). Although written errors produced by second language learners may occur systematically, there is no experimental evidence to suggest that they should be *corrected* systematically.

Several scholars recommend that teachers record their students' errors on diagnostic charts in order to reveal the linguistic features that are causing students learning problems (Lee 1957, Corder 1973, Cohen 1975, and Cohen and Robbins 1976). Recently, this writer used Burt and Kiparsky's global/local error distinction as a basis for developing an error taxonomy for classifying, coding, and charting students' oral and written errors systematically. The following error chart reveals one student's major problem areas based on the coding and tallying of his composition errors (Hendrickson, 1977a):[3]

	Lexicon	Syntax	Morphology	Orthography	Total
Global Errors	4			2	6
Local Errors	8	5	8	17	38
Problem Area(s)	Nouns 9	Prepositions 4	Plural markers 5	Omitted letters 8	

Error charts are useful not only for diagnostic purposes, but also for developing individualized instructional materials, for building a hierarchy of error correction priorities, and for learning more about the process of second language acquisition.

Recent literature in foreign language methodology contains several specific suggestions for correcting students' oral errors. At the University of South Carolina pre-service teachers are given a partially self-instructional program designed to sensitize them to different types of oral errors and to involve them in dealing with these errors effectively. The error correction techniques "resemble the tactics of a parent who is trying to help a child express his ideas or those of one who is helping a foreigner communicate in a language which he knows imperfectly" (Joiner 1975, p. 194). When the teacher cannot decipher a student's message it has been suggested that he "either reword the answer in an acceptable fashion, in such a manner as adults do with children, or at the end of the activity he may summarize and review the most common mistakes" (Chastain 1971, p. 250). Another oral error correction method is to make tape recordings of student conversations; then each student edits his own tape for errors. If he does not recognize his mistakes, it may indicate that he has improperly learned the linguistic concepts at issue, and the teacher will then be responsible for formulating an appropriate corrective technique (Lantolf 1977). Several suggestions have been given for teachers who use "The Silent Way" method developed by Gattegno. Silent teachers may respond to students' oral errors in many ways, preferably those that conform to two principles: "(1) Remain silent if at all possible. (2) Give only as much help as absolutely necessary" (Stevick 1976, p. 143).

The literature also contains some specific suggestions for correcting students' *written* errors. One suggestion is to first identify and record the error types that each learner produces frequently. Then, the student reads his or her written work to search out and correct all high-frequency errors, one such error type at a time. For example, if a learner's composition customarily lacks subject-verb agreement, the student is asked to read the composition in order to identify the subject of the first sentence. He then puts the index finger of his left hand on the subject, and moves the index finger of his right hand until he has identified the verb, and checks for concord. After the student proceeds through the entire composition in this way, he reads it once again to check for other error types that he produces often. It is claimed that correcting errors in this way is a highly effective technique requiring relatively little time or effort on the part of the student (George 1972, pp. 76-77). Another suggestion for correcting composition errors is to use different color inks for distinguishing more important errors from less important ones (Burt and Kipansky 1977, p. 4). It has also been recommended that the teacher discuss each student's composition errors on cassette tapes, as a means of assuring that students will remember the comments (Farnsworth 1974).

Currently, this writer uses a combination of various direct and indirect techniques to correct picture story compositions written by intermediate learners of Spanish. Some indirect techniques are underlining all misspelled words and omitted or superfluous affixes; placing a question mark above a confusing phrase or structure; and inserting an arrow (Λ) to indicate a missing article or preposition. Generally, these indirect

[3]The writer has recently modified this taxonomy so that teachers can evaluate the quantity and quality of information in students' communication samples using an error analysis approach.

methods are used whenever it is assumed that students can correct their own errors using a good dictionary or grammar book. More direct correction techniques include underlining a word and providing a verbal tip such as "use subjunctive"; crossing out superfluous words; and supplying the correct form or structure—the most direct and least used technique. When students receive their corrected compositions, they rewrite them and turn them in at the next class session. The few errors that appear on the rewritten compositions are then corrected by supplying the correct form because it is assumed that students are not able to correct these errors by themselves. Thus far, these correction procedures have significantly improved students' expression of thought as well as their grammatical accuracy in Spanish. The procedures have also contributed to a considerable increase of word output from the beginning to the end of each term.[4]

Finally, Wingfield (1975) points out that the teacher should choose corrective techniques that are most appropriate and most effective for individual students. He lists five techniques for correcting written errors (p. 311):

1. the teacher gives sufficient clues to enable self-correction to be made;
2. the teacher corrects the script;
3. the teacher deals with errors through marginal comments and footnotes;
4. the teacher explains orally to individual students;
5. the teacher uses the error as an illustration for a class explanation.

One educator concludes that any error correction process includes some of the following general features: indication that an error was committed, identification of the type of error, location of the error, mention of who made the error, selection of a remedy, provision of a correct model, the furnishing of an opportunity for a new attempt, indication of improvement (if applicable), and the offering of praise (Allwright 1975).

Very few of the error correction theories and methods described above have been tested to determine their effect on facilitating second language proficiency. Clearly, there is a great need to conduct research that deals with this issue. It would be worthwhile, for example, to determine what native speakers do to facilitate communication with foreign learners in various types of free-learning situations, compared to what language teachers do in a classroom environment. Many other questions remain unanswered: What effects do correction in natural versus artificial settings have upon learners' language proficiency? Do native-speaking and nonnative-speaking teachers evaluate deviant speech and writing differently? If so, how do they correct students' errors, and how do students react to the different correction approaches?

Who Should Correct Learner Errors?

Most classroom teachers probably assume the responsibility for correcting their students' errors. The teacher is expected to be a source of information about the target language and to react to errors whenever it seems appropriate to do so (Allwright 1975). One educator believes that the teacher's function in error correction is "to provide data and examples, and where necessary to offer explanations and descriptions and, more importantly, verification of the learner's hypothesis (i.e., correction)" about the target language (Corder 1973, p. 336).

While few language educators would deny the teacher an active role in correcting errors, it has been suggested that he or she should not *dominate* the correction procedures. One alternative approach to correcting *written* work is to ask students to correct one another's papers. Peer correction would especially help students recognize more grammatical errors than lexical errors; this process would be reversed when students correct each other's spoken errors (Cohen 1975, p. 419). In other words, students would tend to focus on linguistic forms of sentences when correcting each other's compositions; but when they would correct one another's spoken utterances, the students would concentrate on function words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Students would also tend to correct each other's spelling and pronunciation, depending on the

[4]An unexpected finding in a study conducted by the author was the substantial increase (30 percent) in the number of words that students wrote on their composition pretests compared to the number of words they wrote on identical composition postests after six weeks of practice describing picture stories in writing (Hendrickson 1977b). It may be that writing practice, improvement in writing proficiency, self-confidence in one's own writing ability, and total word output are closely related variables.

modality of communication. Several scholars agree that in a heterogenous class, one student will be able to recognize another's error, especially when the corrector has himself just overcome some grammatical or lexical problems (Burt and Kiparsky 1972, Corder 1975, and Valdman 1975). Recently Witbeck (1976) experimented with four peer correction strategies, including whole class correction, immediate feedback and rewriting, problem-solving, and correction of modified and duplicated essays. He concludes that peer correction results in a "greater concern for achieving accuracy in written expression in individual students and creates a better classroom atmosphere for teaching the correctional aspects of composition" (p. 325).

Several language specialists propose that once students are made aware of their errors, they may learn more from correcting their own errors than by having their teacher correct them (George 1972, Corder 1973, and Ravem 1973). Self-correction would probably be effective with grammatical errors but would be relatively ineffective with lexical errors (Wingfield 1975).

It is apparent that the effects of these different approaches to who should correct learners' errors are based more on intuition than experimental research. The effects of the various methodologies of error correction discussed above need to be substantiated or refuted by conducting a series of carefully controlled experiments before correction strategies can be recommended or rejected as being effective for dealing with students' written or oral errors. It may well be that the specific effects on a learner's language proficiency in terms of *who* corrects his errors will depend upon *when* they are corrected, *which* ones are corrected, and especially *how* they are brought to the learner's attention.

Summary

The literature on the correction of second language errors is quite speculative and relatively scant. Nevertheless, some general and specific implications for error correction can be drawn from the information reported herein. The following implications respond directly to questions concerning whether, when, which, how, and by whom the student errors should be corrected.

1. It appears that correcting oral and written errors produced by second language learners improves their proficiency in a foreign language more so than if their errors would remain uncorrected.

2. There appears to be no general consensus among language methodologists or teachers on when to correct student errors. Many language educators recognize, however, that correcting every error is counter-productive to learning a foreign language. Therefore, teachers need to create a supportive classroom environment in which their students can feel confident about expressing their ideas and feelings freely without suffering the threat or embarrassment of having each one of their oral or written errors corrected.

3. The question of when to correct student errors is closely related to which errors to correct. Many educators propose that some errors have higher priorities for correction than other errors, such as errors that seriously impair communication, errors that have stigmatizing effects upon the listener or reader, and errors that students produce frequently. Procedures for classifying and coding specific error types are being developed for purposes of building a hierarchy of error correction; one error taxonomy has already been developed to classify errors in communicative terms.

4. The literature reveals a wide variety of techniques that teachers currently use to correct their students' oral and written errors. Although there is no experimental evidence to substantiate whether any of these methods reduces student errors significantly, some empirical research indicates that *direct* types of corrective procedures have proven to be ineffective. Some very recent research has focused on how teachers actually correct student errors in their classrooms. It appears that continued research in this new area will contribute to the development of additional practical methods for correcting errors effectively and efficiently.

5. Although teacher correction of learner errors is helpful to many students, it may not necessarily be an effective instructional strategy for every student or in all language classrooms. Peer correction or self-correction with teacher guidance may be a more worthwhile investment of time and effort for some teachers and learners. However, no empirical research was found to substantiate these hypotheses.

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