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Practical Dealing With EFL Learners' Errors

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1.0 The Problem

This study is an attempt to investigate and find out whether the currently used method in Iraqi schools of dealing with error correction of EFL learners which focuses on fluency is better than the old one which focuses on accuracy, or vice - versa, or there may be another one, i.e, the eclectic one.

Obviously, the language teachers work under the influence of conflicting policies. Thus, they vary concerning this problem and they may create psychological problems for their learners, especially for the learners at co-educational schools and those who are teen-agers.

Being an EFL teacher at the preparatory stage for thirty years, the researcher feels that there is a pressing need for such a study to cover this field, which both teachers and learners suffer from, taking its practical side and the psychological dimension on the learners into account in order to draw up a road map for EFL teachers to follow. They are in need for adopting an effective method that enables their learners to speak and write English accurately and with an acceptable fluency at the same time.

1.1 The Importance of The Study.

"Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow". This saying reveals that the violation of linguistic rules is plenty by learners of any foreign language, especially in linguistic grammar (Corder: 1973:256/ Al-Jumaily: 1982:9). Consequently, the following questions may have been raised, "Should errors be corrected? If so, should all or some of them be corrected? On what occasion? And by whom?". These questions need to be answered. The people who can answer such questions are the language teachers who deals with this point every day.

The answers for these questions constitute the importance of this study.

1.2 The Aim of the Study.

This study aims at finding out a better method of practical dealing with EFL learners' errors which motivates the learners to perform the language better in a healthful and friendly atmosphere.

1.3 The Limits of the Study.

The study is limited to the EFL teachers at the intermediate and preparatory schools in the centre of Baquba city for the academic year (2007-2008).

1.4 Definitions of Basic Terms

To shed light on the terminologies used in this study, it is felt necessary to present the definitions of the following basic terms:

1.4.1 errors / mistake / lapse.

These terms are associated with Corder (1973:256). An error is a breach of the language's code, resulting in an unacceptable utterance by the second language learners, while a mistake is the result of inappropriate usage; in a naval context, for example a "ship" might be referred to mistakenly as a "boat", whereas a lapse is a result of some failure of performance.

Brown (2000:217) defines a mistake as a performance error, that is either a random guess or a "slip" in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. All people make mistakes in both native and second language situations. Mistakes are not the result of a deficiency in competence, but the result of some sort of slips of the tongue, random ungrammaticalities, while an error is a noticeable deviation from the inter- language competence of the second language learners. It reveals a portion of the learner's competence in the target language.

Johnson K. (quoted in Johnson and Johnson 1998:115) distinguishes errors which are caused generally by a lack of knowledge from mistakes which are caused by a failure to put what is known into practice.

While Richards et al (1992:127) make a distinction between an error which results from incomplete knowledge and a mistake which is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness or some other aspect of performance.

2.0 Theoretical Background

There are conflicting policies concerning the question of correcting the errors made by learners (Al-Hamash & Younis:1985:58). Theories battle with each other; therefore, the teachers of English work under the influence of different methods and approaches. Concerning this problem, there are two or more trends. Thus, every teacher may have different views or has his/her philosophy concerning this point.

Generally, there are two trends of error correction: a traditional trend and current trend. The traditional trend focuses on accuracy, i.e, accuracy is paramount, while the current one focuses on fluency, i.e, fluency is paramount. Accuracy is to produce correct and appropriate language, while fluency is to perform a genuine communicative act. Thus, the language teachers are at the intersection of two roads; one leading to accuracy rather than fluency and the other leading to fluency rather than accuracy.

In traditional trend, it is important to prevent learners from making errors because they lead to the formation of bad linguistic habits. So, errors should immediately be corrected by the teachers. In current trend, teachers should be tolerated of the learners when they make errors. Errors are seen as a natural outcome of the learning process. They are inevitable since the learners are encouraged to speak and write a foreign language. Thus, teachers should be friendly and unobtrusively correct only major ones and postpone minor ones to another period or

until the learners get more advanced. In the latter trend, methodologists vary about who should treat the errors. Some believe that the teachers should do this, while others believe that the teachers should give the learner or learners the opportunity to correct them. The teachers do not have to supply the correct language until all self-correction options have failed. (Freeman:1986).

Mahammad et al (1993:97) support this principle because some of the errors are due to carelessness, while others are due to lack of application of a learned rule.

Muller (1980:VI) explains the teacher's role in a current trend:

> "The Fluency - focused approaches want the teacher to facilitate the active role of the pupil in the language learning process because communicative capacity is a goal they want our pupils to reach and this goal is more important than grammatical correctness".

Now, another question may have been raised: Does the emphasis on fluency exempt us from correcting errors made by the learners in speaking, reading and writing?"

The upshot of this discussion is that there are two different theoretical stances on the correction of errors and there is no unitary stance dealing with this point. This necessitates taking the practical stances into account.

Therefore, the EFL teachers of accumulated experiences whose experience exceed five years or more, are consulted to constitute a basis for that. Teachers' points of view should be sought since they are the applicators of the lesson plans, and they also deal with their learners' errors every day.

2.1 Which Trend should be followed?

There is no typical or superior trend. Both fluency and accuracy are of great value. They should be an integrated whole. If the trend does not focus on fluency and accuracy at the same time, the final goal of the teaching process will deteriorate. So, teachers, the mainstays of the teaching process, can add many things to the methodological considerations from their own experience (Mohammad et al:1993:146). They have to combine desirable aspects of a number of different trends or approaches. Burns et al (2002:297) cite a statement by Duffy and Hoffman:

> "Effective teachers are eclectic".

3.0 The Statistical Procedures

3.1 The Population and the Sample

The population of this study is (180) teachers of English in the centre of Baquba city (affiliated to the Directorate General of Education in Diala Governorate).

The researcher feels that these teachers are real representatives of the teachers in the Governorate due to the large number of the intermediate and Preparatory schools in this city.

The sample was taken randomly from the population. Thirty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to those teachers. Only (24) copies were received, six of them were cancelled because of the insufficient professional experience of teachers who have less than Five years in which the situation in Baquba was insecure (Many of them had no pre-service and in-service training during that period). Thus, the remaining copies are (18) which represent (10%) of the population. Five copies of them belong to teachers whose experience is (5 years - 10 years), three copies belong to teachers whose experience is (11 years - 16 years) and ten copies belong to teachers whose experience exceed 17 years.

3.2 The Instrument of the Study

To achieve the aim of this study, a questionnaire was designed for the above - mentioned sample to elicit their points of view. (See the Appendix).

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were collected, analyzed statistically by the use of SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Sciences) and then the results were interpreted.

T-test for one independent sample is used in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 to get at the statistical results. In table (5) ANOVA is used to know the variable of the professional experience of the three groups of teachers: (5 years - 10 years), (11 years - 16 years), and (17 years - and more).

3.3.1 The Field of Reading, Speaking and Writing

Table -1-
Statistics of All the Fields (Reading, Speaking and Writing).

Sample	Arithmetic Mean	S.D	Degree of Freedom	Assumed Mean	Calculated t-Value	Tabulated t-Value	Level of Significance	
18	44.4	10	17	38	2.72	1.02	0.05	Statistically Significant

The statistics in table -1- reveals that the calculated t-value is more than the tabulated t-value. Consequently, it is statistically significant. Generally, teachers

have to correct errors made by learners because this is regarded as a form of feedback for the learners. But the question "Should all or some of the errors be corrected?" The answer will appear in tables 2, 3, and 4.

3.3.2 The Field of Reading

Table -2-
Statistics of Reading

Sample	Arithmetic Mean	S.D	Degree of Freedom	Assumed Mean	Calculated t-Value	Tabulated t-Value	Level of Significance	
18	13.8	8	17	12	1	1.02	0.05	Non-Significant

The main theme of the field of Reading is that teachers should interrupt the learners' reading and correct all errors they make.

The results in table (2) show that there is no statistically significance. The calculated t-value is less than the tabulated t-value. That means, learners should not be interrupted in the activity of reading and errors should not be corrected wholly. The aim is to develop fluency and avoid the learners' scatterbrain.

3.3.3 The Field of Speaking

Table -3-
Statistics of Speaking

Sample	Arithmetic Mean	S.D	Degree of Freedom	Assumed Mean	Calculated t-Value	Tabulated t-Value	Level of Significance	
18	16.2	9	17	14	1.04	1.02	0.05	Statistically Significant

Regarding the field of speaking, the main theme of this field is that the teacher should interrupt the learners' speaking and correct some of the errors they make because the correction of all errors in speaking spoils the learners' interest in the subject and reduce their participation in this activity.

The statistics in table (3) reveal that the calculated t-value is more than the tabulated t-value. Consequently, there is statistically significance. The teacher should correct some of the errors, not all of them. The flow of speaking is very important in the acquisition of language.

3.3.4 The Field of Writing

Table -4-
Statistics of Writing

Sample	Arithmetic Mean	S.D.	Degree of Freedom	Assumed Mean	Calculated t-Value	Tabulated t-Value	Level of Significance	
18	14.3	7	17	12	1.39	1.02	0.05	Statistically Significant

As for the field of writing, the main theme is that the teacher should correct every error the learners make in the skill of writing in order to let them avoid it in the future and develop accuracy and that is of a great benefit because it occurs without calling other learners' attention.

A statistical analysis of the data yields the figures displayed in table -4- above. It is noticeable that the calculated t-value is higher than the tabulated t-value.

Consequently, the results are statistically significant. Thus, all errors should be corrected and that does not cause embarrassment to the learners because they are spotted without letting their classmates know anything about that.

3.3.5 The Variable of Teachers' Professional Experience

Table -5-
Statistics of Teachers' Experience

The source of Variance	$(Mean)^2$	Degreed Freedom	Variance	Calculated F	Tabulated F	Level of Significance	
among	0.19	2	0.45	0.29	5.31	0.05	Non-

groups							significant
Within groups	50.09	16	1.51				
Total	51	18					

Table -5- above shows the statistical results of the variable "teachers' Professional Experience" of the three groups (5 years - 10 years), (11 years - 16 years) and (17 years - and more).

By using the statistical means the analysis of one variance (ANOVA), the results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in their points of view due to the experience of the three groups of teachers.

4- Conclusions

According the results obtained from the study, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1- EFL teachers have to deal with error correction wisely. They have to take the psychological dimension on the learners into account. In Reading and Speaking, correction a lot of errors for the learners has a bad effect on their desire to participate in the class activities and it leads them to avoid any contact with their teachers and with their classmates. The correction of many errors, in front of their classmates, becomes frustrating for the learners. Therefore, it is advisable to correct some of the errors and correct other errors with other learners, i.e, to distribute errors on the learners, or to postpone them to other periods or other stages. If this measure is not taken into consideration, teachers will stray from the goal of education, and learners may develop antagonistic feelings towards the target language.

Here, the aim is to minimize the learners' errors and to develop an acceptable fluency.

2- As for as writing, teachers have to correct every error the learners make and avoid using the sign (√) to let their learners know their errors in order to avoid them. If this does not occur, error will root and the learners will never be able to get rid of them easily. Developing this skill requires patience from both the teachers and learners.

For the sake of avoiding learners' frustration and embarrassment, teachers have to follow the following conditions:

a) The correction should occur without calling other learners' attention.
b) The action (errors) should be isolated from the doer (the learner). The teacher has to whisper in his learner's ear: "You are good, but you did badly, so prepare yourself for the next time (or for the next exam).

If the teachers follow these points, they will pay a good attention to the psychological factor which is vital in motivating the learners.

Here, the aim is to develop accuracy.

3- All the participants agree unanimously on the two above-mentioned items, regardless of their different professional experience. This underline the principle that both fluency and accuracy should go (work) together for the purpose of mastering the target language.

5- Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

a) It is essential for EFL teachers to be acquainted with the basic principles of behaviourist psychology for its vital role in treating with error correction of learners, i.e, the psychological therapy is of great importance for learners.
b) The balance between fluency and accuracy should be developed in any realistic foreign language teaching situation.
c) It is preferable for the language teachers to pinpoint and list the common errors among their learners in order to show them on the board and encourage the learners to correct these errors by themselves. Weinreich sees this of great use for teaching purposes as an aid in anticipating areas of difficulty the learners face (quoted in Musa, 1981:94).

6- Appendix: The Final Version of The Questionnaire

Teacher's Professional Experience

- year - 4 year ☐
- 5 years - 10 years ☐
- 11 years - 16 years ☐
- 17 years - and more ☐

Reading: To correct errors:

1. The teacher should interrupt the learners' reading whenever they make any errors.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
2. The teachers should correct only some of the most important errors to encourage learners to read.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
3. The correction of all errors in reading spoils the learners' interest in reading and reduce their contribution to the subject.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
4. The learners feel frustrated and embarrassed when all their errors are corrected.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
5. The learners feel enjoyable when all their errors corrected by the teachers in front of their classmates.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
6. The correction of many errors leads to scatterbrain.

Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐

Speaking: ***To correct errors:***

1. The teacher should interrupt the learners' speaking whenever they make errors.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
2. The teacher should correct only some of the most important errors in order to encourage the learners to speak and to develop fluency.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
3. The correction of all errors in speaking spoils the learners' interest in the subject and reduce their participation in this activity.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
4. The learners feel enjoyable when all their errors are corrected in the presence of their peers or classmates.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
5. The learners feel frustrated and lose their self-confidence when all their errors are corrected in the presence of their classmates.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
6. Some of the most important errors may be corrected at the end of speaking.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
7. Some errors can be written on the board, and the learners are asked to correct them.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐

Writing: ***To correct errors:***

1. The teachers should correct every error the learners make in their writing in order to let them a void it in the future and to develop accuracy.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
2. The teachers should not correct all the errors the learners make in their writing to let them feel proud of their work.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
3. The correction of all errors in writing lets the learners know their stumbles in the language (in spelling, grammar, abbreviation, capitalization and punctuation) in order to avoid them in the future.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
4. The learners do not feel embarrassed when all their errors are spotted without letting their classmates know anything about that.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
5. Some errors can be written on the board and the learners are asked to correct them for the purpose of motivation.
   Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐
6. Error correction is of a great benefit when it occurs without calling other learners' attention.

Agree ☐ Occasionally agree ☐ Disagree ☐

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