

Action Research: How to Make Oral Error Corrections More Effective

by Huan Ren

This paper reports on an action research project that focuses on oral correction in the ESL classroom. The research question is “How could a teacher effectively make error corrections without affecting a student’s motivation for learning English?” This action research took place in a public high school classroom in New York City, with 26 intermediate high school English language proficiency students and one ESL teacher.

The data comes from observation journals and interviews with students and the teacher. Three main issues had been studied: a) language anxiety happens more frequently in L2 speaking; b) effectiveness of oral correction varies under different conditions; and c) negotiation of meaning is more effective in providing corrective feedback during communication.

This research will benefit ESL teachers in making effective oral error corrections, which will affect not only students’ learning performance, but also their cognitive and mental development.

Introduction

Error correction is an important issue in language learning and teaching. Whether a teacher can make effective error correction or not can directly affect students’ learning performance.

Oral correction happens frequently, and indeed it is the most common action whenever correcting occurs during the process of language acquisition and language learning. Oral correction happens authentically in an ESL classroom during communication, either between teachers and students or between students and students. There are also many established training courses and other resources that encourage teachers to consider what kind of oral correction strategies benefit students most.

Correction Methods

There are several different ways to make an oral correction. Following are some methods that are commonly used by teachers in the classroom.

- Explicit correction. The teacher clearly indicates that the student’s utterance is incorrect, and provides the correct form.
- Recast. The teacher implicitly reformulates the student’s error, or provides the correction without directly pointing out that the student’s utterance was incorrect.
- Clarification request. The teacher indicates that the message has not been understood or that the student’s utterance included some kind of mistake and that a repetition or a reformulation is needed by using phrases like “Excuse me?” or “Sorry?”
- Metalinguistic clues. The teacher poses questions like “Do we say it like that?” or provides comments or information related to the formation of the student’s utterance but without providing the correct form.
- Elicitation. The teacher directly elicits the correct form from the student by asking questions, pausing to allow the student to complete the teacher’s utterance, or by

- asking the student to reformulate his or her utterance.
- Repetition. The teacher repeats the student's error and changes the intonation to draw the student's attention to it (Coskun, 2010).

Findings

The main findings in my action research are based on the data I collected from the ESL classroom. The findings are specifically related to language anxiety, types of oral correction, or negotiation of meaning.

Language anxiety is a type of anxiety specifically associated with L2 learning contexts (Skehan, 1989; Young, 1991), especially in various socio-cultural contexts (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1991). In the classroom I observed, the student population is diverse. The teacher did a variety of classroom activities to encourage students' oral practice participation. Most students, though, were not willing to take part in classroom activities, especially students with lower English proficiency, students who were shy, or students who were newcomers in the class.

The effectiveness of different types of oral correction varies. For instance, recasts were the most commonly used corrective feedback, but they were the least likely to lead to successful uptake. The most successful type of feedback resulting in students' repair may be elicitation.

In my observation, I found that sometimes students seem to neglect the teacher's recasting. Because it was made indirectly, and usually in the correct form, students were not that willing to repeat or pay more attention during the teacher's recasting.

Negotiation of meaning is a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other; it is more effective in providing corrective feedback during communication. Strategies for the negotiation of meaning can be asking for clarification, rephrasing, and confirming what you think you have understood. Corrective feedback during negotiation creates opportunities to negotiate the meaning by encouraging active learner involvement in the feedback process (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

I had interviewed some of the students, asking, "Why do you feel more comfortable being corrected during conversation?" Answers were classified mainly as:

- Less anxiety being evaluated.
- Willingness to talk.
- Desire to make ideas be more understood by others.
- More confident.
- Learning and practicing at the same time.

Implications

Oral error correction is more effective when teachers give positive feedback by using practical examples. This will motivate and inspire students' language learning. Teachers should try to engage in more active negotiation by interacting with students during language teaching. This will lead to more successful oral correction practice under a less anxious classroom environment. Finally, as teachers of language, it is continually important to be aware of what might be in our students' minds and hearts.

References

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