

Expressed Beliefs and Actual Classroom Practices of High School English Teachers Concerning Error Correction

Abiy Yigzaw*

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Introduction

One of the major classroom concerns of teachers, particularly second or foreign language teachers, is error correction. This is because, as Edge (1989:1) states, "... making mistakes is a part of learning,...and correction is a part of teaching". Errors are inevitable in language learning, and their correction, particularly in foreign language classes, is a usual classroom activity. Hence, error correction can be taken as specific to, and a main feature in, language classes. Teachers may have their own beliefs and attitudes toward errors and their treatment, however. Their conception of error treatment and the strategies they opt to

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Introduction

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use play a great role in motivating students or otherwise; that is, they have a direct effect on students' language learning and proficiency development. Teachers' correction of any error, for example, may reduce learners' willingness to take risks and experiment (Wajnryb 1992). Therefore, this study attempts to explore the oral error treatment policy of high school English teachers by inquiring into what they think they do and comparing it with what they actually do in their teaching. It attempts to respond to the following questions:

- ◆ Is there congruity between teachers' expressed attitude on oral error correction and their actual classroom application?
- ◆ Which oral errors receive great attention by teachers for correction?
- ◆ When do teachers correct oral errors?

These issues are taken as crucial because teachers at tertiary level classrooms often complain about students' poor participation in activities, which may be attributed to students' fear of making mistakes. Incidentally, fear of making mistakes was found as the chief cause for students' reticence in classroom in a study made by the researcher in May 1997 (unpublished).

The cause for this inhibition could be due to the background experience students had in primary and secondary levels. It may be assumed that the way teachers treated students' errors had contributed to it.

Rationale

The attitude of the English language teachers towards error correction may affect the students' learning interest. Besides, if teachers do not apply what they believe in, it is likely that the students may be confused.

Teachers should survive and develop professionally. They have to learn how to teach---by developing their creativity, by exposing themselves to a diversity of experiences, and by practising self-assessment--- continuously throughout their career. Such a study can help them to reflect on what they do, examine where they stand, and reassess their beliefs and thoughts in light of what they are doing.

This study, therefore, attempts to examine what high school English teachers think they do and what they actually do in correcting learners' oral errors. The results of the study can be useful as informative feedback for educational authorities and training institutions. They could help the authorities and training institutions to design workshops, seminars and other related activities to upgrade teachers' skills of error correction and develop their teaching competence. The results could also be helpful for teachers' awareness raising; that is, they can provide the teachers with insight of what they are doing concerning error correction.

Related Literature

Errors in language learning are defined as deviant linguistic forms from the native speakers' norms. However, all the deviant linguistic forms are not distinguished as errors. Some are categorised as *errors*, which indicate the incomplete linguistic knowledge learners possess; and others as *mistakes*, which are faulty productions due to lapse of memory, emotional state, fatigue, carelessness, and ill-health. These linguistic flaws are also distinguished by some writers as *competence* and *performance* errors (Hubbard, *et al.* 1983). Errors are classified into lexical, phonological, syntactic, interpretive, and pragmatic errors.

The effects errors may have on communication and/or on other speakers of the language vary. Some errors may have little

effect, some may cause irritation, while others may cause communication difficulties. According to Lewis and Jimmie (1985), the most important errors that hinder oral communication constitute stress, intonation, register, and appropriacy errors, as well as omissions. On the other hand, Broughton, *et. al.*(1980) assume the most serious errors to be transformations, tense, concord, case, negation, articles, order and lexical errors. Olsson (1972) says that semantic errors block communication more than syntactic errors do. Burt (1975) considers that global errors (errors that affect the overall structure of sentences) affect intelligibility more than local errors (errors that affect only parts of sentences).

The perspectives and attitudes of theoreticians and practitioners towards errors have significantly varied from time to time with new orientations and changes in learning psychology and learning theories. During the heyday of the behaviorist psychology (1920s-1950s), habit formation through stimulus-response-reinforcement method influenced language learning to focus on habits. Therefore, theories and classroom language depended on this instructional procedure, and an immense effort was made to avoid error commission—which was assumed to be a bad habit—through mechanistic *saturation practice*. This theory and practice also encouraged teachers to overcome errors by immediately presenting the correct model. This view of error prevention and teachers' immediate error correction, however, lost its significance with the introduction of cognitive psychology and mentalistic linguistic theory. Proponents of this trend hypothesise that the acquisition of language has only little to do with conditioning.

As Rivers (1983) indicated, the notion of rule-governed behavior, creative language use, and hypothesis testing have replaced beliefs in habits and saturation practice. These concepts have revolutionised practitioners' thoughts about errors and error correction.

As a result of the emergence of these new concepts, there was a tendency towards "stressing on the use of language for communication" (Hendrickson, 1978). This tendency gave way to understanding of errors as a natural phenomenon integral to the process of learning. Regarding this, Corder (1967) says that "errors are signs that actual learning is taking place,...and indicate students' progress and success in language learning". The pedagogic focus has also shifted from preventing errors to learning from errors (George 1972; Rivers 1983). Corder (1973:265) has explicitly indicated the pedagogical value of errors as:

Errors provide feedback, they tell the teacher something about the effectiveness of his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the syllabus has been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him to decide whether he must devote time to the item he has been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors.

Furthermore, they are also important to the students. Regarding this Norrish (1983:113) says, errors are essential parts of learning and provide the learner with feedback in the process of concept formation.

Error correction is the remediation or repair of students' errors. It is highly influenced by teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards errors. Are errors desirable or undesirable to language learning? Those that consider errors as inhibition and a sign of failure suggest their avoidance or immediate correction by teachers. Others see errors as a sign that learning is taking place. Advocates of the latter understand learners' faulty grammatical constructions as an interim grammar (Rivers 1983), or interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) that appears in hypothesis testing of the internalised rules of the target language. Hence they

disparage the value of error correction. Norrish (1983:114), for example, says that learners must be encouraged for their attempts and disapproval should on no account be shown.

Each of the above thoughts plays a significant role, positive or negative, in students' endeavor to *learn by doing* and the development of their confidence. If errors are regarded as signs of failure, it is likely that students will be wary of making mistakes and will not volunteer to experiment language and to take risks. On the other hand, if errors are taken as signs of learners' achievement and progress of the interlanguage, error correction will be aimed at building confidence and raising awareness both of which are "necessary conditions" for learning (Scrivener, 1994).

The liberal stand on error correction sees correction as a waste of valuable time since it assumes that only little may be achieved from it. However, this view has constraints which relate to the immediate practicalities of the classroom and exam demands which are often based on accuracy (Norrish 1983). This fact, despite the different perspectives and attitudes, makes classroom error correction inevitable and in some respects mandatory.

To date, there have been various speculations and experiments made to respond to questions concerning whether, when, which, how, and by whom the students' errors should be corrected. Regarding whether errors should be corrected, perspectives and attitudes of students toward error correction were studied. Cathcart and Olsen (1976), for example, found that college students had positive attitudes. This result was also supported by Chenoweth, *et al* (1983). Error correction has also been considered valuable by theoreticians and practitioners. Kennedy (1973), Krashen and Seliger (1975), Edge (1989), and Hammerly (1991), for instance, believe that error correction is useful for students to discover the functions and limitations of

the syntactical and lexical forms, and the precise semantic range of lexical items.

Which errors need correction? Some writers such as Hammerly (1991) and Johnson (1996) claim all malformations, be it error or mistake, need to be corrected to avoid pidginization and fossilization. On the other hand, Edge (1989), Parrott (1993), and others suggest errors rather than mistakes be corrected. This is because the former indicates lack of students' general knowledge or their having some false knowledge, while the latter indicates their lack in processing ability. Of the errors, then, which ones need correction? Olsson (1972) and Burt (1975) recommend that errors affecting intelligibility be corrected. For Olsson the most important errors are global errors, while for Burt semantic errors create misunderstanding. For others, errors of high frequency (Dredner, 1973; Allwright, 1975; George, 1972); errors with stigmatizing or irritating effects (Strenglass, 1974; Johnson, 1974); errors affecting a large percent of the students (Holley and King, 1971; Olsson, 1972); and errors relevant to the pedagogic focus (Cohen, 1975; Norrish, 1983), require correction.

Students' errors can be corrected by the learners themselves, by their peers, and/ or by the teacher. Many writers (Edge, 1989; Marrione and Lois, 1979) believe self-correction to be more effective in terms of retention and improvement than teachers' correction. They recommend that students should be responsible for locating, diagnosing, and repairing a problem. They view peer correction, rather than dependency on the teacher, to be valid in promoting co-operative learning among students. Teacher correction, however, can be useful as a final resort when students fail to self-correct or when their peers fail to repair errors.

Teachers may employ different correcting strategies. Nunan (1989: 31-33) enumerated possible strategies such as indicating

fact and type of error, providing opportunity for new attempts, providing model, as well as remedy and improvement.

Regarding when error correction should be carried out, Hendrickson (1978) says that it can be valid in manipulative grammar practice. Errors committed when students communicate should be tolerated, for doing otherwise can be detrimental to students' confidence. As research by Walker (1973:103) indicated, students also have a negative attitude toward every minor correction while they are speaking. Recently, it seems that there is a tacit agreement not to interrupt *in mid-stream* of learners expressing meaning, imparting information or opinion.

This study, however, is limited to the investigation of the teachers' expressed attitude or belief on oral error correction and their actual classroom practice. In studying the actual classroom practice, all malformed types will be considered.

Methodology

The subjects of this study were all English Language teachers, totaling 27, in three high schools: Tana Haik, Ghion, and Merawi high schools. The subjects were experienced teachers who served from 8 to 20 years. Among them only two were females.

The main thrust of the study was to ferret out the orally pronounced treatment policy of the teachers and their actual classroom application. In order to inquire into the perceived attitude of the teachers, a questionnaire was employed. This instrument was particularly selected because it was assumed to be relatively better to investigate the attitudes or the beliefs (perceptions) of the teachers. As a complementary method, classroom observation was employed to see the extent of the actual application of teachers' beliefs.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 items many of which constituted five rating scales ranging from very important to not at all important. Some items required the subjects to rate how frequently they corrected oral errors. The questionnaire was aimed at finding out which oral errors---such as lexical, phonological, grammatical, discorsal, content, the pedagogic focus, and others---the subjects assumed to require a great deal of attention, and the frequency of their treatment. To this end, the questions in the questionnaire asked the subjects about the desirability, the frequency, and the type(s) of students' oral errors that are believed to require treatment. Besides the questionnaire, each of the teachers' actual classroom teaching was videotaped to examine if they applied their perceived policy practically.

The items in the questionnaire were categorized under formal and content errors. The grouping was made by putting aspects and related activities of form and content together. For example, phonological, grammatical, pedagogical focus, and discorsal errors were grouped under formal errors. On the other hand, lexical, content errors, and those that were committed in fluency activity, as well as those that were related to meaning were classified as content errors. For example, the grammatical errors were considered as errors of form because they were errors of sentence structure, but lexical errors were taken as *content* errors because lexical items carry meaning.

In the study, which errors, *content* or *form*, teachers focused upon were studied comparatively. Complementary analytic procedures were used in order to see the differences and similarities between the subjects' preference of correcting *content* or *form* errors. Therefore, a t-test and Pearson's Correlation Coefficient were used to study the differences and the degree of association between the two groups. The significance level for 'r' was also computed using the formula,

$$t = \frac{r\sqrt{n-2}}{\sqrt{1-r^2}}$$

The "r²" statistics was used to establish its meaning.

In order to find out the actual classroom application, 20 (74.07%) teachers, who responded to the questionnaire, were videotaped while they were teaching. The videotaped actual classroom teaching was watched and discussed by the researcher and two of his colleagues for a sound, valid and reliable judgement. The finding was then interpreted qualitatively and discussed in comparison with the results of the questionnaire.

Findings

The object of the study was to evaluate the relationship between the perceived policy of English language teachers on students' oral errors and their actual classroom application. To understand which errors the teachers gave importance to and corrected, a questionnaire was distributed. Their expressed attitude in the questionnaire was taken as their perceived policy. A t-test procedure for testing the differences in teachers' attitudes toward correcting errors of *form* and *content* and Pearson's Correlation Co-efficient for testing the strength of association between their correcting tendencies to the two types of errors were calculated.

As indicated in Table 1 below, the result of the t-test showed that the observed t-value was less than the critical t-value; that is, $t_{\text{obs}} < t_{\text{crit}}$. ($df = 19$; $0.52 < 2.09$; $p > .05$). This could mean that the teachers gave equal importance to the practice of correcting students' oral errors of *form* and *content*.

Table 1: T-test Value by Error Type

Error Category	Mean	Variance	df.	t-obs	t-crit.
Form	18.8	16.90	19	0.52*	2.09
Content	19.2	11.22			

* $p < .05$

The outcome of the second test, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient indicated $r=0.59$. As a post hoc test to this outcome, the significance level of the relationship between the means of *form* and *content* given by the formula,

$$t = \frac{r\sqrt{n-2}}{\sqrt{1-r^2}}$$

was computed. The result showed that $t\text{-obs.} > t\text{-crit.}$ ($df. 19$; $3.1 > 2.1$; $p < .05$), and from this it could be concluded that there was a significant positive association between the subjects' treatment of oral errors of *form* and *content*.

Once the significance of the relationship was established, a test (r^2) to decide whether the relationship was meaningful was made. The obtained result (r^2) was .35 (35%). Although the outcome was below 50%, it can be interpreted as meaningful. This can be justified by considering the magnitude of teachers' interference with their students' oral production. Error correction is helping students to alleviate their deficiency in language form and content (or thought), and assumes interruptions. Dealing with errors of *form* and *content* 35% alike, interrupting and assisting, however, can be meaningful for it mirrors a problem in the teachers' policy of oral error correction, when it is seen in light of the views, thoughts, and practices of other scholars in the field (see Scrivener 1994).

The videotaped actual classroom teaching observation displayed that from the 20 teachers studied, 15 (75%) taught structures; 3 (15%) writing (sentence completion and information transformation); 1 (5%) vocabulary, and the other one (5%) reading.

The study revealed that oral error correction was not one of the main classroom activities. Of the 20 observed teachers, 14 (70%) did not correct any errors at all because (a) 10 (71.42%) teachers devoted their class hour to explicating grammar rules and usage; (b) student participation, which was limited only to answering comprehension check questions, was very low; and

(c) 4 (28.57%) teachers neglected students' errors and left them uncorrected even if they were the pedagogic focus. A teacher, for example, was dealing with conditional sentences; and told her students about the verb tenses in the clauses and the meanings associated with them. However, she neglected a student's mistake when he produced: "If you work very hard, you will success". Similarly, another teacher who was teaching *the result clauses* did not correct mistakes like:

The exam was easy so all students were passed.
It was such an easy question test that every one
got to try it.

The remaining 6 (30%) teachers corrected a total of 12 students' errors although there were other sizable errors committed. Among them 3 (50%) teachers corrected 3 (25%) errors each, and the rest one (8.33%) each. The corrections were immediate and were related to the structures dealt with. Other errors away from the grammatical focus, save five, were not repaired. Of the five corrections made out of the grammatical focus, two teachers wanted their students to repeat the *correct* pronunciations of 4 mispronounced words. However, two of the taught models— *bray* and *pigeons* were wrongly pronounced. Regarding content errors, there was only one repair made when the teacher told a student to use *daughter* instead of *son* because the student confounded them.

In summary, the common characteristics observed among the teachers were: (a) they used a lot of meta-explanation; (b) they used almost all the class hour themselves; (c) they neglected a lot of students' errors; (d) those who corrected very few errors corrected them immediately; and (e) they themselves produced a considerable number of ill-formed sentences some of which students picked up and used in mechanistic repetition drills.

Discussion

The results of the statistical procedures, the t-test and r-test, revealed the latter supporting and making the result of the former stronger; that is, the teachers' expressed attitudes towards correcting students' oral errors of *form* and *content* turned out to be the same. The study showed a meaningful, significant positive relationship of the importance the teachers gave to correcting errors of *form* and *content*. This partially explains which oral errors received greater attention.

As mentioned in the literature section above, many scholars in the field of language teaching recommend the correction of only those errors that hinder communication. These are errors that affect intelligibility, global and frequent errors, errors with stigmatizing or irritating effects, and errors relevant to the pedagogic focus (Olsson, 1972; Burt, 1975; Dredner, 1973; Allwright, 1975; Strenglass, 1974; Johnson, 1974; Holley & King, 1971; Cohen, 1975; Norrish, 1983.)

All these writers recommended selective correction. The expressed attitudes of the teachers, however, reflected that they tended to correct all errors without selection. Such an attitude might be detrimental to students' participation--- a necessary condition for hypothesis testing--- because it may increase students' fear of making mistakes and decision (Scrivener, 1994 & Tsui, 1996). To put it another way, correcting any type of errors frequently could result in reticence, and this can have a negative effect in learning the language. Teachers' frequent and over-zealous correction of errors affects students' confidence, and this can contribute to failure.

Possible causes for such an attitude can be the belief of the teachers about the best learning, and/ or lack of orientation of up-dated views and research-based developments. Teachers have overtly reflected their underlying principle of preventing and

immediately correcting errors. This practice implies that the teachers follow the principle of accurate teaching→accurate learning→accurate production that occur in this sequence of causal relations. This sort of view, however, does not comply with the currently accepted view that regards making mistakes as a necessary condition and a sign that learning is taking place.

The findings of the actual application survey, however, asserted that error correction was not one of the chief classroom activities of the teachers. This was clearly shown by teachers' high amount of talk suggesting that they took themselves as good models and 'knowers'. In some cases they were heard telling their students to keep quiet and listen to them explaining. They allowed their students to respond only to comprehension check questions. This might be because of their underlying principle of imparting accurate knowledge and preventing errors.

The findings have also opened a 'Pandora's Box' in that teachers' errors and teacher-induced errors were relatively high.

When we compare the teachers espoused beliefs and their actual classroom application, a difference has been observed. The teachers expressed that they provided equal correction to both types of errors any time they were committed. The classroom observation, however, displayed that teachers were not upto their expressed beliefs. There was a disparity between the findings. Scholars assume such a discrepancy to occur. As cited in Williams and Bob (1997), Argyris and Schon, for example, contend that there is almost always a discrepancy between what teachers say they believe and the ways in which they act. Another study has also asserted similar inconsistencies in teachers' beliefs and actions on feedback. The occurrence of the discrepancy in teaching, as Williams and Bob (1997) said, indicates inefficiency, and students are likely to receive confused and confusing messages.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focused on investigating the espoused beliefs and theories-in-action of high school English teachers concerning oral error correction of their students. Teachers expressed that they corrected all types of errors (categorized as *content* and *form*) at any time they were committed. However, their actual classroom actions revealed that error correction was not their major activity. There was a great disparity between what they said and what they did. This discrepancy might be attributed to lack of teachers' orientation on reflecting what and how they taught in relation to their beliefs. Such discrepancy in belief (perception) and action may result in ineffectiveness in teaching. So, new orientations are called for.

Based on the findings and the conclusions made it could be recommended that:

- ◆ responsible authorities and training institutions prepare workshops, seminars, and in-service training programmes for high school English teachers on oral error correction and others that can help them develop professionally;
- ◆ teachers themselves develop the skill of critical reflection and self-awareness on all that they do in their classrooms. Reflecting on their work is particularly important for their professional and self-development; and
- ◆ teachers develop a habit of school-based team discussions with their colleagues so that they can learn together sharing their experiences regarding error correction and others.

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