

ERROR CORRECTION. ROMANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION¹⁰⁹

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Abstract: The idea for this research came to us when, after reading books and articles on error correction, we realized that not all techniques could be used with our Romanian students at Ovidius University of Constanța, where we teach English for Specific Purposes, for Law or Local Police students.

The first question we had to answer, therefore, was why the techniques we had read about and which apparently worked with other students, were not at all functional with ours. The answer lies in the learning experience of Romanians who are not yet encouraged to be independent, to look for solutions themselves or to capitalize on a suggestion offered by the teacher. The vast majority of Romanian learners prefer to be corrected on the spot, in the middle of a sentence, whether it is delivered orally or in writing, without reflecting on a better option themselves. This type of brutal intervention has become a tradition in Romanian schools. Through our modest contribution in this research, we wish to correct it, while also explaining the causes that generated such a reaction and looking for better alternatives so that learning becomes an enjoyable, memorable process meant to foster student independence and self-confidence.

Should we also mention that we have conducted a survey which shows that our students might be reluctant to gaining independence. They do not necessarily want to save face and do not wish to rather be suggested than told what to do. At the same time, unfortunately, most Romanian students have never even considered to sever ties with the teacher because of their past learning experience which is one perspective that has to change.

Keywords: error correction, Romanian students, independent learners, self-confidence, techniques.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of error correction has been popular with teachers of all languages for numerous years. Still, there are debates, differences of opinion or misconceptions on the matter, depending on each culture and on each educator's beliefs and principles. Subsequently, our paper aims at investigating the issue in relationship with our university students who are, in their vast majority, nineteen to twenty years old having reached a proficiency level of English of Intermediate/Upper Intermediate when they commence higher education. We have decided to restrict our research to our students only and their oral production of English given the benefits of it to our work. Additionally, we trust that our findings can help other teachers when faced with difficulties alike such as demanding to be corrected on the spot or when asking for translations regardless of the context.

EXPOSITION

Error Correction in Subject-Specific Literature

Firstly, the concept of error correction needs clarifying. Traditionally, the term under investigation refers to the teacher's intervention when the learner delivers an incorrect form or deviates from the linguistic norm. But, interventions can be performed by other learners, too, which often happens in pair or group activities or in open class when the atmosphere is positive and relaxed or when some learners are more daring than others.

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Penny Ur defines error correction as “what a teacher does when indicating to the learner when they have said or written a form that is considered an error by the standards of acceptability of international English and helping them to correct it” (Ur 163). This is a foreseeably traditional definition and nuances should be considered as below.

While some scholars prefer to call the action of interfering in the process of learner production corrective feedback, defining it is made similarly, as Rod Ellis et al make in the following: “Corrective feedback (CF) refers to the feedback that learners receive on the linguistic errors they make in their oral or written production in a second language (L2)” (Ellis 593).

Along the same lines, James (James 1998) emphasizes that error analysis is not just a remedial tool but a window into the learner’s cognitive and linguistic development. The author discusses errors (caused by learning gaps) as opposed to mistakes (slips, things that learners might have forgotten or might not use correctly because of pressure to perform or because of time constraints). He also refers to error taxonomy, classifying errors by linguistic level and by origin and correcting strategies, while looking at pedagogical implications, more precisely, encouraging teachers to view errors as diagnostic tools rather than failures, helping them to tailor instruction and feedback.

Comparably, Kavaliauskienė et al. (Kavaliauskienė 2012) explore the role of error correction in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in second language acquisition, including the subsequent key points: pedagogical purpose (it aids learner development, confidence, and communicative competence), timing and tone (choosing between immediate or delayed correction, focusing on maintaining learner motivation and minimizing anxiety), cultural and personal differences (teachers are advised to adapt strategies based on learner preferences, proficiency levels, and classroom dynamics). Overall, the article advocates for a balanced, learner-sensitive approach to correction that fosters both fluency and accuracy, being a solid starting point for research in our own investigation, even though we are equally preoccupied with what happens to the teacher while correcting the learner.

Similarly, Peter Wilberg’s “One to One: A Teacher’s Handbook” (Wilberg 1987) introduces a layered approach to error correction through the concept of “reformulation,” emphasizing learner-centered, context-sensitive feedback rather than mechanical correction. Reformulation involves taking a learner’s spoken or written output and collaboratively reshaping it into a more accurate, fluent version. Teachers should not simply point out errors but recast learner’s language into a model that reflects correct usage, style, and communicative intent. Wilberg (Wilberg 1987) identifies several teaching “modes” that influence how correction is delivered: conversational mode – promotes natural speech and relaxed correction, instructional mode – formal teaching of specific language points, caretaker mode – slow, simplified correction that risks oversimplifying, ‘Let’s Have Fun Together’ mode – correction through playful interaction, though this can be subjective. We are in favour of reformulating and we prefer the conversational mode as we have investigated oral production of our university students in this paper. Instructional mode might be an option when the scope of the task is not necessarily speaking.

Another article that caught out attention because it refers to higher education is “Error Analysis in English as a Second Language Students’ Writing” (Shakir et al. 2020). The authors examine the most frequent writing errors made by Pakistani ESL university students, highlighting how error correction can improve their writing accuracy. The purpose of the paper was to investigate common grammatical and spelling errors in ESL students’ writing. It was designed to emphasize the role of error analysis as a diagnostic tool for teachers. A sample of twenty five students was asked to produce written texts on a set topic. Their errors were identified and categorized based on frequency and type. Findings showed that the most common mistakes are spelling mistakes, article misuse (a/an/the), subject–verb agreement error, singular/plural confusion. While we are not interested to investigate writing errors, we could see a similarity to what our university students produce wrongly in oral communication. Whereas this article concludes that error analysis is essential for improving ESL writing and gives teachers the opportunity to intervene promptly, it does not look at reactions towards error correction which we find crucial for the whole process to run smoothly.

A different resource for our research when we were reflecting on how to proceed with our own students in order to keep the experience of learning positive and fruitful was “Error Correction in Oral Classroom English Teaching”. In their study, the authors, Huang Jing, Hao Xiaodong, and Liu Yu (Huang 2016), describe how oral mistakes made by junior high school students in China can become valuable learning opportunities when teachers apply flexible correction strategies. They explain that errors in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and classroom communication often arise from first language interference or incomplete mastery of English, yet these mistakes should not be ignored. Instead, teachers are encouraged to balance fluency and accuracy by choosing when to correct immediately, when to delay correction, and when to involve students in peer or self-correction, so that oral practice remains both motivating and effective.

Further on, we discovered a more balanced and nuanced approach in another study that looks at intervention methods of correction. In the article “English Language Teachers’ Oral Corrective Preferences and Practices Across Proficiency Groups,” Sajjad Sepehrinia et al. (Sepehrinia 2020) investigate how teachers handle oral errors differently depending on students’ proficiency levels. They show that with beginners, teachers often delay or soften correction to protect confidence and encourage fluency, while with advanced learners they apply more immediate and precise strategies to sharpen accuracy. By comparing preferences and classroom practices, the study reveals that oral error correction is not uniform but shaped by learners’ abilities, classroom goals, and teaching philosophies, highlighting the importance of balancing communication with linguistic precision.

Moreover, in “Oral Corrective Feedback Preferences in English Lessons: Learners’ and Teachers’ Perspectives,” Thanh-Huong Nhac (Nhac 2021) from Hanoi Law University explores how students and teachers perceive the role of oral correction in English classrooms. The study shows that learners often value immediate feedback because it helps them avoid repeating mistakes and strengthens their confidence in accuracy, while teachers tend to weigh correction against the need to preserve fluency and motivation. By comparing these perspectives, Nhac highlights the tension between learners’ desire for precision and teachers’ concern for communicative flow, ultimately suggesting that effective oral corrective feedback requires a flexible approach—sometimes direct and immediate, sometimes delayed or indirect—depending on the classroom context and the learners’ proficiency.

Besides explaining the core concept of error correction, it is even more important to scrutinize the manner in which it is perceived by various parties. Most teachers argue that the process of correcting is natural. Some educators, though, are hesitant to even correcting because many learners continue to make the same mistakes. In such instances, correcting errors might be effective for conscious learning (when solving a grammar task), but when engaged into speaking activities, correction might be less likely to function as intended.

Considering all of the above, may we also point out that the stakeholders of corrective feedback are both teachers and learners. Their opinions and reactions might differ and also modify in time which can hugely impact on motivation. On top of that, with oral correction (which is our target for this paper), the major concern stands whether grammatical, lexical or phonological errors are more relevant and if they should be corrected explicitly or implicitly. Is explicit or implicit oral corrective feedback better? When should we attempt to introduce it, on the spot or we ought to delay it to the end of the oral activity? These are all complicated issues to address as underlined by other researchers: “despite carried out in different contexts, most of the studies show that there remains an inconsistency between language learners’ and interactions’ attitudes towards OCF (oral corrective feedback) concerning CF (corrective feedback) types and timing” (Ur 164).

Discussing the issue of correctness, Michael Swan opts for effectiveness, not absolute correctness as articulated in the following:

“If someone makes too many mistakes in a foreign language, he or she can be difficult to understand, so a reasonable level of correctness is important. However, it is quite unnecessary to speak or write a language perfectly in order to communicate effectively (very few adults, in fact, achieve a perfect command

of another language). Learners should aim to avoid serious mistakes, but they should not become obsessed with correctness or worry every time they make a mistake" (Swan xx)

On the same note, Scrivener argues that mistakes represent a consistent part of the learning process-“evidence that progress is being made” (Scrivener 285). Making mistakes shows that students are “experimenting with language, trying out ideas” (Scrivener 285) which aspect becomes crucial if students want to be independent learners, able to manage a multitude of situations in English.

The same author points out that context and culture prove essential when engaged in delivering feedback to students and waiting for their responses. We could not agree more with the next statements as we have experienced these with the manner in which our students want to be corrected or when they ask for clarification of certain structures: “students may be fearful of appearing not to know an answer, to the degree of not saying anything in class for fear of getting it wrong and losing face” (Scrivener 286). May we add to the above the fact that our students prefer immediate correction despite interrupting fluency during an oral task or inquire about Romanian words and phrases to be translated without fitting them into the context. We strongly presume that these reactions were shaped through their learning experience because there was no person to explain why and when correction should be made which is one important responsibility we wish to take on.

Common Mistakes and Techniques

While mostly working, through the years, with Romanian students in their vast majority, we have come to notice redundant mistakes and patterns. Mistakes such as those listed below appear more frequently with lower level students, but it can happen with more advanced, equally. Given the fact that we are interested in oral production, we are going to investigate only the errors that fall into this category-oral production.

Grammar Mistakes

- Subject-verb disagreement: *She go to school.*, *Does he wants to come to the reunion?*
- Wrong tense usage: *I have saw the movie.*, *Did you see it yet?*
- Missing articles: *I bought car.*, *The people want to help you.*
- Misused prepositions: *He is good in math.*, *I agree at that decision.*

Vocabulary

- Lose - Loose: “Don’t lose your keys” vs. “My shirt is loose”
- Desert - Dessert: “Camels live in the desert” vs. “I love chocolate dessert”

Pronunciation Errors

- Misplacing stress in words like “record” (noun vs. verb)
- Confusing vowel sounds: “ship” vs. “sheep”

Common Mistakes with Romanian Learners

Literal Translations from Romanian

- Mistake: “He is a criminal in series” (from criminal în serie)

False Friends. Words that look similar but differ in meaning:

- “Actual” (Rom. actual = current) → should be “current”
- “Eventual” (Rom. eventual = possible) → should be “possible”
- “Sens” (Rom. sens = direction) → not “sense”

Article Usage. There is no 100% correspondence to English articles

- Mistake: “I saw movie yesterday” or “The life is beautiful”

Verb Tense Confusion

- Mistake: “I have seen him yesterday” (should be past simple)

Modal Verbs + “To”

- Mistake: “I must to go” instead of “I must go”

Question Word Order

- Mistake: “What you do?” instead of “What do you do?”

Using “Since” Instead of “For”

- Mistake: “I’ve lived here since five years”

Pronunciation and Intonation

- Over pronouncing final consonants
- Flat intonation patterns
- Mispronouncing diphthongs and schwa

Related to techniques that can be employed in error correction, we would like to retain a few worth mentioning because they are effective with our Romanian learners of English. One of the most recommended technique that we employ is recast which translates to reformulating the learner’s error without underlining it, such as follows- People communicate better orally (instead of what the learner said, using a definite article when it was not necessary- The people communicate better orally). The risk with this technique is that the learner in question might not even realize the error and might not notice the correction, but it can be efficient when learners are not easily offended.

Another technique to take into consideration is elicitation which involves prompting the learner to self-correct as in the example- Is it “was” or “were”? (instead of the utterance produced- My sister and our friend was at the station that day.) Using such an approach could be felt as too intrusive, even though our Romanian students prefer to be told rather than suggested.

Repetition of the sentence spoken by the learner with a rising intonation to draw attention to it might function effectively in some contexts thus could trigger awareness on the speaker’s part, as long as it is not performed too radically. Still, our students would rather have explicit correction which is a direct way to indicate to the error which might disturb communication flow, not to mention possible humiliation in front of the class. In the same group of direct intervention techniques, metalinguistic feedback (giving theoretical comments on students’ production like- Present Simple can be also used to talk about transportation, so use it here) can be introduced, but we believe it can prove its efficiency only with advanced students or only

with those students that possess solid grammar knowledge which is the case with generations of students born out of the Romanian educational system that prioritizes grammar over vocabulary or oral communication.

Looking at a multitude of mistakes made by second language speakers of English, in his pragmatic study, Practical English Usage, Michael Swan counts more than thirty grammar errors with Intermediate students such as using Past Simple instead of Present Perfect or putting in both sections of if clauses Future with “will” due to contamination with L1 or employing articles with uncountable nouns (an information, an accommodation). Nevertheless, by comparison with Italians, Romanians are well acquainted with grammar rules hence they would pay more attention when engaged in complex sentence production:

“Italian learners are often very worried about grammatical accuracy; this may reflect the insistence on correct Italian that is common in mother-tongue teaching. They usually have a high level of grammatical awareness, which can be exploited in foreign language situations.” (Swan 73)

Being aware of grammar does not solve one’s reaction to error correction. As aware as Romanian learners of English might be of grammar rules, they still prefer to be corrected during production time instead of being suggested which, from our perspective, comes from their past learning experiences, not all positive. Such reactions that are context and cultural-based need to be corrected, too, for relaxation’s sake, for confidence’s sake, for a better learning environment and growth.

Our survey

In order to understand how to deal with our university students while showing them that not jumping at correcting their mistakes is nor productive, nor professional, we conducted a short investigation. Our respondents were one hundred students in their second year of study within the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences at Ovidius University of Constanta to whom we teach Legal English with a focus on communicative skills because they have to watch documentaries at home and to discuss them in class in connection with law topics such as discrimination, contracts, wrongful termination, criminal law, civil law, violence, constitutional rights and freedoms, legislative issues. Students’ participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Our survey was analytical, exploring the relationship between two main variables- language acquisition of second language learners of English in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and reactions to oral error correction. The method we employed was paper survey due to time constraints and availability problems.

We asked our students the below questions:

1. How often do you expect your teacher to correct your spoken errors during class?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

2. Which type of oral corrective feedback do you find most helpful?

- Immediate correction during speaking
- Delayed correction after finishing the activity
- Peer correction
- Self-correction guided by the teacher
- Written notes after class

3. What is your main goal when receiving oral error correction?

- Improving pronunciation
- Learning correct grammar
- Expanding vocabulary
- Building confidence in speaking
- Preparing for exams or certifications

Our findings as illustrated below confirmed our perceptions in connection with cultural habits and reactions.

1. How often do you expect your teacher to correct your spoken errors during class?		
Option	Percentage	Students
Always	45%	45
Often	35%	35
Sometimes	15%	15
Rarely	4%	4
Never	1%	1

Figure no. 1 above shows that a vast majority of students expect consistent correction, even during active speaking, believing strongly in its pedagogical value

2. Which type of oral corrective feedback do you find most helpful?		
Option	Percentage	Students
Immediate correction	60%	60
Delayed correction	15%	15
Peer correction	5%	5
Self-correction guided by teacher	10%	10
Written notes after class	10%	10

Figure no. 2 above shows that immediate feedback is overwhelmingly preferred, suggesting students value direct intervention over fluency preservation

3. What is your main goal when receiving oral error correction?		
Option	Percentage	Students
Improving pronunciation	35%	35
Learning correct grammar	40%	40
Expanding vocabulary	10%	10
Building confidence in speaking	10%	10
Preparing for exams/certifications	5%	5

Figure no. 3 below points to the fact that grammar and pronunciation dominate as correction goals, reinforcing the desire for accuracy over fluency.

The conclusions we have reached from our investigations with our students and especially from working with them are not necessarily surprising because they confirm outdated perceptions, habits and expectations. Our students, although mostly young and experienced in modern working methods in foreign language learning, still want to be corrected on the spot, to be given the correct answers, without explanatory, additional suggestions or options.

Unfortunately, many intervention methods to correct various mistakes in oral communication that scholars have identified cannot yet be applied to Romanian students. The best approach we would imagine connected to the idea that mentalities and habits can change is to explain why correction of mistakes is made in a certain way, why teachers' intervention cannot be brutal, why we delay feedback and prefer to comment after a participant's speech has ended.

CONCLUSIONS

As previously discussed, whether we refer to it as corrective feedback or error correction, this type of intervention cannot be carried out arbitrarily or under any conditions. Errors may take various forms—pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar—and can negatively affect the intended message. Therefore, depending on the purpose of the learning task, the teacher must decide how to respond: whether to delay the correction or to provide it immediately. Furthermore, the decision to postpone or deliver immediate correction must be aligned with learners' perceptions, their subsequent learning experiences, and the cultural background to which they belong.

As for our second-year students at Ovidius University, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Law, it appears that they continue to prefer immediate correction. They often request translations that isolate words from their context and remain anchored in negative learning experiences from the past. Although their level of English is generally Intermediate or Upper Intermediate, our students tend to make the same errors as other Romanian learners of English—misplacing stress on syllables, especially in adverbs; overpronouncing or omitting word endings; treating uncountable nouns as countable; failing to maintain subject–verb agreement; using incorrect tenses influenced by their first language; and introducing false friends into discourse, again, due to L1 interference.

What we consider more important than persistence in error—which may in fact signal effort and a desire to progress in acquiring a foreign language—is the understanding of the role of correction. The most effective way to address unrealistic reactions and expectations regarding the teacher's intervention is to explain and demonstrate to learners that immediate correction offers no real benefit; on the contrary, it may inhibit their ability to produce language that facilitates communication, especially in spoken interaction. Therefore, teachers must explain, model, and cultivate new, positive, and lasting habits in their students.

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