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A FUNCTIONAL MODEL FOR TEACHER ERROR CORRECTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Teacher error correction is a decision-making process. A functional model for teacher error correction will be presented. Criteria for making decisions for error correction will be discussed.

Teachers are constantly faced with the dilemma of whether to correct the errors learners make when they are communicating with each other or with the teacher in the classroom. Very often the teacher questions himself/herself whether an error made by a learner is really so important that it requires immediate attention or whether it can be left to pass unnoticed. Every time the teacher notices an error he/she is required to make a quick decision on whether and how to treat it. Error correction, therefore, is a decision-making process. This process can be expressed in terms of a system of options available to the teacher to choose from in accordance with the situational constraints of a partcicular classroom setting. There are certain criteria which may be directly relevant in helping the teacher to make the right decisions.

First, however, I shall try to define errors in oral communication in the context of a hypothesis-testing approach to language learning as well as a communicative approach to language teaching. For the purpose of the present research errors are not taken to mean instances of isolated sentences but of wrong utterances in the context of a face-to-face verbal encounter.

Errors are now considered an inevitable part of the learning process. They are not simply an indication of bad learning or non-learning but of the type of hypotheses the learners currently have about the language they are learning in terms of accuracy as well as of appropriacy options available in the language. Errors, therefore, are considered developmental and are an indication of the road left to the learner to «walk or run» in order to reach the desired goals of accuracy and appropriacy he/she has set for himself/herself or the examination board has set for her/him if he/she is preparing for an examination.

Learners' «ill-formed» or «wrongly-used» uterances can be attributed to errors as well as mistakes, lapses or slips of tongue. (See Figure I, p. 348 for a synopsis of the analysis of errors proposed in this paper). Errors are a matter of wrong hypotheses about or lack of knowledge of the linguistic and sociolinguistic rules of the language. Errors arise from learners' imperfect competence in the target language. Mistakes, lapses or slips of tongue may be due to such factors as indecision or fatigue (as

is also the case with native speakers) and they are usually readily corrected by the speaker himself/herself. In short, they may be called «errors» of performance. I take the terms competence and performance in the Hymsean sense (cf. Hymes, 1971), not the Chomskyan sense (cf. Chomsky, 1965).

As stated already errors in oral communication arising from an imperfect competence can be attributed to two sources: They may be errors of accuracy or appropriacy. Accuracy refers to the formal properties of the linguistic rules that are applicable in a particular language. A breach of rules in terms of accuracy may result to:

a. phonological errors   e.g.*[1] [imbosimbl]
b. morphological errors   e.g.* He go to school every day
c. syntactic errors   e.g.* He gave them me all his shoes
d. lexical errors   e.g.* He was affraid of his shade.

The above mentioned errors are deviances from the target language as far as the system of the language is concerned.

Appropriacy refers to the sociolinguistic options available in a particular language. A breach of rules in terms of appropriacy may refer to:

a. meaning

b. wrong use of utterances (i.e. wrong discourse sequencing) in relation to the situation the learners are involved in and the roles they may play when they are enganged in a verbal encounter in the classroom, as is the case with simulations, role-playing, group work or communicative games.

c. sociolinguistic rules of interaction organization and management, and how they are expressed linguistically in the target language, as is the case, for instance, with feedback cues, calling one's attention and so on. (See Figure I p. 348).

Furthermore accuracy and appropriacy errors can be distiguished in two categories. The distinction depends on the gravity of error on the communication process. If the error causes a breakdown in communication, then I would classify it as a global error of competence. If, however, it does not cause problems in communication I would classify it as a local error of competence.

Examples of global errors of competence in English may be: wrong word order, wrong feedback cues, lack of cohesion and/or coherence in

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1. The symbol * indicates that the utterance is unacceptable in terms of accuracy.

oral discourse such as misplaced or missing connectors, or wrong speech act sequencing (for discourse sequencing see especially Labov & Fanshel, 1977). Examples of local errors in English may be:missing -s in third person simgular, present tense; missing articles and so on. (See also Dulay & et al, 1975, where the terms global and local are defined in a slightly different way).

The need to distinguish between global and local errors is vital for classroom error correction. Teachers must always bear in mind that ill-timed as well as frequent error correction may have an inhibiting influence on learning as well as on motivation for learning and for expressing oneself in the foreign language as relevant research has indicated.

Developmental errors, either global or local, can be further subdivided into general or class-specific errors and idosyncratic or learner-specific errors.
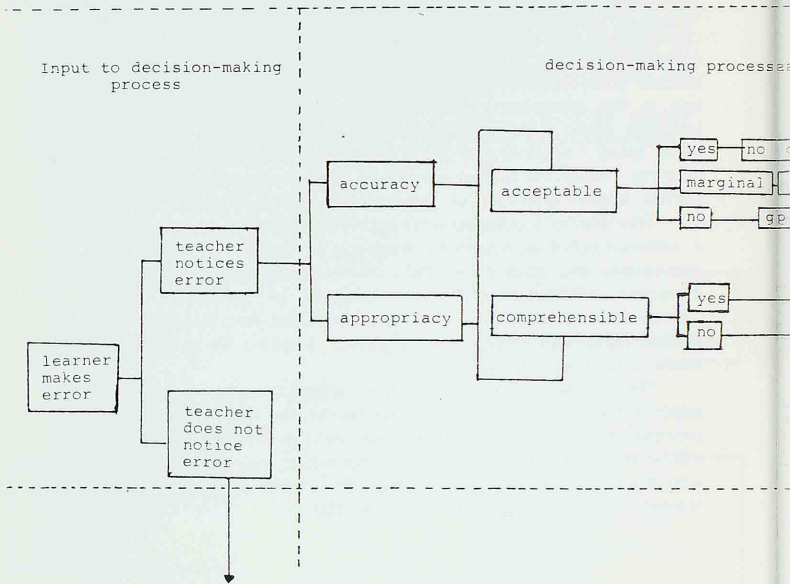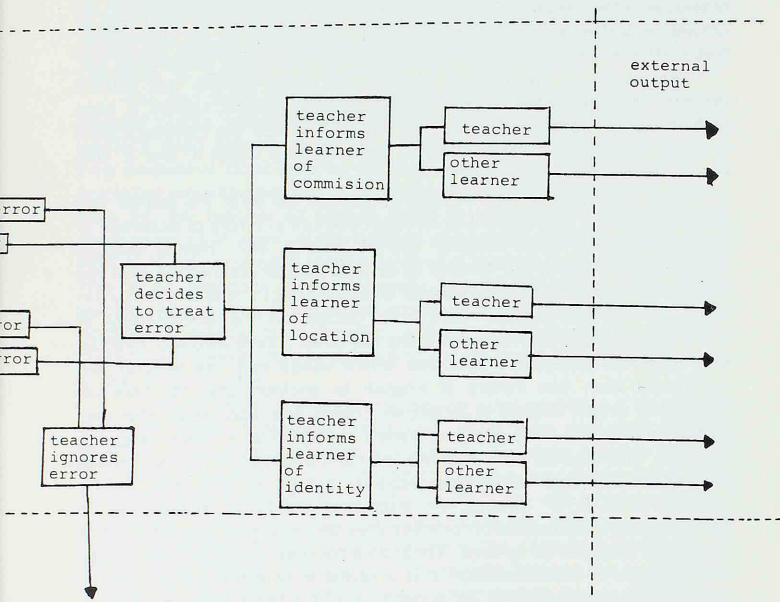
Figure 1
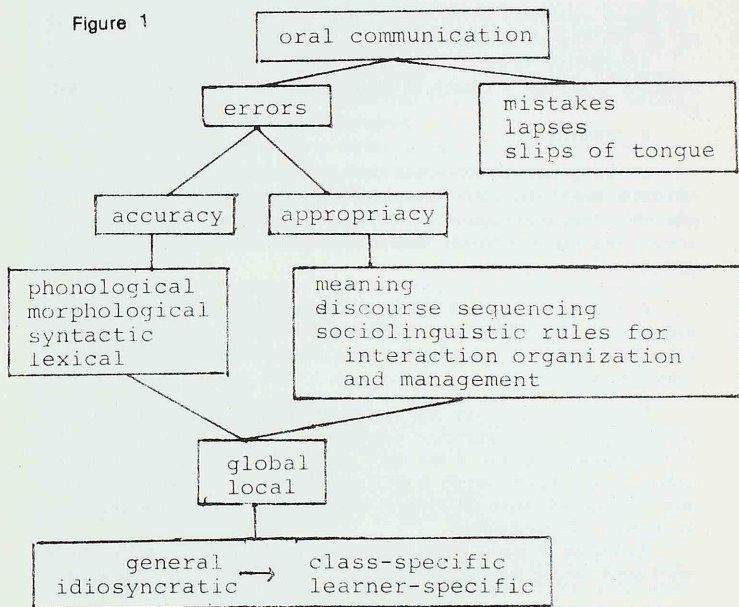
In short, this is a classification of errors which I propose in the context of a hypothesis-testing approach to language learning as well as a communicative approach to language teaching. However, I will not pursue the discussion on error analysis any further since phycholinguistic evidence about class-specific or learner-specific errors is outside the scope of the present paper.

Next I will concentrate on the other partner in the teach-learn game, that is, the teacher and discuss his/her potential behaviour when error correcting in the classroom. However, before I discuss the teacher's potential behaviour for error correction, I would like to define what I believe teacher error-correction really means. When the teacher is error-correcting in the classroom, he/she is actually providing the learner with feedback which is designed to promote shelf-correction. Correction really takes place - according to the hypothesis-testing approach to language learning - when the learner modifies a linguistic or sociolinguistic rule of his/her interim grammar of the language being learned.

The teacher's potential behaviour will be discussed in the context of a communicative approach to language teaching where accuracy and appropriacy are equally important. His/her potential behaviour for error correction constitutes a procedural system of options for him/her to choose from in accordance with the situational constraints prevailing in his/her classroom setting. (See Figure 2, p. 350-1 for a synopsis of the model discussed below).

The functional model of teacher error correction proposed in this paper is divided into three procedural blocks: the input to decision making process; the decision making process and the external output (cf. Long, 1977). Within each block teacher's behaviour may vary in accordance with the particular situational constraints of the classroom setting and learner behaviour. (See Figure 2, p. 350-1).

Input to decision-making process / decision-making processes

- learner makes error
  - teacher notices error
    - accuracy → acceptable → yes / no; marginal; no → gp
    - appropriacy → comprehensible → yes / no
  - teacher does not notice error

external
output

teacher
informs
learner
of
commision

teacher

other
learner

teacher
decides
to treat
error

rror

or

ror

teacher
ignores
error

teacher
informs
learner
of
location

teacher

other
learner

teacher
informs
learner
of
identity

teacher

other
learner

So a learner may make an error when he is engaged in communicating with the teacher or a fellow learner, his/her partner in an activity. The teacher notices the error. This constitutes the i n p u t to teacher's decision –making process. Of course, the teacher may equally well not notice an error committed by a learner engaged in pair or group work if he/she attending to a different group of learners. This possibility raises the issue of learner error correction in pair or group work, which I would consider of utmost importance in a learner-centred classroom. To my knowledge, however, this aspect of error correction has not been researched yet.

As soon as the teacher notices the error, he/she has several decisions to make, basically by answering four questions, namely, a. what type the error committed is; b. how much it affects the communication process; c. how can the learner be better notified about it, and d. who should notify him/her.

First the teacher has to decide whether the error the learner has made is an error of a c c u r a c y or a p p r o p r i a c y. Errors of accuracy or appropriacy have been already defined, see p. 347. Having decided that the next thing for the teacher to do is to decide whether the error (be it either of accuracy or appropriacy) is a c c e p t a b l e and/or c o m p r e h-e n s i b l e (cf. Johansson, 1973). To decide on the acceptability or non-acceptability of learner error there are three criteria involved. First, an error may be acceptable in cases where usage and use features are transferred from one variety of English to another, say, for instance, features of British English to American English and vice versa. This may be the case where more than one variety of English as a foreign language is taught. The teacher may draw the learner's attention to the two varities of English and their distinctive features, but in no way may he/she consider it an error. Second, an error may not be acceptable but its gravity on the communication process may be minimal or marginal. It is a local error and can be ignored. Third, an error may cause or have caused a breakdown in communication. It is a global error and has to be treated accordingly. (see pp. 347-8 for a defintion of the terms local and global).

Erroneous utterances, however, are not only judged for their acceptability but also for their comprehensibility. If an erroneous utterance is comprehensible and causes no problems in the communication process, then the error is a local one and can be ignored.[2] If, however, the utterance is incomprehensible and causes a breakdown in communication then the error is a global one and needs to be treated accordingly.

The next step towards completion of the decision-making process is for the teacher to decide how the learner can be notified of the error and

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2. A note of caution, however. Local errors may be ignored for the time being but they should usually be dealt with later on through remedial work.

who will do so. To achieve the former there are three options available to
him/her. The learner can be either notified of the commission of an error,
or of the location of an error, or of the identity of an error. To achieve the
latter there are two options available. Either the teacher or another learner
may do so. To make these decisions the teacher bases his/her judgement
on certain criteria. These are: a. the type of error the learner has made,
i.e. linguistic or sociolinguistic; b. the practices that the teacher usually
follows on error correction with a particular class; c. the learner's age and
knowledge of English as well as learners' attitude towards classroom error
correction in general.

   The end result of this decision-making process is actualized in the
external output which is manifested in the teacher's or some other
learner's overt behaviour, that is a specific linguistic realization(s). This
third procedural block gets us into the important area of teacher talk as
actualized language behaviour. What are the appropriate linguistic realiza-
tions for the teacher to use in order to notify the learner(s) of the
commission of an error, of the location of an error or of the identity of an
error or to get some other learner involved in the error correction process?
This is an important issue especially for the non-native speaker EFL
teacher who has got to be equipped with accurate and appropriate
language if he/she is to function well in a communication orientated
classroom. However, further discussion on this issue is outside the scope
of the present paper.

   To round off the discussion on teacher error corection, I understand
that the model presented here may seem long and cumbersome.
However, it is an exemplification of the decision-making process that may
take place in the teacher's mind although he/she may not be aware of it.
Teachers have to decide in seconds what to do with errors and react
accordingly. The model presented here basically aims at helping the
teacher to develop a better understanding of this decsion-making process
and to refine his/her perception of the learning process the learners are
engaged in. For we must always bear in mind that all decisions should be
taken in the light of aiding the learning process, not as punishment for
errors committed.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Σοφία Παπαευθυμίου–Λύτρα, "Ένα λειτουργικό μοντέλο διορθώσεως προφορικών λαθών από τόν δάσκαλο στήν ξενόγλωσση τάξη

Ἡ σωστή διόρθωση λαθῶν ἀπό τόν δάσκαλο στήν ξενόγλωσση τάξη εἶναι ἀποτέλεσμα μιᾶς σειρᾶς ἀποφάσεων πού πρέπει νά πάρει. Οἱ ἀποφάσεις αὐτές ἐξαρτῶνται ἀπό τίς συνθῆκες πού ἐπικρατοῦν σέ κάθε τάξη, ἀπό τό εἶδος τοῦ λάθους καί ἀπό τήν ἡλικία καί τίς γνώσεις τοῦ μαθητῆ πού ἔκανε τό λάθος αὐτό.

Τό βασικό κριτήριο γιά τήν διόρθωση ἑνός λάθους εἶναι οἱ συνέπειες πού μπορεῖ νά ἔχει τό λάθος αὐτό στήν προφορική ἐπικοινωνία. Ἄν οἱ συνέπειες εἶναι ἀρνητικές, ὁ δάσκαλος πρέπει νά ἀποφασίσει πῶς καί ποιός (ὁ ἴδιος ἤ ἄλλος μαθητής) θά ἐπισημάνει τό λάθος στόν ὁμιλοῦντα μαθητή.

Ἡ διόρθωση λαθῶν πρέπει νά ἀποβλέπει στό νά βοηθήσει τόν μαθητή νά μάθει καί ὄχι νά τόν τιμωρήσει.