

MISTAKE CORRECTION IN TEACHING EFL

N. Hordiienko, T. Batiuta

Kyiv, National Technical University of Ukraine "Kyiv Polytechnic Institute"

engl2009@rambler.ru, batuta.tania@yandex.ua

This article deals with the importance of proper mistake correction in the process of teaching English as a foreign language as well as the challenges English language teachers regularly face when eliciting mistakes made by students. The analysis of the main strategies presented by leading local and foreign scientists concerning the problem of opportune mistake correction is carried out. The article focuses on the importance of the problem mentioned and provides detailed classification of different types of mistakes that can be made by students in the process of acquiring new language skills. Taking into consideration the deficiency of system development of methods and approaches to correcting mistakes during the lesson, the following scientific research is focused on scrutinising all sorts of possible solutions of the problem arising from the necessity to wisely correct mistakes. The problem of when to correct, how often and what kind of mistakes are to be corrected is given due consideration in the following article. The vital importance of facilitating favourable friendly atmosphere that would "allow" students to make mistakes is highlighted. Students' psychological problems that may arise in the process of incorrect mistake correction are considered. The article is of great help to all foreign language teachers interested in effective implementation of modern techniques and approaches that can have a positive impact on the teaching process.

Key words: mistake correction; slips; errors; attempts; error-eliciting problems; psychological barrier; self-esteem.

Introduction. There is no need to say that teaching English as a foreign language in higher educational establishments is becoming increasingly important. Ukraine's integration into the world community and the establishment of closer economic, political and cultural ties has resulted in a dramatic increase of the necessity to master at least one foreign language. Higher educational establishments all over Ukraine actively participate in the process of Europeanization of higher

education by shifting priority areas to including English to the curriculum at all stages of specialist education.

Background. There seems to be no compelling reason to argue that English language teachers in technical higher educational establishments in the overwhelming majority of cases have to tackle the difficult dilemma of what to do with proper error correction. The problem of when to correct, how often and what kind of mistakes are to be corrected should be given due consideration. It is certain that error correction process poses a significant challenge to the English language teacher. Despite the importance of the problem mentioned above, the analysis of native scientific and methodological literature has shown that there is a lack of scientific works devoted to the investigation of strategies and methods of error correction that can be successfully applied in the process of English language teaching.

Aim. Taking into consideration the deficiency of system development of methods and approaches to pointing out mistakes to students in the process of teaching English, the following scientific research is focused on scrutinising all sorts of possible solutions of the problem arising from the necessity to constantly deal with error correction. It seems fair to suggest that this issue is of top priority not only for technical higher educational establishment teachers. The problem is very common for all kinds of educational establishments as, firstly, some students tend to be psychologically vulnerable to being endlessly corrected in the process of learning foreign language, and secondly, students may differ significantly in the speed of acquiring knowledge, motivation, learning styles etc.

Teacher's attitude to students' mistakes. It is quite obvious that mistakes can be called an integral and essential part of any learning process. Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that it is mistakes that turn out to be an unmistakable indication to students of what needs to be improved. Without making mistakes one would not know what is necessary to work on. It would be appropriate to quote American writer Garry Marshall who wrote: "It's always helpful to learn from your mistakes because then your mistakes seem worthwhile."

Thus, we come to the point that the task of any foreign language teacher resolves not only into finding and correcting students' mistakes, but consists in creating friendly educational environment that would "allow" students to make mistakes.

Classification of mistakes. Usually all mistakes that can be made in the process of learning foreign languages can be divided into three categories: slips, errors and attempts. [2, p. 99]

Slips are mistakes which students can correct themselves, once the mistake has been pointed out to them by the teacher. They can be caused by fairly intrinsic and quite understandable factors such as lack of concentration, inattentiveness, excitement, nervousness, distraction etc.

Errors are mistakes which students can't correct themselves and which, therefore, need further explanation. Attempts are mistakes that students make when they try to say something, though they do not yet know how to say it. The way we deal with correcting mistakes will depend on which different types of mistakes students are making. If a student hasn't managed to understand new information and as a consequence continues to make mistakes, we would identify such mistakes as errors.

Another category of mistakes is often called developmental errors. Such errors occur naturally as the students' language knowledge develops, and are the result of the students making apparently sensible assumptions about the way language works. [1, p. 96]

If a teacher works with a group of students for some period of time, it wouldn't pose a substantial problem for him to distinguish whether a student made a slip, an error or an attempt. Here we come to the point where a teacher is to answer the following question: "What is the most appropriate way to correct mistakes and how to give feedback on mistakes without damaging motivation, confidence, eagerness to learn etc.?"

Teacher's attitude to mistake correction. It is necessary to emphasize that sometimes it is rather complicated to give definite unequivocal advice whether to

correct mistakes made by students practicing some language activities or not. The analysis of local and foreign methodological literature on the problems of mistake correction during the class showed that there are different attitudes to this problem. Some scientists consider that correction doesn't help the language learning process of internalising rules, other scientists tend to be in favour of correcting all mistakes made by students as it seems more 'teacher-like' to do something about mistakes. As a result of the scientific research that was carried out we can come to a conclusion that it is always better to steer the middle course. Definitely there are cases in which constant interruption for mistake correction wouldn't be appropriate as well as situations in which it is better to aim for fluency rather than the accuracy. [3]

Our observations allow us to make conclusions that the cases in which mistake correction is meaningless and inopportune are the following:

- If we deal with low-level students and they tend to make a lot of mistakes, firstly, it would be just impossible to correct all mistakes, moreover, it makes no sense since such students won't be able to continue speaking because they will definitely get flustered and lose train of thought due to ceaseless interruption, secondly, they wouldn't be able to perceive and remember all corrections, thus, they will surely continue to make the same mistakes in the future. Moreover, students that are constantly interrupted for mistake correction can get frustrated, lose motivation, develop psychological barrier that will hinder participation in class activities in the future.
- It is inadvisable to interrupt speaking activity in case it is quite obvious for the teacher that the error made by the student is a so called slip of the tongue error.
- Teachers don't need to correct errors that are beyond students' current capabilities in English.

Problems associated with error correction of students lacking confidence.

It is important to remember that there is no use trying to force low-level students lacking speaking skills to talk, thereby provoking possible aggravation of the fear to

make mistake and making them even less reluctant to speak in the future. It would be sensible to create amicable learning environment, where learners are not afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed. The task of any foreign language teacher is to make students understand that mistakes made in the process of acquiring new language skills should be considered as an excellent opportunity to get knowledge or improve language skills. Moreover, students can react to numerous and inescapable mistakes as if they were learning steps without which it would be impossible to improve knowledge of the foreign language.

Naturally, not all students are affected by the factors mentioned above. Basically, it is common for people with low self-esteem and high levels of anxiety, i.e. people experiencing psychological distress in all situations associated with the evaluation of their activities. [4] Since learning a foreign language is associated with a large number of errors (that is surely inevitable when learning new skills), participation in speaking activities becomes a major stress for students who are seeking to meet the expectations of others and are afraid to fail (i.e. to make a mistake speaking foreign language), which is a consequence of low self-esteem and self-doubt.

Unfortunately, these psychological characteristics are inherent to a large number of students, which means that the main task of the lesson will not be accomplished and such students will not acquire communication skills, learn to use foreign language for its intended purpose, i.e. as a means of communication. Taking into consideration all the above mentioned factors, it is important to help the teacher find the necessary solutions so that the educational process might be carried out to the full extent, while minimizing stress factors arising in the process of foreign language communication.

In case we deal with shy students lacking confidence, improper correction could be quite embarrassing, thus leading to intimidation and wouldn't encourage such students to take active part in speaking activities next time. Moreover, if a student makes too many mistakes (be it grammar mistakes, vocabulary mistakes, pronunciation mistakes, etc.), constant interruption for correction would inevitably

cause to lose the train of thought. What can be undertaken to avoid such unfavourable scenario?

One of the possible ways to give feedback on mistakes in a sensitive way is to jot down mistakes on note pads while listening to speaking activities and afterwards point out the mistakes to the student who made them or explain the rules to the whole class without giving unnecessary details of whose mistake it was. If such strategy of mistake correction is applied during the lesson, students feel free to make mistakes and it should be considered as a great advantage since it is well-recognised fact that we all learn by making mistakes.

The task of a foreign language teacher is to create friendly homelike atmosphere in which mistakes made by students are not taken for "criminal acts" for which you are going to be undoubtedly punished, but as the advantageous integral part of any learning process without which it would be just impossible to acquire knowledge and new skills as well as to work on and improve existing ones. Students should be aware of the fact that to avoid situations in which you can definitely make a mistake would become the biggest mistake of all.

Peer correction and self-correction as one of appropriate ways of mistake correction. Students making mistakes in the process of acquiring new language skills in the majority of cases must be provided with some feedback on their work. It is quite possible for foreign language teachers to organize the class work in such a way that teacher-correction of mistakes is at least partially replaced by self-correction or peer correction. Though, surely, if a teacher identifies some errors that seem to be common for several students in the class, the task of the teacher is to focus on that problem, to provide an extensive explanation, to ask students to complete some additional tasks etc.

Self-correction implies that students are able to cope with correction of their own mistakes. In such cases it is quite obvious for the teacher that such mistakes were not made because of lack of knowledge, but because of quite understandable factors such as lack of concentration, inattentiveness, excitement, nervousness, distraction etc. Thus, self-correction can be pushed forward if we are entirely sure

that we deal with slips and mistakes, with the correction of which a particular student can cope successfully.

Our observations showed that in case we deal with slips it is always much better not to correct them, but give a student the chance to do it by him/herself. Sometimes teachers can use a pause to show students that they have made a mistake and should try to correct themselves. Prompting self-correction can be helpful if we work with students who have low self-esteem as students are frequently in danger of losing their self-confidence when they get corrected.

Students can be involved in self-correction to different extent, herewith the role of a foreign language teacher is shifting to an "observer", who is monitoring the whole process, though is always ready to give a helping hand to those students who can't manage on their own. It is necessary to note that teacher's help is not always to be explicit. If there is no doubt that we don't deal with attempts or errors that can never be self-corrected, we can provide more or less guidance to students who are trying to find their mistakes by giving some hints on the nature of mistakes or location in the text if we speak about self-correction of writing tasks. Such tactics proved to be very effective in making students analyze what they wrote and gradually habituate them to such analysis before handing the writing tasks to the teacher.

Obviously, the teacher has to meet the needs of all the students of the class, thus, in the process of acquiring knowledge it is crucial to organize the pair work in such a way that students start learning from each other, that is why peer-correction has become one of the most popular technique used in the process of teaching foreign languages to "techies". The overwhelming majority of groups, a foreign language teacher has to work with in technical higher educational establishments is mixed-ability classes. Dealing with mixed-ability class, foreign language teacher can use the benefits of peer-correction encouraging higher-level students to help lower-level students find and correct mistakes (e.g. completing writing tasks or reading and comprehension tasks). Peer-correction engages students to actively participate in the learning process, moreover students learn to help each other contributing to creating

warm and friendly atmosphere among all members of the academic group. The environment is favourable if it "allows" students to be 100% sure that their making mistakes by no means would lead to public embarrassment.

It should be mentioned that peer-correction is to come after self-correction, but not vice versa. If a teacher is going to correct a student on the spot, it proves to be very effective to ask this student to repeat the sentence, in which the mistake was made, giving him/her the opportunity to self-correct. If the student repeats the sentence making the same error, at this point it would be appropriate to encourage peer-correction asking other students to elicit the mistake. It is necessary to remember that peer-correction must be handled in a subtle and sensible way to prevent situations in which the student who makes a mistake would start feeling inferior.

The data yielded by this study provides convincing evidence that the use of pair work based on the principles of peer tutoring helped improve the skills of average learners while solidifying skills of advanced learners that were proud to fulfill the role of an "aide". Adopting a peer-assisted learning strategy in mixed-level English classes peer tutors would help lower-level students correct mistakes resulting in the groundbreaking increase of students' motivation and achievements. Investigations and surveys into achievements and progress in developing all types of language skills indicate that average students tend to give positive evaluation of peer-assisted learning experience. [5]

Conclusions. The research conducted doesn't encompass the comprehensive solution of all problems, the English language teachers face, pointing out mistakes to the students in the process of teaching English in technical higher educational establishments. At the same time, its results definitely indicate that in spite of the fact that the problem of appropriate mistake correction tends to be quite vital and is one of the biggest and, we dare say, the most challenging teaching problems, it can still be successfully solved by applying strategies described above. The English language teacher dealing with mistake correction in class has to adopt a mixture of solutions meeting the needs of both advanced and average students, simultaneously facilitating favourable and friendly atmosphere among all members of the academic group. The

involvement of peers in the process of mistake correction is to be implemented in supportive and encouraging way to create successful teaching and learning environment. The outcomes of the following scientific and practical research can be used to identify the perspective directions of studying this problem in the future. It would be appropriate to carry out in-depth analysis of psychological factors affecting the efficiency of students' progressing in acquiring language skills by applying different strategies of immediate or delayed mistake correction, that, supposedly, can be extremely helpful in solving the problem discussed above. Further research in this area may focus on the detailed analysis of problems arising with the involvement of peers in the process of mistake correction and appropriate way of their solution or even evasion of the problem.

REFERENCES

1. Harmer, J. (2007). *How to Teach English*. Essex: Pearson Longman.
2. Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching*. Harlow: Longman.
3. Oxford University Press. English Language Teaching Global Blog. (2014). *Peer-correction*. Retrieved March 5, 2014, from <http://oupeltglobalblog.com/tag/peer-correction/>
4. Phillips, E. (1991). Anxiety and Oral Competence: Classroom Dilemma. *The French Review*, 65, 1-14.
5. Topping, K. (1996). The Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring in Further and Higher Education: A Typology and Review. *Higher Education*, 32, 321-345

Н.М. Гордієнко, Т.В. Батюта. Виправлення помилок у процесі викладання англійської мови як іноземної.

Статтю присвячено розгляду актуальної проблеми, яка часто постає перед викладачами англійської мови як іноземної, а саме важливості правильного виправлення помилок, допущених студентами під час аудиторної роботи. Беручи до уваги недостатній розвиток системних методів і підходів до проблеми виправлення помилок на уроках англійської мови, це наукове дослідження зосереджене на опрацюванні різних шляхів

вирішення проблеми, пов'язаної з необхідністю обережного ставлення до процесу виправлення помилок. Було зроблено спробу дослідити стратегії і методи, які можуть бути успішно застосовані в процесі викладання англійської мови. У статті наводиться докладна класифікація різних типів помилок, які можуть зробити студенти в процесі відпрацювання нових мовленнєвих навичок. Було досліджено роль метода "peer-correction" як одного з можливих вирішень проблеми. У статті підкреслюється надзвичайно важливе значення створення сприятливої дружньої атмосфери, що сприятиме усуненню страху допущення помилок, що є запорукою успіху в реалізації навчального процесу у повному обсязі. Було розглянуто психологічні проблеми студентів, що виникають у процесі вивчення іноземної мови в групах різного рівня, зокрема, в процесі вдосконалення навичок спілкування. Стаття призначена для всіх учителів іноземної мови, зацікавлених в ефективній реалізації сучасних методів і підходів, які можуть позитивно вплинути на навчальний процес.

Ключові слова: виправлення помилок; обмовка; вищий навчальний заклад; психологічний бар'єр; самооцінка.

Н.Н. Гордиенко, Т.В. Батюта. Исправление ошибок в процессе преподавания английского языка как иностранного.

Данная статья посвящена рассмотрению актуальной проблемы, с которой регулярно сталкиваются преподаватели английского языка как иностранного, а именно важности правильного исправления ошибок, допущенных студентами во время аудиторной работы. Проведен анализ существующей отечественной и зарубежной научно-методической литературы, посвященной вышеуказанной проблеме. В статье приводится подробная классификация различных типов ошибок, которые могут сделать студенты в процессе отработки новых речевых навыков. Была исследована роль такого метода как "peer-correction" в качестве одного из допустимого решения проблемы. В статье подчеркивается чрезвычайно важное значение создания благоприятной дружеской атмосферы, что будет способствовать устранению страха допустить ошибку. Статья предназначена для всех преподавателей иностранного языка, заинтересованных в эффективной реализации современных методов и подходов, которые могут оказать положительное влияние на учебный процесс.

Ключевые слова: исправление ошибок; оговорка; высшее учебное заведение; психологический барьер; самооценка.