Effective Error Correction and Language Improvement in Business Communication Teaching

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Abstract

Considering the impact of ESP studies at all academic levels, as well as my belief that language learning is beyond a simple process input and intake of linguistic information, I centered my present approach on effective forms of error correction in communication and on developing language improvement, as well as improving social skills, as featured by my business communication teaching experience. The spoken dimension of language and the communicational competence, although of extreme importance in contemporary world, seem to have enjoyed less attention from theorists. In the present article I stress the importance of offering our students a tailored form of teaching, which would enable them to play an active role and to acquire a real understanding of error correction in order to offer them the possibility to continue studying on their own and to support their independent learning ability.

Key words: ESP, Business Communication, error correction, language improvement
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1. Introduction

Error correction and error analysis is a highly debated subject among theorists and practitioners alike. In the process of developing language improvement, the linguistic code is surpassed by the overall process of learning, which is comprehensive, affecting and being based on a wide range of personal features, metal capacities and mental processes. Just like language learning, psychology is "concerned with mental experiences, processes, thoughts, feelings, motives and behavior of individuals involved in language learning"(Mercer. S., Ryan S. and Williams M., (eds.), 2012, 2).

In my opinion, present language learning goes beyond the statement that only „practice makes perfect" and in this respect, the role of teachers or instructors in correcting the errors, as well as self-correction should not be neglected in oral communication.

2. Literature review and Methodology

A key ingredient in any form of communication is, undoubtedly- fluency. One of the main concerns of ESP or ESL teachers is to encourage this conversational feature and to provide strong motivation for students to continue and to improve their skills. However, from this desire a new problem arises- fluency or linguistic accuracy? An ideal response would be: "both", but this is not always feasible. Communication in a second language is continuously exposed to corrections, adjustments and improvement.

In order to be able to make effective corrections, we must have a consistent standard and a reliable definition of the working concepts. One of the first divisions to be operated is between errors and mistakes. Errors are derived from a lack of grammatical knowledge, a deviation from a norm, while mistakes mark a failure to utilize a known system correctly (Brown, H. Douglas, 1994, 205). Consequently, it is obvious that students can initiate self-correction in the case of mistakes, whereas in the case of repeated errors (systematic), they are unable to activate this correction mechanism.

Offering correction in one-to-one conversations is useful, we can all agree to that, as correction functions as a filter which is meant to provide a qualitative growth for our learners. The feedback we offer can be either during or after the conversation. On the one hand, correction during the conversation has several disadvantages, the most disturbing of which I noticed among my students would be the fragmentation of ideas, loss of self confidence followed by a loss in dialogue fluency. Students feel intimidated and are inclined to focus on the grammatical accuracy of their utterances rather than on content. On the other hand, the feedback offered after sets other limitations: the student has completed his/her task and is, up to a certain extent out of focus- the capacity to concentrate on the correction offered is consequently affected, the interest in receiving this type of later correction is visibly diminished.

Apart from offering a pure form of conversation, teachers also practice and at the same time teach active listening skills- either under the form of non-verbal communication (gestures and movements) or verbal signaling devices. A this point, active listening can be used as a correction tool- apart from introducing new language items, by reformulating or echoing in a corrected version the interlocutor's words.

The information feedback functions as a growth engine: it increases motivation, increases accuracy and extends repertoire (Williams M., Burden R.L., 1997, 77).

In business communication teaching error correction, as well as language improvement is a continuous process, going hand in hand with professional skills acquisition, therefore, the focus should rather be placed on fluency and continuity. From our experience teachers are more aware of this aspect than students. In most students' view, error correction should have as ultimate goal a grade centered approach. What we teach and what students learn is in tight correlation to the course's announced goals. The assessment is rather viewed under the formative aspect: to measure students' ability and skills to produce a grade for each student and to be useful in setting learning goals for future improvement.

In my opinion, at this stage of their development, the entire process should rather be based on formative assessment- as knowledge and skills, ideally speaking, go beyond a score and evaluation rather indicates what students did well and what adjustments need to be made. Future teaching and future learning will thus become more proficient and easier to adapt to various labor market challenges, which are difficult to be fully anticipated at this point. The major challenge comes from the speed the educational system is confronted with- students prepare for tomorrow's jobs, but professions appear and disappear much quicker than the educational system is prepared to foresee and to adjust to.

Assessment and testing need to be clearly differentiated-continuous assessment acts as a mirroring image- by taking an attentive look at yourself, you discover who you are and at the same time the context around you, a vivid and fluent image of the world around and of the individual in it. Since this activity is mostly placed in a class environment, each student can learn from the others- learning itself in such cases comes natural, we copy what we admire and what we like. Testing is a static image, similar to a snapshot- the ideal situation is the one in which the assessment and the testing image overlap. However, in most situations this perfect overlapping fails.

Measuring learners performance involves a definition of language proficiency not only in terms of grammatical or vocabulary structures, but also in terms of its socio-linguistic structures. In 1983, Canale identified four components of the communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. In fact, when measuring the acquisition level, teachers should take into consideration several other factors- the knowledge acquired, the knowledge to be acquired and the knowledge being acquired.

In order to assess the mastery of these items, tests have been traditionally used in classroom contexts. At this point of our discussion a differentiation test versus task is necessary. Tests are meant to measure performance in terms of target-language speakers the acquired knowledge of the learner, while tasks are conceived to indicate the learner's own rules, systems and categories. The range and nature of the judgments and the choices made are based upon the knowledge already possessed, irrespective of its extent (Corder, 1981, 62).

The entire teaching process is structured similarly to the building concept. At first the concept comes under an abstract form, a central idea around which once the structuring process progresses,

palpable qualities gather under the form of skills and knowledge. Translated in terms of constructions, this is similar to house building- the project design starts from one or several concepts, these are transformed into a project (curriculum and lesson plans are alike), at a later stage turned into a building by constructors, brick by brick, layer by layer, finished and polished until every tiny idea becomes palpable. Starting with first grade teachers the layers of knowledge gather and can be seen or diagnosed in students. In some of these layers we can identify periods in which teaching to the test was practiced. The overuse of these exam practice materials, apart from its positive influence such as motivating students to learn and preparing students according to the standards of the curriculum, brings negative aspects, such as a loss of labor market connected skills, loss of social and communicational skills and in some cases a sort of functional illiteracy. Being accustomed to a certain artificial form of expression, controlled and guided by given pattern drills, most students are afraid to "get out of the shell" and initiate a conversation when required. New conversational tasks are rather perceived as a threat, than as a challenge to put into practice what they learnt.

3. Findings

Having set a number of working definitions, we consider useful to investigate the teacher's role in effective error correction in the case of communication tasks. In this case, their role proves to be a multitasking role, as they assume in turn the roles of scenario writers, when designing scenarios for the given tasks. They become actors, when interpreting/demonstrating the task to their students. Some other times they become directors, when assigning and explaining the roles or when choosing the right approach for the activity. And finally, they become evaluators when assessing students' oral performance.

Oral communication activities go beyond a capacity of finding words and putting them together. In order to make students aware of the social context the practical oral activities include a presentation of three factors that influence speaking in real life situations: audience, reason and social environment.

In terms of possible formats of business oral communication activities are organized as: a job interview, a business presentation, an interactive small talk, business meetings or interactions with customers, providers, suppliers etc. the tasks are centered around describing processes, situations or job tasks, comparing things, narrating a situation, offering information. In terms of settings- real life circumstances are created: face-to-face, remote (telephone or internet) recorded or live.

Committing errors in the process of language learning is almost unavoidable. Error analysis needs to be transformed into a productive instrument; therefore, teachers are continuously preoccupied to offer constructive error correction to their students. An effective analysis of the errors would enable instructors to identify what their learners need to learn. In order to be able to offer students a precise indication on the level of their performance and linguistic acquisition, the use of feedback instruments is a useful method. In the case of oral presentations, for example, apart from discussing personal observations and subjective points of view, developing a feedback grid and applying it, followed by a group analysis, proves to be an excellent approach. The feedback sheets used must also include socio-linguistic items. After being studied and discussed with the whole class, the grid should ideally be used not only by the professor, but also by the other students- who, most often, prove to be extremely attentive and refined observers. In order to simplify the grading system, we used a grading scale ranging from 1 to 5, in which 1 is unacceptable, 2 is poor, 3 is average, 4 is good, 5 is excellent.

Table no. 1 Oral presentations feedback grid

Aspects	Points to take into consideration	Grade
Presentation planning	A careful preparation of the chosen topic	
Objectives accomplished	Adapted to the audience, to the topic	
Approach	Subject knowledge Clear message	

Organization of content	Consistency Relevance to the chosen topic	
Visual aids	Adequately chosen Easy to understand Clear design Confident handling of the presentation? Of the equipment?	
Delivery	Enthusiasm Eye contact Audience rapport Audibility and intonation Body language	
Overall	Was it interesting? Motivating? Enjoyable? Overcrowded slides?	
Other suggestions		

Source: (Adapted from Cotton D. and Robbins S., 2003, 76)

Applying peer support and correction in this case is very valuable, as it fully illustrates the advantages of peer correction noticed by Edge (1989, 26):

-Students are involved and motivated to listen attentively and think abut the language.

- Studens learn that collaboration among them is important and that they have a lot to learn from each other.

-When encouraging peer correction, the teacher gets information about the other students' ability to perceive and correct a certain type of mistake.

-Learners'ability to practice constructive correction without hurting each other's feelings is exercised.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to present and to offer a brief analysis on the way error correction in oral business communication can become a useful instrument in effective language improvement and not only- as socio-linguistic devices are also practiced and improved at this level. A passive role in this type of approach is most probably excluded, both teachers and students being actively involved and in a constant collaboration. Apart from the roles mentioned above, the professor's struggle is to find the adequate balance between correction and a constant supportive attitude in order to fit the learner's educational and emotional needs. Sufficient space and time should be allowed for self-correction, because it guarantees self-improvement and the most adequate form of informational internalization. Correction is ultimately a method of "pushing learners to succeed", the reverse being represented by the danger of losing the "object" between theory and practice. Teachers' ultimate goal is to produce confident and motivated learners, able to produce effective communication and to use effective communication strategies.

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