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Correction in the ESL classroom: What teachers do in the classroom and what they think they do

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Resumen

Este estudio examina técnicas concretas utilizadas por profesores de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL) para tratar los errores gramaticales, de pronunciación y de vocabulario de sus estudiantes. Cuatro profesores de ESL fueron observados en cuatro ocasiones diferentes en clases de inglés de nivel intermedio. Como forma de explorar el nivel de conciencia de estos profesores al lidiar con los errores de sus alumnos, estos fueron entrevistados individualmente una vez concluidas las observaciones. Los datos mostraron que los errores de los estudiantes se manejaron de manera diferente dependiendo de si estos ocurrían en prácticas de precisión o en prácticas de comunicación. Más errores fueron corregidos en las prácticas de precisión. Las cuatro técnicas de corrección identificadas fueron: forma correcta, exhortación, corrección negativa y repetición. La técnica utilizada con mayor frecuencia fue la forma correcta, seguida por alguna forma de exhortación y repetición. Las entrevistas revelaron que los profesores de ESL en este estudio no tenían una idea clara acerca de las maneras en que afrontaban los errores de sus estudiantes.

Palabras claves: errores, corrección, ESL, enseñanza del inglés, aprendizaje del inglés, técnicas de corrección

Abstract

This study looks at concrete techniques used by teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in addressing their students' grammatical, pronunciation, and word choice errors. Four ESL teachers were observed in four different occasions in intermediate level classes. As a way to explore the extent to which these teachers were aware of the ways in which they handled their students' errors, they were all individually interviewed upon completion of the observations. The data showed that students' errors were addressed differently depending on whether they occurred in accuracy practice or in communicative practice; more errors were corrected during accuracy practice. The four correction techniques identified were: correct form, elicitation, negative evidence, and repetition. The technique that was used the most was the correct form, followed by some form of elicitation, negative evidence, and repetition. The interviews revealed that the ESL teachers in the study did not have a concrete idea about the ways in which they addressed their students' errors.

Key words: errors, correction, ESL, English teaching, English learning, correction techniques

INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that most second-language learners produce grammatical, lexical, and phonological errors in their speech. Coder (1967) argues that errors that truly reveal the learner's underlying knowledge of the language at a certain stage reflect the learners' transitional competence. Errors of performance, on the other hand should be referred to as *mistakes*, not 'errors'. He argues that errors are significant in several ways. First, errors tell the teacher how far the learner has progressed towards the goal and consequently, how much he still has to learn. Second, errors provide researchers with evidence on how language is acquired (i.e., they reveal the strategies or procedures the learner employs in the process). Third, errors are indispensable to the learner himself because they can be regarded as a device in order to learn; they are a way for the learner to test his or her hypotheses about the Second Language (henceforth, L2). Finally, errors are a strategy used by both First Language (L1) and L2 learners.

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For most language teachers, however, there is controversy regarding the best ways to handle students' errors. There are language teachers who attempt to correct all of their students' errors, while others only focus on correcting errors that are directly related to the topic being addressed in a particular lesson, or errors that inhibit communication.

Several studies have addressed the role of correcting errors in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and most of these studies have focused on providing support for or against error correction in general. For example, Whitlow (1997) and Schwartz (1993) affirm that Error Correction (henceforth, EC) serves no purpose in SLA; while many other researchers argue that correcting errors in language classrooms helps learners improve their proficiency in the target language (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, Bartran & Walton, 1994, Chaudron, 1988, Hendrickson, 1978, Lyster & Ranta, 1997, Lyster, 1998, and Schachter, 1981). According to the latter group of researchers, errors are an essential part in teaching a second language because they are a way of determining the learners' progress throughout the language acquisition process. Furthermore, they claim that errors should be corrected and that learners expect to be corrected more than teachers think. Unfortunately, the best ways of addressing students' errors are still unclear.

Few studies have looked at the various ways in which language teachers address their students' errors (Bartran & Walton, 1994; Chaudron, 1988; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998; Schachter, 1981), and even a smaller number of studies have looked at how the various correction techniques relate to different types of errors (Lyster, 1998).

Furthermore, while it is true that most studies on EC have been based on classroom observations, none of them have analyzed the differences between what teachers do in the classroom to handle errors and what they believe they do. Given the limited knowledge regarding errors and EC, it is possible that teachers themselves are unaware of how they deal with students' errors or about the most effective and appropriate techniques to address students' errors.

This study explores how errors are dealt with in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. It is assumed here, as suggested in Corder (1967), that error correction is not only significant but also necessary in SLA. This case study looks at concrete techniques used by ESL teachers to correct different types of errors. Through an oral interview, the study additionally examines the extent to which the teachers in the study are aware of the concrete ways in which they address their students' errors.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ERROR CORRECTION IN ESL CLASSROOMS

Correction in communicative versus accuracy practice

According to previous research, it is crucial to establish a difference between *communicative practice* and *accuracy practice* because language teachers tend to address errors differently in the two contexts. Communicative practice refers to activities whose goal is to get students to engage in free language production, while accuracy practice refers to activities that focus on discrete syntactic, morphological, or semantic structures (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Bartran & Walton, 1994; Hendrickson, 1978). According to Bartran and Walton (1994), in communicative practice language teachers should correct only those errors that hinder communication, whereas in activities involving a specific grammatical structure, a function, or a skill, correction should focus on errors strictly related to the structure being addressed. Similarly, Hendrickson (1978) suggests tolerating more errors in communicative activities so that learners can communicate with more confidence. He also states that EC should be reserved for manipulative grammar practice. Along the same lines, Allwright and Bailey (1991) argue that communicative language lessons should be more concerned with learners' ability to convey their ideas and less concerned with their ability to produce perfectly grammatical sentences. Allwright and Bailey (1991) also emphasize the importance of addressing errors differently depending on specific classroom activities. All these researchers agree that correcting usually means interrupting; if teachers constantly correct learners' attempts to speak during free communicative activities, the learners might become frustrated, build negative attitudes towards language learning, and feel embarrassed and reluctant to use the target language. At the same time, however, language learners need correction in order to improve their proficiency in the target language.

Error correction techniques identified in ESL classrooms

Various correction techniques used in ESL classrooms have been identified in previous studies

(e.g., Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Bartran & Walton, 1994; Schachter, 1981). While some forms of correction are explicitly provided by the teacher, others aim to actively involve the learners in the process of identifying and correcting their own errors; the latter approach produces more positive results.

Elicitation is a correction technique whose aim is to engage the learners in identifying and correcting their own errors. Lyster and Ranta (1997) described elicitation as the most effective way of addressing learners' errors because it involves the learner in the correction process, which in turn leads to the most amount of uptake. Correspondingly, Bartran and Walton (1994) add that elicitation is very effective because having learners do the correcting themselves helps them feel more motivated, independent, and cooperative. These two researchers also described a type of elicitation, *peer correction*, whereby learners are encouraged to help each other identify errors and correct them. The effect of peer correction is similar to that of elicitation, as it is a way of getting second language learners to negotiate meaning. Peer correction is a form of positive automatic correction that results form the interlocutor's inability to comprehend an utterance; the speaker is then forced to make an effort to correct his or her previous utterance in order to get his or her idea(s) across.

More explicit forms of correction have also been identified. For example, Schachter (1981) claims that some ESL teachers rely on the use of the interrogative word 'What?' as a correction technique. By asking 'What?', the teacher explicitly indicates to the learner that his or her previous utterance was not clear and that it needs repair. According to Schachter (1981), however, this technique is not very effective because teachers also use 'What?' "to register shock, surprise, or even disagreement with regard to the last utterance" (p.128). The problem relies on the fact that teachers use 'What?' for communicative purposes, not merely to correct errors, and students are often confused as to the teacher's intent (i.e., it is ambiguous). A similar technique identified by Lyster and Ranta (1997) is the use of *clarification requests.* According to them, this technique is a clear way to indicate to the learner that there is a problem with his or her utterance, and that it needs to be reformulated.

Two additional techniques identified in EC are *recasts* and *repetition*. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), recasting is the reformulation of all or part of the student's erroneous utterance minus the error, whereas repetitions refer to the repeating of the learners' previous erroneous utterance by adjusting one's intonation as a way to highlight the error. These two researchers point out that recasts and repetitions are quite controversial. After studying four French teachers, Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that these teachers did not use recasts and repetitions exclusively to pinpoint errors, but also following well-formed utterances produced by the learners. Repetitions and recasts showed to be ambiguous because the message that the student had made an error was often unclear. In their study, these two techniques were the least likely to lead to uptake of any kind, yet recasts were the main way in which teachers addressed their students' errors. Similarly, Lyster (1998) stated that recasts "risk being perceived by learners as alternative or identical forms … they fail to convey what is unacceptable in the L2" (p.207). Chaudron (1988) also noted that recasts are ambiguous because the teacher's responses can serve several functions, and the learners have difficulty perceiving the teacher's intent. Additionally, Bartran and Walton (1994) argued that repetition, which they referred to as *echoing*, is not effective because "it often sounds as if the teacher is trying to make fun of the student" (p.51). Furthermore, echoing is ambiguous, and the teacher does not provide any specifics about why the utterance is incorrect. Along the same lines, Schachter (1981) argued that repetition, even when used with interrogative intonation, serves any of the following purposes: to request confirmation, to challenge the truth-value of a given utterance, and to provide feedback on form. Hence, it is nearly impossible for learners to sort out the teacher's intent.

Another technique recognized in handling errors produced in SLA is *overt* or *explicit correction*, defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997) as explicitly providing the learner with the correct form. These researchers argued that overt correction is one of the least ambiguous forms of correction; yet, in their study, this technique did not show to be very effective. Bartram and Walton (1994) observed that although explicit correction is frequently used in communicative activities, it interrupts the learner's intent to communicate, makes the learner feel uncomfortable, and inhibits his or her willingness to communicate in the target language.

A somewhat different type of correction, *body language*, has also been suggested as an effective tool in handling language errors. It refers to non-verbal cues through which the learner's attempt to

communicate is non-verbally interrupted. Bartran and Walton (1994) suggested, for instance, that hand movements can be used to indicate errors about word order and tense (mainly present, past, and future). Moreover, they proposed that facial expressions such as frowning and doubtful looks are effective ways to tell the leaner that there is a problem in the utterance he or she has produced. Correspondingly, Schachter (1981) suggested that language teachers should rely less on verbal correction and use a series of hand signals to indicate when a learner makes an error. She also proposed the use of hand movements to indicate errors related to tense, agreement, pluralization, prepositions, and word order.

Lyster (1998), in addition to identifying techniques for error correction, looked at the kinds of error correction used to address lexical and phonological errors. He looked at three correction techniques, namely *negotiation of form*, recasts, and explicit correction. The term 'negotiation of form' was used to include other techniques such as elicitation, metalinguistic clues (providing comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of a given utterance), and clarification requests. Lyster (1998) found that most grammatical and phonological errors were corrected through recasts, while lexical errors were mainly followed by negotiation of form. The study also showed that negotiation of form produced more positive effects as compared to recasts, which showed to be ambiguous and ultimately ineffective.

Overall, only one of the studies reviewed looked at the relation between different correction techniques and specific types of errors in SLA. Furthermore, none of the studies referred to in the review of the literature examined the relation between the ways in which language errors are handled in the classroom and the ways in which teachers believe they handle errors. This is a possibility given the controversy regarding how to best correct students' errors; teachers are likely to be uncertain or unaware regarding how they address student's errors. In an attempt to identify the error correction techniques used in ESL classrooms as well as the level of awareness on the part of teachers when handling students' errors, two questions were addressed in this study:

1. What techniques do the ESL teachers observed use to address different language errors?

2. To what extent are these teachers aware of the techniques they use to address different types of errors?

THE STUDY

1. Subjects and Methodology

This study was carried out in an ESL intensive program for international students at a semi-private university in Massachusetts in the United States, and it included four ESL teachers in intermediate level classes. All the students in the program were preparing to enter an academic program at an American college, and they were young adult learners from different language backgrounds (ranging in age from 16 to 32). Each class had between 15 and 25 students. The lessons observed combined exercises on various language skills: reading comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and pronunciation. Each teacher was observed and audio-recorded during four class sessions of one hour and a half each, yielding a total of 24 hours of data recorded. Additionally, throughout the observations, written notes were taken to illustrate teacher-student interactions involving errors and error correction. The notes were kept as a complementary resource since the audio-recordings did not always capture important student-teacher exchanges due to the dynamics of the classroom; that is, students working in small groups and teachers walking about the classroom as they monitored students' individual, peer, or group work. The audio-recordings were transcribed, including the teachers' and the students' turns and these were complemented with the notes taken by the researcher.

Once all observations were concluded, each teacher was interviewed for an average 20 minutes in an attempt to bring forth their conceptions on error correction and whether they explicitly described the various ways in which they handled their students' various errors.

2. Data Analysis

The results were analyzed in two ways. First of all, the classroom observations and audio-recordings were examined in order to identify specific correction techniques used to address three types of errors: grammatical, pronunciation, and word choice. Furthermore, since the data evidenced that errors were handled differently in accuracy versus communicative activities, the correction techniques were analyzed in these two different contexts. Secondly, the data collected through the interviews were analyzed and the results were compared to those obtained from the classroom observations and

recordings. It is important to clarify that, although specific terminology regarding correction techniques used in ESL classrooms have been described in previous studies (e.g., elicitation, recasts, repetition), those presented in this study were labeled according to the data collected (i.e., some of the techniques used could not be described with any of the already existing labels).

2.1. Classroom observations and audio-recordings

After transcribing the audio-recordings and studying the notes taken during each lesson, three main types of errors were identified: *grammatical*, *phonological*, and *word choice* errors. Grammatical errors included syntactic functions such as word order and tense and person agreement. Phonological errors referred to instances in which learners mispronounced a word or a word-segment. Word choice errors referred to learners' inappropriate or incorrect use of a lexical item according to a given context.

In addition, after studying a total of 326 samples of teacher-student exchanges involving errors and error correction, four techniques to address students' errors were identified: *negative evidence*, *correct form*, *elicitation*, and *repetition*. Some of these techniques were used with all types of errors, while others only applied to certain error types. The following is a detailed description about the various techniques identified; all teachers used each of the techniques, some more than others.

a) Negative evidence: this label was used to describe instances in which a teacher explicitly indicated to the learner that an utterance was incorrect by using a negative word or phrase such as *'no'*, *'never'*, or *'I don't think that is correct'* (none of the previous studies referred to this or a similar technique).

b) Correct form: this label was used to refer to instances in which a teacher substituted the learner's erroneous utterance with the correct form; the problematic segment was highlighted by either changing the intonation or by writing the utterance on the board and underlining the problematic segment.

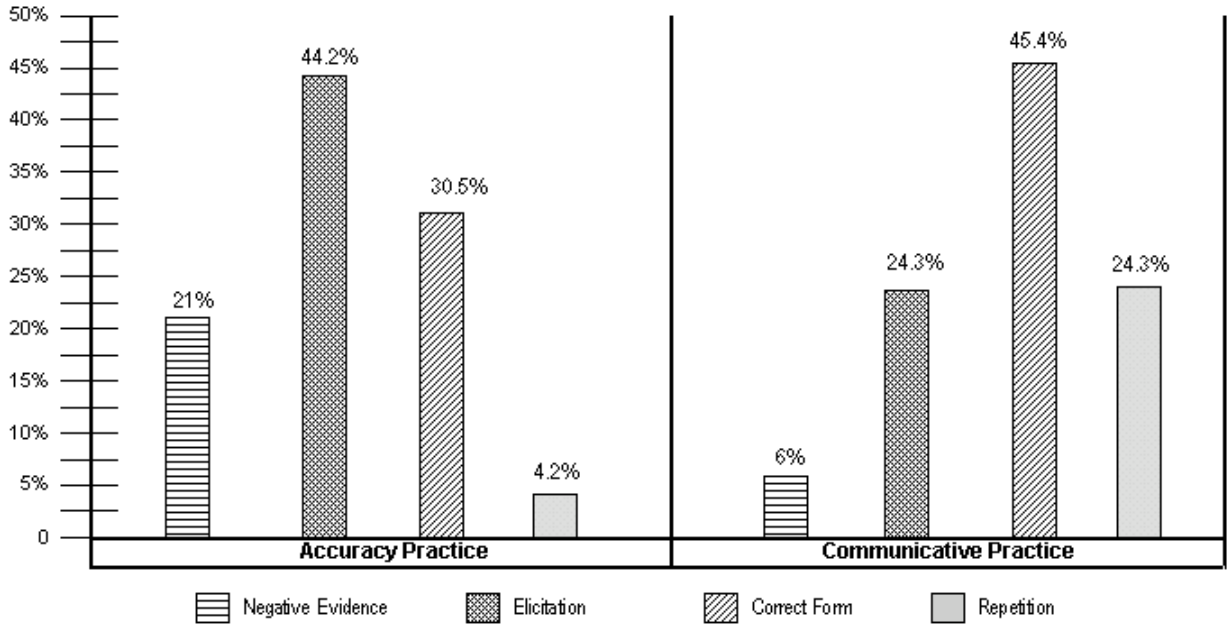
c) Elicitation: errors in which the teacher used a given procedure to get the learners to identify and correct their own errors were classified as elicitation errors. Some forms of elicitation were asking a question, providing hints, and eliciting the completion of a word, phrase, or sentence (e.g., this is a _____?).

d) Repetition: errors in which the teacher repeated the learner's incorrect utterance exactly as the learner produced it were classified as repetition errors.

Despite the fact that each technique referred to distinct procedures, some instances of correction included a combination of two or more techniques. For example, the correct form was often preceded by negative evidence or by some form of elicitation. Additionally, most of the techniques identified were used to correct the three types of errors (grammatical, phonological, and word choice), but unsurprisingly, repetition was only used to address grammar and pronunciation errors (one would not expect a teacher to repeat a students' mispronunciation).

The four correction techniques were used differently in accuracy and communicative activities. Figure 1 bellow illustrates the distribution of the various correction techniques during both accuracy and communicative practice.

Figure 1: Distribution of correction techniques used during accuracy and communicative practice.



Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of the correction techniques according to the three error types, grammar, word choice, and pronunciation errors.

Figure 2: Distribution of correction techniques according to error types in accuracy practice.

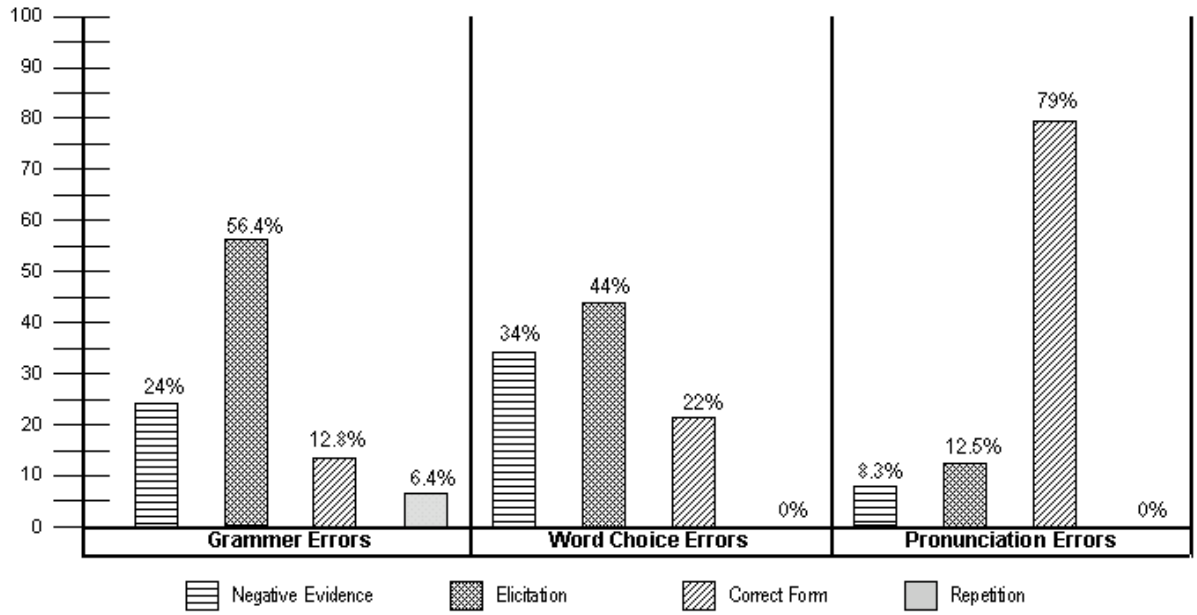
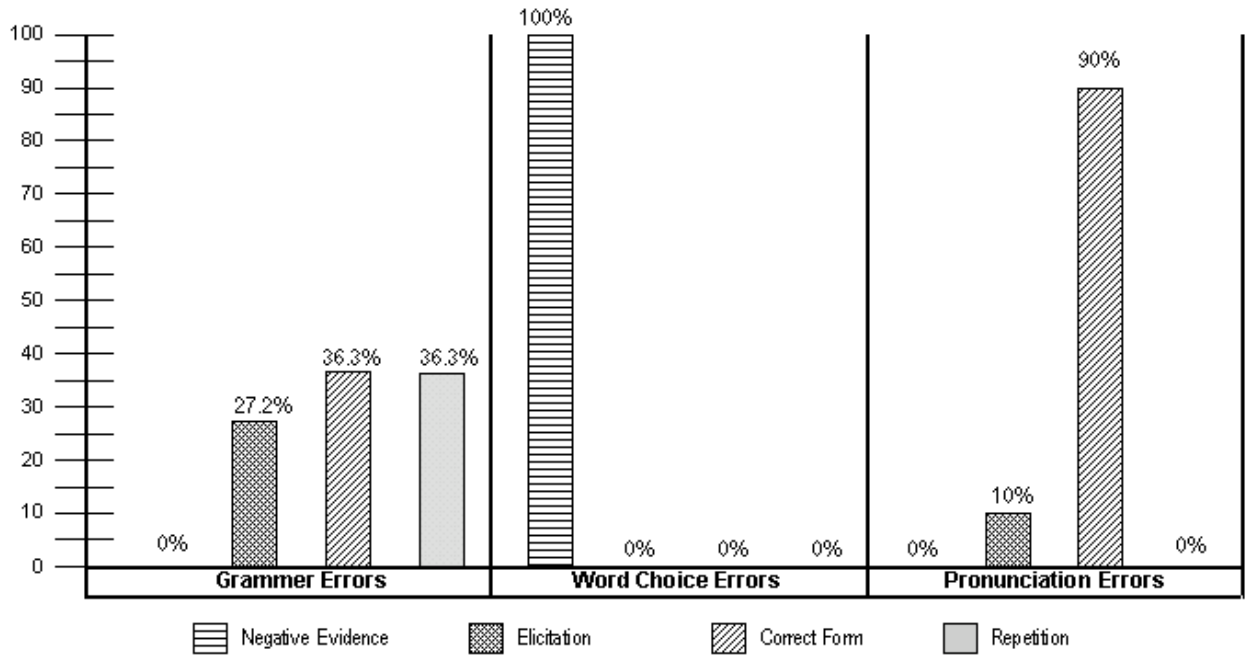


Figure 3: Distribution of correction techniques according to error types in communicative practice.



According to the data, *negative evidence* was mainly used during accuracy practice, as shown in Figure1. Furthermore, *negative evidence* was primarily used to address word choice errors as well as grammar errors, as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

Some examples of negative evidence found in the data were,

1. I don't think that's correct
2. I don't think so
3. no, not really
4. never
5. we would never say that

In general, following negative evidence, all teachers also provided the *correct form*, as in the following example,

6. (**Context:** choosing the correct referent of a pronoun in a given context; the context of the sentence in this example was, '*many men see it and think that's the kind of person <u>they</u> would like to be*'.)
TEACHER: what's *they* referring to?
STUDENT: *kind of person
TEACHER: no, not 'kind of person'; it's referring to '*many men'*

7. (**Context:** giving reasons why being attached to material things might be dangerous.)
STUDENT: *some people might kill for getting money
TEACHER: not *for*, that's Spanish
STUDENT: *for take money?
TEACHER: no, that's Spanish, *<u>to</u>* get money
STUDENT: o.k.

Regarding the use of *correct form*, in communicative practice this correction technique was used more often than in accuracy activities, as illustrated in Figure1. Generally, the *correct form* was followed by a raise in the teacher's tone of voice as a way to highlight or emphasize the segment or structure where the error had been made, as in,

8. STUDENT: *the man founded it in the bathroom
TEACHER: f<u>ou</u>nd it
STUDENT: *founded it
TEACHER: f<u>ou</u>nd it (emphasis on pronunciation, and pause between *found* and *it*)
STUDENT: found it
TEACHER: good

Moreover, correct forms were often followed by an explanation about the grammatical structure or pronunciation in question, as can be seen en the next example,

9. STUDENT: *what mean expectation?
TEACHER: what *<u>does</u>* expectation mean? Remember, we need to add an auxiliary (the teacher orally emphasizes the auxiliary *'does'*)

Sometimes, the explanation preceded the correct form, as in,

10. STUDENT: *the flight commander was explain
TEACHER: Ok, when we use *'was'*, we have to use the –ing form, *the flight commander was explaining* (giving emphasis to the *–ing* ending)

Other times, the correct form was preceded by negative evidence, as in,

11. (**Context:** answering questions about a video passage.)
TEACHER: you can be charged with what?
STUDENT: *breakfast driving
TEACHER: not *breakfast* driving, '*reckless* driving' (the teacher writes the word on the board)

12. (**Context:** completing sentences with the correct verb phrase.)
STUDENT: *he broke her
TEACHER: not *broke her*, *broke up* with her; 'broke her' would mean that he beat her up or something of that sort

With regard to pronunciation errors, the *correct form* was used very often during accuracy activities (as shown in Figure 2), and it was usually emphasized either orally or visually by writing it on the board and as a way to highlight the segment in question, as shown in these examples,

13. STUDENT: curious *[kúɹɪɔs]
TEACHER: curious [kɪʊ́ːɹɪəs]

14. STUDENT: capacity *[kapásiti]
TEACHER: capacity [kəpǽːsɪrɪ]

15. STUDENT: usually *[ú ʃuali]
TEACHER: usually [jɪú́ːdʒualɪ]

In addition, all of teachers frequently used *examples* following the correct form. The examples always illustrated the correct form, and they were used as a way to reinforce the correct structure. *Examples* were mainly provided orally; yet, sometimes the teacher would write the comparing examples on the board, underlining the relevant difference or similarity as a way to highlight the problematic segment. For instance, in addressing errors regarding irregular past tense verbs (their grammatical form as well as their pronunciation), one of the teachers used minimal pairs, that is, pairs of words whose pronunciation only differs in one sound, as shown in the examples bellow:

16. STUDENT: * the cop catched the bad guys
TEACHER: caught [kɔt]

remember, catch [katʃ] caught [kɔt]
teach [tiːtʃ] taught [tɔt]
bring [bɹɪŋ] brought [bɹɔt]

An additional instance where similar examples were provided in order to correct the learners' pronunciation was when establishing the contrast between cardinal and ordinal numbers, as in the following example:

17. STUDENT: *December twenty-four
TEACHER: twenty-fif**th** [fɪθ];
we say October twenty-four**th** [foɹθ], twenty-fif**th** [fɪθ], twenty-six**th** [sikθ], twenty-seven**th** [sé́venθ], twenty-
eigh**th** [é́ɪθ], twenty-nin**th** [ná́ɪnθ]

Recall that according to Lyster and Ranta (1997), the *correct form* might be ambiguous, as it is used for various purposes; it is not very effective. Yet, the teachers observed used the *correct form* more often than *elicitation*, which is much more effective.

Elicitation was used to correct grammatical, pronunciation, and word choice errors, and it included one of three procedures: *asking questions*, *providing hints*, and eliciting either *sentence or word completion*. Sometimes all of the teachers asked overt questions as a way to indicate to the learner that there was an error in his or her previous utterance, and that it needed to be revised. Hints referred to comments and phrases used by the teacher in an attempt to get the learner to identify and correct an error. Sentence or word completion was used as a way to get the learners to complete a word or sentence with the correct structure or segment. Questions were used with grammar and word choice errors. Elicitation through word or sentence completion was used to correct errors about word choice and pronunciation. Providing hints was used to address grammar errors. The following examples illustrate the various elicitation forms used to handle the three types of errors.

i) Asking a question:

18. TEACHER: why can't we have this one in the past progressive?

19. STUDENT: *the sentence is very big
TEACHER: do we use *big* to describe a 'sentence'?
STUDENT: long?
TEACHER: right!

20. TEACHER: well, is this finished, or is it an ongoing action?

21. TEACHER: what verb tense do we use with *when*?

ii) Providing hints:

22. TEACHER: there are a couple of mistakes there

23. TEACHER: think about the time when the story was told

Providing hints was only used to address grammar errors.

iii) Sentence or word completion:

24. (*Context:* students are completing sentences with the correct personal pronoun.)
STUDENT: she got *him to choose her own topic
TEACHER: she got____ (hand gesture eliciting completion of the sentence); student gives a blank look; he does not know the answer
TEACHER: she got who, *T.*, that's a girl's name
STUDENT: she got her to choose…

25. (*Context:* eliciting overt pronunciation of past tense endings in regular verbs.)
STUDENT: I remember that I *visit my friend
TEACHER: visit___
STUDENT: visit**ed** my friend, and then we *start to drive to Boston
TEACHER: start___
STUDENT: start**ed** to drive…

Peer correction was also used as an elicitation technique, as peers were encouraged to help one another to identify and correct their errors. For example,

26. STUDENT A: *the man *sell* his house to another man
TEACHER: the man _____, student B? (asking student B for the correct form)
STUDENT B: *sold* the house
TEACHER: right, *sold* the house

27. STUDENT X: *person who start a new business
(teacher writes the sentence on the board)
TEACHER: student Y, what's the problem with this sentence?
STUDENT Y: person who start***s***, we need an –s
TEACHER: good

Finally, *elicitation* was used fairly frequently in both accuracy practice and communicative practice, as shown in Figure 1 (44.2% of the time in accuracy practice and 24.3% in communicative practice). This is encouraging given that, according to most studies (e.g., Bartran & Walton, 1994; Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), this correction technique is the most effective technique; it leads to the most amount of uptake.

Nonetheless, *repetition* was used in both accuracy and communicative practice. In accuracy practice, *repetition* was used only to address errors related to grammar. All teachers repeated the utterance or part of the utterance containing the error in an attempt to indicate to the learner that there was a problem with his or her previous utterance. The utterance was repeated exactly as it had been produced by the learner (in its incorrect form), although teachers usually adjusted their tone of voice as to highlight the error. For example,

28. STUDENT: * last year I *get* a gift from my friend
TEACHER: *I *get* a gift (teacher raising his tone of voice to highlight '*get*')

29. STUDENT: *I went to the party and I *bring* some food
TEACHER: *I went to the party and *bring* some food (highlighting the verb *bring*)

In both accuracy and communicative activities, teachers also constantly repeated correct utterances either as a way to indicate acceptance or approval of a given structure, to emphasize a structure or segment, or to make sure that the utterance was heard by the whole class, as some students spoke very softly. The fact that repetitions were used for two different purposes confused the students, and most of the time they failed to notice when a repetition was being used as correction. Recall that according to studies by Bartran and Walton (1994), Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Schachter (1981), repetition is the least likely of all correction techniques to lead to any type of learning (i.e., intake). The teachers in this study relied on repetitions to address 36.6% of the grammatical errors.

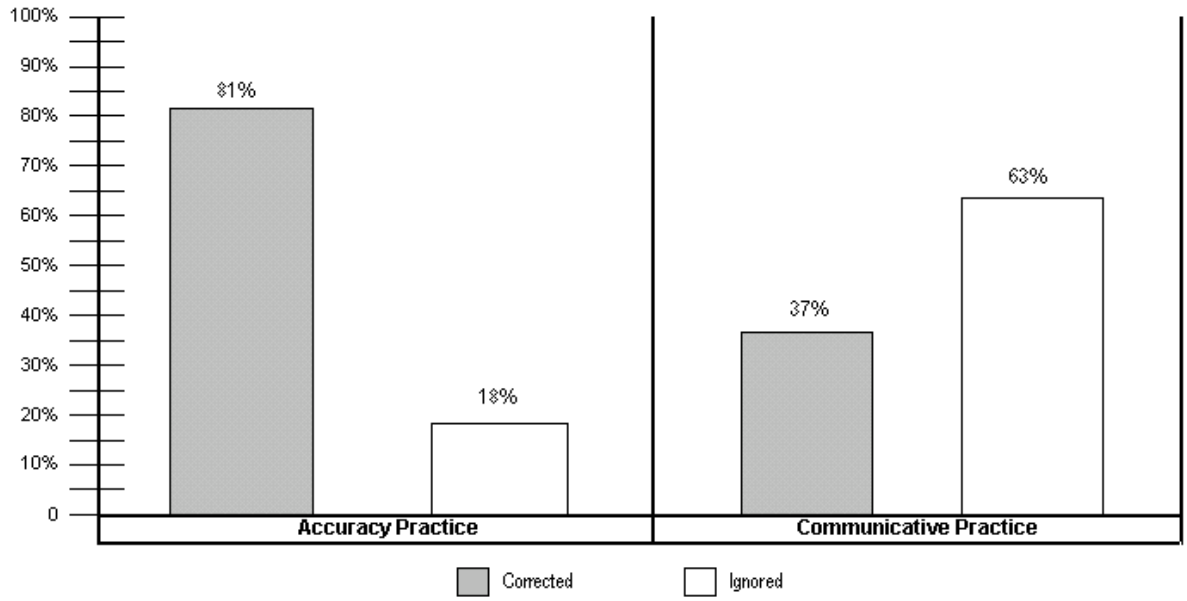
Lastly, the data also revealed an important fact, namely, that many errors were simply not addressed at all. This mainly happened in communicative practice although errors were often not corrected in accuracy practice either, as shown in Figure 4 below. Pronunciation errors were ignored the most, 78.5% of the time, whereas grammatical errors were ignored only 21.5% of the time. Interestingly however, the data revealed no instances of word-choice errors being ignored. Throughout the study, the teachers primarily corrected two types of errors, errors that prevented the learner from getting his or her ideas across, and errors involving a particular skill that constituted the focus of a given lesson. For example, when studying the simple past tense, most

teachers readily corrected mispronunciations of past tense endings, but if other words or phrases were mispronounced during the same lesson, these were rarely corrected. Furthermore, it was interesting to witness that teachers only corrected the word or word segment(s) in question. For instance,

30. STUDENT: study *[ɛstari] (meaning *'studied'*)
TEACHER: studi**ed** [staRI**d**]

Here, the teacher only emphasized the overt pronunciation of the regular past tense ending,/ɪd/, ignoring the student's incorrect insertion of the /ɛ/ sound at the beginning of the word, before /s/.

Figure 4: Percentage of errors corrected in accuracy and communicate practice.



2.2. Interviews to the teachers

Through the interviews, three main issues regarding EC were analyzed, namely, correction in communicative versus accuracy practice, teachers' conception about their techniques to handle errors, and the use of body language as a correction tool (a technique suggested by Bartran and Walton (1994) and Schachter 91981).

All the teachers in the study expressed their belief that errors have to be treated differently depending on whether they occur in communicative practice or in accuracy practice. They clearly stated that in communicative practice the goal is to get students to use the language and hence, error correction should be kept to a minimum, only correcting errors that truly block the learner's attempt to communicate. For example, teacher B stated that, "It's discouraging to the students if you correct too much when they are trying to speak [in communicative practice]." Similarly, teacher A said, "I try not to correct errors in communicative activities, unless the error is major and blocks communication." In accuracy practice, they all agreed that the focus should be on errors that directly relate to the language skill being studied in a particular unit. As teacher D stated, during accuracy activities, "I correct things that we've gone over before, or things that I think the students should know at a certain level." Likewise, teacher C sustained that, "You can't correct everything, you correct what you're teaching." The data obtained through classroom observations supported this conception, as it evidenced that these teachers tended to correct errors a lot more during accuracy practice (81% of the errors) than they did during communicative activities (37% of the errors).

The interviews additionally revealed that the teachers in the study were *not fully aware* of the ways in which they handle their students' errors. When asked to talk about their ways of addressing errors, none of them was able to articulate particular techniques they used to correct different types of

errors. At best, they made general statements about things they tried to do or to avoid when addressing errors. For example, teacher C stated, "I ask them [the students] to think about it again or ask them why they chose a particular form so that they analyze the error. I try not to give them the correct answer right away". Similarly, teacher D expressed that teachers "have to get them [the students] to understand what they did, so that they can eventually learn how to self-correct." Such statements suggest that these teachers had the notion that they preferred to use some form of *elicitation*, but none of them explicitly said so. Furthermore, although all the teachers claimed that they preferred not to provide their students with the correct form, the classroom observations revealed the contrary. According to the data from classroom observations and recordings, although elicitation was one of the techniques used the most (44.2% of the time in accuracy practice and 24.3% of the time in communicative activities), the correct form was used more often than elicitation (30.5% of the time in accuracy practice and 45.4% of the time in communicative practice). The correct form is much less likely than elicitation to lead to positive uptake, as argued by Lyster and Ranta (1997). Furthermore, none of the teachers referred to other correction techniques such as negative evidence, correct form, and repetition, which were also clearly identified through the classroom observations. In sum, although the teachers appeared to have a general notion about how they dealt with errors, none of them talked about particular ways in which they addressed their students' errors, nor did they use any specific labels to describe what they did. This suggests a lack of knowledge regarding how and when to best address and correct students' errors, as was predicted at the outset of the study.

When asked about using body language as a tool to address error correction, all the teachers said that they did not intentionally use gestures to correct errors, but that they were certain that their facial expressions sometimes served as a hint to the learners that there was an error in a given utterance. Teacher B stated that using non-verbal cues as a correction tool "is more valid for lower levels."

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the various techniques used by four ESL teachers to correct three types of errors: grammatical, word choice, and pronunciation errors. Firstly, it was established that the teachers in this study treated errors differently depending on the type of activity, with more errors being corrected during accuracy activities than during communicative practice. Secondly, four general correction techniques were identified, *negative evidence*, *elicitation*, *correct form*, and *repetition*. *Elicitation*, which several researchers had described as the most effective correction technique (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Bartran & Walton, 1994.), was used fairly often by all the teachers in this study. Nonetheless, the *correct form* was the technique used the most. *Negative evidence* was also used fairly often, especially in accuracy activities, and it was usually followed or preceded by the *correct form*. *Repetition*, which consisted of echoing the students' incorrect utterance, was used primarily in communicative activities. Repetition showed to be ambiguous because it was used as a correction tool and also as a form of positive feedback, as previously claimed in Lyster and Ranta (1997), Lyster (1998), Chaudron (1988), Bartran and Walton (1994), and Schachter (1981).

Through the teacher interviews, it was determined that these teachers were not fully aware of the ways in which they handled their students' errors. Their statements indicated that their main form of dealing with errors was *elicitation* and that they avoided providing the *correct form*. However, although *elicitation* was used quite often, the *correct form* was the technique used the most.

It was also shown that these teachers tended to ignore a lot of the errors their students made, especially in communicative practice. In the interviews, the teachers explicitly stated that it is impossible to correct all errors in instances where learners are making an effort to communicate; in such cases they preferred to keep correction to a minimum. Finally, according to both the interviews and the classroom observations, these teachers only made use of non-verbal cues as an indirect form to address errors.

Overall, although this was a small-scale case study, important implications were drawn. It is unfortunate that many language teachers are not aware about the ways in which they handle their students' errors, which suggests that they are not consistent about when and how to best correct their students. The study also clearly evidenced that what these language teachers did in the classroom to address errors did not necessarily match what they believed they were doing. The study reveals a clear need to reinforce the role played by error correction in the language classroom, and that second and foreign

language teachers need more training regarding how and when to best correct their students' errors.

Finally, this study involved a small student population, namely groups of intermediate level classes in an academic program. Should the study have included different levels, it is very likely that the results might have been different; lower proficiency level students would probably get corrected more often than did the students in the classes observed here, and higher level students would get corrected less or on concrete aspects (pronunciation and grammar accuracy). Additionally, students learning a second language with a purpose other than academic would probably have been corrected differently, focusing less on grammar accuracy.

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