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**The Importance of Error Correction
in Foreign Language Learning**

REVIEW PAPER

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The Importance of Error Correction in Foreign Language Learning

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical and practical overview of different types of error correction, to discuss various factors affecting error correction in class, and to highlight the benefits of error correction. In contemporary language teaching, different types of error correction are implemented in the classroom: explicit and implicit techniques, oral and written correction, and non-verbal techniques such as gestures and facial expressions. According to the Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Schmidt, corrective feedback becomes internalised input only when learners notice it, a point any foreign language teacher should keep in mind when correcting their learners (qtd. in Truscott 103). When choosing which type of feedback to implement, teachers should talk with their learners to see which method suits them best and also consider their individual differences, such as age, proficiency, attitude towards language learning, and motivation. In conclusion, there is no single right way of correcting learners' errors. It is the teacher's task to cultivate learners' positive attitudes towards error correction and to find a method which a particular group of learners will accept and which will be optimal for the group.

KEYWORDS

error correction, communicative language teaching, individual differences

INTRODUCTION

Error correction is an indispensable part of the foreign language classroom, but one that at the same time raises many concerns. Some of the concerns surrounding error correction are when to correct learners and when error correction should be avoided, what type of corrective feedback is best to use, and how much error correction should be used in a particular situation.

Foreign language teaching has changed over the past and shifted from "an explicit focus on the language itself" to placing focus on "expression and comprehension of meaning" (Lightbown and Spada 430) since, according to Krashen, approaches focusing on the latter lead to high proficiency in the L2 because, in that case, the language instruction is conducted in a "natural" environment (qtd. in Lightbown and Spada 430). This approach, however, does not lead to grammar accuracy, which is why contemporary foreign language teaching includes a form-focused approach as well as the communicative-based approach and tries to use different types of feedback depending on the circumstances in order to implement both meaning and form (Pawlak 12).

Corrective feedback can be written and oral. However, it is usually oral feedback that is of topical interest in various disciplines and theoretical frameworks and an issue concerning many teachers since the teacher has to make immediate decisions as to whether to correct a learner's erroneous utterance or not and which feedback technique to use.

The corrective feedback techniques that teachers in communicatively oriented classrooms have at their disposal include explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition (Lyster and Ranta 46). The teacher should keep in mind, however, that these techniques should be chosen not only according to the particular learning situation, but also to the individual differences among the learners in terms of intelligence (or intelligences), aptitude, learning style, personality, motivation, attitudes, etc. (Lightbown and Spada 57–67), as learners will react differently to different types of error correction depending on their individual characteristics. This seems to complicate corrective feedback processes even more, as the teacher usually has to deal with more than 20 learners per class who all have different learning styles, abilities, motivation, personalities, etc.

This article is divided into eight sections dealing with issues connected to error correction while providing theoretical background and research findings. Our experiences gained during teacher training, an obligatory part of the Teaching Stream graduate programme at the

Department of English (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb) during which students of English visit elementary and secondary schools and/or faculties, observe classes, and have the opportunity to teach, will also be included in order to raise questions about the important topic of corrective feedback as well as to help future colleagues and teacher trainees who are struggling to find their path in the world of teaching.

Section 1 discusses attitudes towards errors in the contemporary foreign-language classroom. It explains what teachers and learners should do in order to make error correction a facilitative experience. **Section 2** mentions criteria for correcting errors and suggests what types of errors should be corrected and in which situations. It also briefly presents the Noticing Hypothesis and its importance for language acquisition. **Section 3** describes and exemplifies how error correction is used in a communicative language setting which encourages learners to speak without hesitation. **Section 4** explains how nonverbal metalinguistic cues are used to draw attention to learners' errors and how they differ depending on the learners' age. **Section 5** suggests research-based methods of providing written error correction and highlights the importance of learners' self-correction. **Section 6** discusses the application of sociocultural theory in the context of early language learning and recommends types of feedback for young learners. **Section 7** examines how individual differences such as proficiency, age, and motivation affect error correction and how different methods of error correction are applied in elementary and secondary school. Finally, **section 8** presents types of feedback that learners prefer based on scientific findings as well as first-hand experience.

1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ERRORS IN THE CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Error correction is one of the most delicate aspects of foreign language teaching but one that can hardly be avoided. The process of mastering a foreign language involves making lots of errors; hence errors and error correction are an integral part of any foreign language lesson. However, many teachers feel rather uncomfortable correcting their learners, especially when oral feedback is concerned, as they believe "overt correction can harm learners' self-confidence as well as heighten their anxiety levels to an extent that is detrimental to language learning" (Mackey et al. 501).

Making errors in a foreign language classroom can sometimes be an embarrassing experience and can cause the learner to refrain from saying anything in the target language so as to avoid making any further errors. However, it is often not the error correction itself that induces this

feeling, but the general idea that errors are something bad, something that should be avoided at any cost. A confirmation of this idea can be found at school, where it is easy to notice that primary school learners usually tend to be less afraid of making errors and being corrected as opposed to high school or university learners. This might suggest that, in the process of growing up, one learns to interpret errors as a negative occurrence because the word *error* has connotations of somebody having done something wrong, and nobody likes doing things wrong.

And while the older language teaching methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method indeed viewed learners' errors as something undesirable that was to be avoided (Larsen-Freeman 47), in the "new look" at errors and learning and teaching foreign languages, "the creative use of language that is . . . based on trial and error" is encouraged (Mitchell 13). In other words, according to modern teaching methods and principles, learners should be given space to "use language creatively by testing [their] hypothesis[es] about the rules" (Mitchell 15), and accordingly, learners' errors should be welcomed, as it has been found that "errors enhance later memory for and generation of the correct responses, facilitate active learning, stimulate the learner to direct attention appropriately, and inform the teacher of where to focus teaching" (Metcalfe 620). However, practice is very often not in line with theory, and many foreign language learners and teachers do not perceive errors and the ensuing error correction as a means of making progress in the foreign language acquisition process.

It can be argued that errors and error correction are an opportunity for the learners to develop their interlanguages. On the other hand, refraining from making any errors and simplifying one's sentences so as to say only what one is sure is correct or refraining from producing any sentences in the foreign language in question is usually nothing but counterproductive. It is therefore indispensable for foreign language teachers to discuss with learners the importance of making errors and being corrected, to create an atmosphere where errors are accepted as an integral part of learning and to develop a sense of how to apply corrective feedback so as not to make the learners feel uncomfortable. This may eliminate negative feelings surrounding errors for both the teacher and the learners and make the learners value errors and corrective feedback and start seeing them as an effective and efficient way to acquire a non-native language.

2. ERROR CORRECTION CRITERIA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NOTICING

Apart from making sure that their learners understand the importance of corrective feedback, it is important for teachers to establish

a set of principles that will help them decide on the types of errors and situations that require corrective feedback as well as on the techniques they are going to use.

One of the authors concerned with error correction mentions certain principles that should guide error correction and highlights the importance not only of the teacher's intuition when dealing with errors, but also of the learners' feedback (Amara 62). This means that teachers should also consider the learners' preferences when it comes to corrective feedback and not rely solely on their own knowledge. Some other principles introduced by James include using corrective techniques that are aimed at enhancing the learners' accuracy in expression. Moreover, error correction should not be face-threatening to learners, and their affective factors should be taken into consideration (qtd. in Amara 62).

The most common criterion when it comes to deciding whether to correct an error or not seems to be the "seriousness" of the error, that is, its appropriateness for the proficiency level of the learners. If the error is something the learners at a particular level of language acquisition are definitely supposed to have acquired, then the teacher usually reacts to the error to avoid the fossilisation of an incorrect form. However, if the error is something that is not expected from the learners at that level of proficiency, the teachers tend to ignore the error.

The second criterion that teachers commonly use when deciding whether to correct or not is the kind of situation or the task the error was made in. Teachers usually do not correct errors in fluency-based tasks, such as open-class discussions, when learners are expected to make longer and more complex statements or when the content of their speech is more complex and requires more concentration. On the other hand, if the focus of the activity is on practicing a particular language area, then the teacher tends to give corrective feedback.

In general, the teachers observed during teacher training usually use negotiation of meaning instead of correcting the learners' errors. Comparing the techniques of error correction used in elementary school and in high school or at the university level, a few differences can be noticed. However, what was most interesting was the fact that some of the observed teachers in elementary school often used implicit techniques of error correction, such as echoing or recast, which often went unnoticed by the learners. They decided to correct the learner's error based on the aforementioned criteria, but the technique they used was not effective. The reason why these instances failed is well explained by the Noticing Hypothesis.

The Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Richard Schmidt, suggests that noticing grammatical details is a necessary condition for learning because only that part of input which is consciously noticed can become intake and be used in acquisition (qtd. in Truscott 103). To understand the Noticing Hypothesis, it is important to be aware of the distinction between input and intake. While input refers to the language that learners are exposed to in its entirety, it is only intake, the part of input that is internalised by the learner, that leads to acquisition (Gass and Selinker 305). This suggests that learners need to be aware of their own errors and notice the corrective feedback used by the teacher for language acquisition to take place.

According to the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers, different groups of learners react differently to various techniques of error correction, so, as Amara (61) suggests, it might be useful to talk to learners about corrective feedback and reach a common decision about the technique the teacher is going to use. Otherwise, there is a great risk that it goes unnoticed, which means that it does not serve its sole purpose of becoming part of learner intake. However, teachers should be careful not to react to their learners' errors too often and not to interrupt the flow of communication in the classroom, as, after all, it is communication that is the ultimate goal of foreign language learning.

3. ERROR CORRECTION IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

As a future teacher, I have to admit that one of my greatest challenges will be the way in which I correct my learners. Luckily, the latest trends in language teaching are more inclined towards a communicative classroom setting where the aim is to encourage one's learners to speak regardless of their imperfect utterances. A fine example is Lightbown and Spada's research on the development of oral English with native speakers of French in fifth and sixth grades (aged ten to twelve) at an elementary school in Quebec. What they found was that form-based instruction within a communicative context contributed to higher levels of linguistic knowledge and performance. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggested that accuracy, fluency, and overall communicative skills were probably best developed through instruction that was primarily meaning-based but in which guidance was provided through timely form-focus activities and correction in context (443). This can be thrilling to a teacher who prefers a communicative classroom setting where there is ample time for the learners to do the talking and for the teacher to engage them in the role of an encouraging listener. Like it or not, as a teacher, one will have to lay stress on the communicative aspect of the lesson, and when one finds

the right method, one will be able to cope with the most difficult tasks, error correction included. Let us observe how this kind of communicative strategy actually aids one's efforts in correcting learners' errors. One thing that most teachers can agree upon is to avoid intimidating the learner into sheer muteness on each following occasion. An easy way of handling the situation when the learner is babbling out an error-ridden jumble of peculiar phrases and non-existent grammar is simply to do nothing. Of course, by nothing it is meant that one should not interrupt them. Instead of immediately correcting the errors, the teacher should pay attention to the message that the learner intends to get across. Consequently, the teacher will be able to engage the learner in a brief conversation and ask them questions about it. Here it is crucial that the teacher makes a subtle move that makes the learner aware of the errors they have just made. One strategy could be asking something along these lines:

T: I like the way you described the boy, but I did not quite understand what you meant by saying that he *received* [/rɪ'saɪvd/] the gift?

S: Well he received [/rɪ'saɪvd/] it . . .

T: Actually, you would pronounce that verb a bit differently in English.

S: Oh, he *received* [/rɪ'si:vd/] it!

T: There you go.

In the given example, the correct pronunciation of the verb has been arrived at fairly easily. In case the same error pattern recurs, one should listen it out until its end and start over again. It is preferable to opt for this kind of combination of metalinguistic feedback and clarification request instead of recasting the correct structure immediately. The decision lies in the fact that the learners get an opportunity to notice the error themselves, which increases the likelihood that they will use the correct structure in the future. Likewise, this kind of configuration allows the teacher to move away from the focus of class attention, as was the convention of traditional language teaching, and shift into a more facilitative role of one who supervises the most important part of the lesson, namely what the learners are saying and how they are saying it. Needless to say, the same strategy will not apply in all circumstances. Specifically, if one is teaching vocabulary or grammar structures that are still relatively fresh to the learners. In those cases, the teacher should not shy away from the good old collective "repeat-after-me". The teacher can easily make this a fun exercise if they tell their learners to repeat it several times, first neutrally, then mock-dramatically, then in a Scottish dialect, etc.

It is doubtful that the perfect technique of error correction will be universally accepted, but what can be claimed is that a teacher can easily devise a strategy within the communicative sphere of classroom experience and personalize one's correcting according to the situation. At least the learners will not be stressed out to such an extent each time the teacher calls out their names when the time comes for them to speak in front of others.

4. NONVERBAL ERROR CORRECTION

There is absolutely no perfect formula or recipe for error correction. What can be specifically problematic are questions such as which form of error correction is the most appropriate, when teachers should correct the learners, which errors they should correct and which not, and other similar questions. Throughout the teacher training that young future teachers undergo, their mentors rarely give them explicit advice on how to correct learners' mistakes. What is more, the different mentors in various schools that the teacher trainees visit rarely use the same error correction strategies. Moreover, what can be noticed is that many language teachers use certain metalinguistic cues that, even though they are not verbally expressed, the learners seem to react well to them. As Wang and Loewen (1) demonstrated in their study of teachers' nonverbal behaviour and corrective feedback in ESL classrooms, teachers use an abundance of such nonverbal metalinguistic cues to draw their learners' attention to language errors. These metalinguistic cues include hand gestures, pointing, affect displays, nodding, and the like.

The types of error correction that I experienced from my mentors differed according to the age of the language learners that I observed. For instance, the errors of young learners in elementary school were approached differently than the errors that secondary school learners made. Since young learners in elementary school were still not aware of the errors that they made and were not familiar with the metalanguage that could make them understand these errors, most of the errors were corrected explicitly by the teacher saying the right solution. On the other hand, most of the error correction techniques that I witnessed in secondary schools included elicitation, repetition, metalinguistic feedback, and clarification requests when it came to grammatical mistakes such as the use of a wrong preposition or a wrong tense, and implicit error correction, mostly in the form of recasts, when it came to erroneous pronunciation. The most interesting forms of error correction were precisely the aforementioned metalinguistic cues which seemed to be very effective in drawing the learner's attention to a certain linguistic error. Some of the metalinguistic cues that my mentors used included

hand gestures, nodding, pointing, and facial expressions to indicate that something was wrong. According to Lyster, as referred to in an article by Katayama, precisely the techniques of elicitation and metalinguistic clues draw the learner's attention more effectively than explicit error correction (76). Moreover, according to Hostetter and Alibali, nonverbal behaviour and metalinguistic feedback can have a great impact on language learning because they "help capture attention, provide redundancy, or engage more senses by grounding speech in the concrete, physical experience" (qtd. in Wang and Loewen 1).

I personally try to avoid correcting errors by explicitly giving the right solution because I believe that this does not make the learners notice and meditate the error. I always try to encourage learners to infer the right solution on their own because I believe that leads to deeper processing of knowledge. What I like to do is repeat the erroneous utterance in a questioning tone or to indicate with a grimace that something is wrong because I believe that this makes the learners think about the error that they have just made and look for the right solution and correct their own error. Furthermore, by drawing learners' attention to certain errors using my personalized set of metalinguistic cues, for example, by using a special facial expression with a particular type of error, learners do not feel discouraged, and I manage to keep a light-hearted atmosphere in the classroom and the right answer seems to become more entrenched in their memory.

Taking into consideration all of the above-mentioned facts and drawing from my own experience, I think that there is no "magic formula" when it comes to error correction. Each teacher needs to find a balance between correcting their learners' errors and letting them state their views and communicate in a foreign language. In my opinion, error correction is not something that can be learned or picked up from our mentors during teacher training. I think that each teacher needs to find their own perfect solution to this problem after he/she becomes familiar with his/her learners and sees what works best for them.

5. WRITTEN ERROR CORRECTION

Aside from verbal and nonverbal corrective feedback, another essential part of error correction which was not introduced during our teacher training is written error correction. Although it may be difficult and time-consuming, written error correction helps develop individual interactions between teachers and learners that are rarely possible in the everyday foreign language classroom; therefore, in the following part there will be a short discussion on how to provide written error correction,

what methods could be useful and what other factors should be taken into account when giving written feedback.

Every teacher has a different view on how to correct their learners, and this also applies to written feedback. However, there is no question that the learners actually benefit from this type of feedback. According to Corpuz, a research that supports using written correction is Bitchener's study from 2008 that investigated whether targeted written correction will improve the participants' accuracy (26). The results showed that three groups of ESL learners who received direct error correction outperformed the control group that did not receive corrective feedback (Corpuz 26). Furthermore, a problem arises when deciding how to correct learners' written compositions. According to Corpuz, there are two specific methods when providing written correction (32). A teacher can either explicitly show the error by providing the correct form, or he or she can do it implicitly by underlining, encircling, giving marginal commentary, or using correction codes (Corpuz 32). Some researchers argue that implementing the explicit type of correction reduces the number of learners' errors, while others disagree (Corpuz 33). The results, for instance, from two studies in 1997 and 2001 that were conducted by Ferris showed that all participants preferred implicit written correction through the use of codes that indicated their errors (qtd. in Corpuz 38). Therefore, it is still not clear which method is more effective. However, when applying any of the aforementioned feedback methods, learners' preferences should be taken into account. It is important for teachers to talk to their learners about written correction in order to find out which method suits them best. When teaching a small group, one can take into consideration learners' individual needs, but when teaching a larger group, one has to apply the methods the majority prefers.

One interesting topic of research is the effectiveness of giving learners the opportunity to correct their own errors in written compositions. Makino's study from 1993 investigated to what degree cues are helpful and what type of cues are more effective in self-correction. The findings of the study showed that all subjects were able to correct their errors to some extent, but the more detailed the cues were, "the higher the ratio of learner self-correction" was achieved (Makino 339). Regarding the type of correction, the teacher used underlining, which showed "a marked effect on the correction of the inflectional morphemes" (Makino 340). Therefore, Makino notes that self-correction has been shown to be highly effective with grammatical errors (340). It gives learners a chance to reflect on their writing and to notice incorrect structures. By giving learners the opportunity to self-correct, they are not just passively receiving the teacher's feedback. On the other hand, self-correction also depends on the learner's level of proficiency because it may not be helpful for some

at all. It can be argued that more detailed cues should be given to less proficient learners while less detailed ones should be given to more advanced learners (Makino 340).

Research shows varying results regarding which method of written error correction should be implemented because learners' preferences should be taken into account as well. Learners should be given a chance to self-correct when provided with teacher cues, and teachers should check if they understand them. There are no preferred types of written error correction because some may benefit from direct feedback, and others from implicit feedback. In order to know what kind of feedback to implement, teachers should directly ask their learners about written error correction and make sure that they can understand their feedback. Giving written feedback is certainly difficult, but one should keep in mind that it serves as a basis for the learner's further improvement. Taking everything into account, pre-service teachers will certainly benefit if written error correction is introduced as a part of their teacher training because it will enable them to experience the difficulties that may arise.

6. EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ERROR CORRECTION

One of the theories that is often used in the area of early language learning is sociocultural theory. Even though this theory can be applied to any age group of learners, it is especially beneficial when working with young learners, as it strives to explain (early) human development and the learning processes. With young learners we tend to use less explicit error correction methods, not only because of their lack of metalinguistic knowledge, but also because we do not want to discourage them from the learning process. This group of learners acquires language through play, and keeping the corrective feedback implicit and casual helps maintain this learning atmosphere. This is where sociocultural theory comes into play.

One of the main concepts of sociocultural theory is scaffolding, i.e. giving learners the *exact* amount of help they need in accordance with their developmental level, and this also includes giving feedback and error correction. In this equation, the distance between the actual developmental level (*what learners can do on their own*) and the potential developmental level (*what learners can do with guidance*) is then called the zone of proximal development, as defined by Vygotsky himself (86). Teachers should provide support and guidance to assist the learner, and the learning process should be a collaborative one which includes both the teacher and the learner (Rassaei 420). This means that different means should be used to elicit the correct form from learners, helping them only as much as they need. Application of this theory in the classroom

environment can be very challenging, especially with (very) young learners, since they have limited metalinguistic knowledge, not to mention very short attention spans. As teacher trainees, we desperately lack instruction in working with very young learners, even though many of us end up working with them at some point during our careers. We are not trained in how to get our young learners' attention, how to keep it, or how to get it back after losing it just seconds later. In other words, the collaborative aspect and the constant negotiations which are crucial in contemporary applications of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development are very difficult to persist in when it comes to teaching (young) children.

It has been said earlier that, as teachers, we should strive to use various methods of error correction depending on our students' needs; however, research has also shown that different types of feedback have different success rates with young children's language acquisition. For example, a study by Chapman et al. published in 1986 compared three types of feedback – acceptance, correction with joint labelling, and correction with explanation. Even though correction with joint labelling may seem as a good feedback strategy (*That's not a car. That's a truck.*), it may lead to acceptance of both terms as signifiers for the same toy (Chapman et al. 103). The same applies to young learners of English as L2 who do not comprehend negative forms of sentences yet. This study found the third type of feedback to be the most successful in helping children learn labels (Chapman et al. 113). It not only provides the child with the appropriate label but also gives additional information about the target word (description of the object, relationship with other objects, etc.), which shifts the attention from the wrong label to the correct one and makes children more interested in the target word. This method is very useful with young children, as repetition of the wrong word in any way will often be understood as confirmation. Recast can also be very effective, especially with a change of intonation, or again in combination with additional questions and information about the target word.

As with any other age group of learners, it is important to see which methods work best for our learners, but with young learners, learning how to improvise during lessons is crucial, and trying new methods and strategies is a must to keep the lesson dynamic and interesting. It has already been said that the form of error correction as well as its frequency highly depends on the context and should always be adapted to the learners, and this is exactly what the sociocultural theory strives to do, arguing that the corrective feedback should be attuned to the learner's needs and his/her zone of proximal development (Rassei 420).

7. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND ERROR CORRECTION

When discussing error correction, the main focus, naturally, is on the learners, who can be observed both as a group and as individuals. In order to get behind error correction and how it affects learners, it is also necessary to take into account individual differences such as intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, risk taking, beliefs, age, proficiency, and memory (Kartchava and Ammar 86–87). Individual differences affect the way a person notices error correction, and subsequently, they affect how a person benefits from it. Individual differences also encompass learners' attitudes towards error correction. Various studies have dealt with the topic, the general result being that the learners' attitude was positive, and they even preferred more error correction. Research conducted by Chenoweth, Day, Chun and Luppescu offer some interesting insights, such as the finding that the learners found error correction as "facilitating – even necessary – for the improvement of their oral English" (85). Furthermore, a study conducted by Kartchava and Ammar helped to form the conclusion that "learners' positive attitudes towards CF [correction feedback] can positively affect the noticing of CF in the classroom" (104).

While doing my teacher training, I gained experience both in elementary school and high school. First off, I was interested in the method my mentors would be using to approach children of different ages. In the elementary school classes, my mentors mostly focussed on the negotiation of meaning, which, we would say, is easier on beginner learners who are children. Even though error correction and feedback are needed for improvement, one always needs to be careful not to discourage learners and turn them away from learning. Kartchava and Ammar reached the conclusion that learners are more likely to notice corrective intent in the form of recast, especially if they believed in the importance of feedback (104). My mentors would often allow the learners to finish the sentence and encourage them to speak in general. They would mostly use recasts or repetition, and the learners often repeated the right form. In my opinion, the learners did not feel agitated and continued to participate in the lesson, which serves as the basis of my conclusion that they did not think of those ways of error correction as rough or severe, but the opposite, as helpful and stimulating.

In the secondary-school classes that I attended, the situation was a bit different. The teacher used error correction more freely and more directly, and the methods varied, while the correction was more explicit. Among the various methods used, repetition was surely employed, while the method of clarification request was also included in the lessons. One could argue that, since the secondary-school learners are cognitively more developed, there is a need to include more explicit error correction,

since at that point this could strongly facilitate true error correction and the intake of the right form. However, in some classes, the learners in general were not that interested, and in my opinion, they did not pay much attention to error correction, either. I would not say they felt ashamed, but they were unmotivated to participate in general, and their individual differences, this time in the form of motivation, affected error correction. Still, there were some classes who showed true interest and surprising knowledge, and while in those classes error correction was often not even needed, when it was, the learners embraced it and it was obvious that they were genuinely trying to take in the right form – they repeated it and corrected themselves. The occurrence of self-correction may point to positive attitudes towards error correction. However, as has been argued above, since numerous factors, including individual differences, affect the way one notices and uses error correction, the topic is open for debate and further research.

8. HOW DO LEARNERS REACT TO ERROR CORRECTION?

Giving feedback can be done in different ways with the ultimate goal that, after the teacher has drawn the learners' attention to some element(s) of language, these elements be incorporated into a learner's developing system (Gass and Selinker 359). During teacher training, young teachers learn in class how different types of feedback may impact learning. However, they are unprepared when they start their teacher training in their second year of the master's programme, which is when they get hands-on experience. They are taught and instructed on various techniques of error correction; they are told and they intuitively know that they should be mindful of their learners' feelings, motivation, and further intake of knowledge. However, what concerns them is the amount of error correction that should be done during lessons and how learners perceive and react to error correction.

In a study released in 2007 titled *Students' Perceptions of Oral Error Correction*, conducted at six Japanese universities on first- and second-year students of Japanese, Akemi Katayama found that the learners had strongly positive attitudes toward teacher correction of errors. After Katayama analysed the learners' responses, she found that 92.8% of the learners agreed that their errors in speaking should be corrected. The most frequently cited reason for this positive attitude toward error correction was that error correction brought learners to an awareness of their errors and that error correction helps them learn Japanese (68). When it came to general preferences for correction of different types of errors, the learners stated that correcting only errors that interfere with communication is not sufficient and that selective error correction does

not help learners improve their accuracy in speaking Japanese (69). The learners also stated that they think peer correction is beneficial to them (70). Finally, when it came to general preferences for particular types of classroom error correction in speaking, grammatical errors ranked first in order of preference for correction, closely followed by vocabulary and errors in pragmatics. A total of 84.5% of the respondents favoured the explicit error correction method, in which the teacher explained why the utterance was incorrect (73).

Some of my colleagues, who were fortunate enough to be able to do their teacher training at an elementary school, at a high school, and at a university, had the opportunity to see how error correction varies in different groups of learners. One mentor at an elementary school would point behind her back when the seventh-graders made a mistake, indicating that the sentence should be in the past tense. Katayama noted in her study that a teacher's metalinguistic clues or elicitation moves that facilitate self-correction may draw learners' attention to correct-incorrect mismatches more effectively than his or her recasting or explicit correction (76). Sometimes the above-mentioned mentor would use repetition (when someone did not pronounce the -s in the third person singular or got an article wrong) and elicitation (when someone could not think of a word), but mostly she used recasts (found to be the most favoured error correction method in Katayama's study) in order not to interrupt the flow of communication, especially in lower grades. These types of feedback were appropriate, adapted to each grade (as their age had to be taken under consideration), and the learners never felt humiliated. However, things are done differently in high school, as observed among seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, who have already acquired sufficient metalinguistic knowledge. These classes were dynamic, and the mentor mixed various types of corrective feedback together. Peer correction was profusely used together with the mentor providing metalinguistic feedback about a mistake, making clarification requests and using repetition and recasts, but he rarely used explicit error correction. Another teacher, who taught at a university, used the same strategies as the high-school teacher. She taught first-year undergraduates, so the age difference was not great. Both of them created warm and friendly atmospheres that allowed their learners to relax (and even joke at times) but maintained authority, so the learners always took them and the feedback they gave seriously.

All in all, if teacher trainees compare the results from this study with their own teacher training experience, they will come to the conclusion that learners have generally positive attitudes toward error correction and that teachers should not avoid it but rather adapt it to their learners' age and the aim of the task of a particular lesson. The most important thing, in my opinion, is to make learners aware that everybody makes mistakes

and that their teacher corrects them for their own well-being. Moreover, once the teacher finds the feedback type(s) the learners react to best, he/she should stick to them.

CONCLUSION

Corrective feedback a crucial aspect of foreign language teaching, but also one of the most complex decisions the teacher has to make in a foreign language classroom. However, based on the personal experiences of pre-service teachers and scientific findings, the first thing to do, even before deciding on the appropriate error correction technique, is to prepare the learners to receive corrective feedback and regard it as part of learning a foreign language. Having a positive attitude towards corrective feedback is the first step in making error correction a necessary part of language acquisition.

Furthermore, it is crucial that the learners notice the teacher's correction following their error, because, according to the Noticing Hypothesis, it is only that part of the corrective feedback that is noticed by the learner that turns into intake, the internalised part of the input (Gass and Selinker 305). Teachers should also take into consideration the fact that even error correction can and should be provided within a communicative context so that their learners will have as many opportunities to be involved in meaningful communication in the foreign language as possible (Lightbown and Spada 443).

Apart from correcting learners' errors verbally, teachers have the choice of using nonverbal techniques of error correction, which are also unobtrusive in nature. They can use various gestures, facial expressions, pointing, and other metalinguistic cues that do not interfere with the communication flow and do not deprive the learners of valuable speaking time (Wang and Loewen 1). Besides, such techniques can be humorous and contribute to a friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

Another aspect of corrective feedback, which is perhaps neglected in the education of young teachers, is written error correction. As in verbal correction, teachers also have an abundance of techniques to choose from when correcting written compositions. What might be the most useful, however, is self-correction, which provides the learners with the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their errors and eventually learn more from them than if the correct solution is simply provided by the teacher (Makino 340). The teacher is there to give cues, and it is the learners' task to come to the correct form. This statement is in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of language acquisition, which suggests

that teachers should use scaffolding when providing corrective feedback. This means that they should give their learners the amount of help they need to correct their own errors and no more than needed (Vygotsky 86). However, this is nearly impossible when working with young learners. Corrective feedback becomes a real challenge in the classroom of very young learners, due to their lack of metalinguistic knowledge, short attention span, and other factors. This is why teachers who work with this group of learners need to be even more patient and combine various types of feedback until they find methods which suit their learners best. Apart from age, there are a number of other individual factors, such as the learners' intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, attitudes towards language learning, and proficiency, that teachers should take into account when choosing the appropriate method of error correction (Kartchava and Ammar 86–87). Due to the individual differences among learners, which determine how they notice and perceive corrective feedback, one technique which has proved to be excellent for one group of learners may be completely useless in another group.

All in all, the conclusion can be reached that there is no right way of correcting learners' errors. It is the teacher's task to find a method which both serves its purpose – providing a basis for further language acquisition – and is well accepted by their group of learners.

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