KANSAI GAIDAI UNIVERSITY

Error Correction in ELT : A Contemporary Analysis of Perspectives of Error Correction in the EFL Classroom

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A Contemporary Analysis of Perspectives of Error Correction in the EFL Classroom

Marc D. Metzler

Abstract

In the contemporary ELT community, one of the most critical topics is the approach to learner error correction. Many academics have perpetuated the theory that errors should be treated as part of the learning process. Although that may be inevitable and widely accepted, the question of how instructors should treat these learner errors in a classroom setting is still rather debated. Some instructors prefer to ignore errors and reinforce correct language production through indirect feedback while other instructors may note each error and immediately address the learners through direct correction or targeted instruction. However, the question that should be on the minds of all language instructors is what the language learners prefer in order for instructors to efficiently support the learning process. Based on previously published research a little over a decade ago from Deng (2016) and almost two decades ago from Katayama (2007), this article aims to reveal contemporary student attitudes toward error correction. Through an analysis and a discussion of a survey of eighty-seven Japanese English language learners, instructors may gain insight into better approaches toward the techniques, perspectives, and treatment of classroom error correction.

Keywords: Error Correction, classroom instruction, ELT techniques

1. Purpose

Error correction in the field of English language teaching (ELT) is one of the most discussed and debated topics among experts and instructors. Very often many instructors hesitate to correct errors directly or indirectly in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom while some instructors choose a very active approach to error correction. Some instructors have more of a preference to indirectly correct learners through supplemental activities or feedback while still other instructors do not correct errors at all and may simply ignore student mistakes. However, which approach is preferable for students? Which approach to giving error feedback is the most efficient and effective for students? The

purpose of this research is to determine learner attitudes to error correction and to improve the quality of language teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

First, it is important to point out the "task as a teacher is to value learners, prize their attempts to communicate, and then to provide optimal feedback for the [acquisition] system to evolve in successive stages until learners are communicating more clearly," (Brown, pg. 265). Optimal feedback depends on the learners and their preferences, and thus it is quite important in order to make efficient progress. One issue specifically to consider is the classroom context of error correction and that "some of the concerns surrounding error correction are when to correct learners and when error correction should be avoided, what type of corrective feedback is best to use, and how much error correction should be used in a particular situation." (Bakan, pg. 8).

In addition, Nunan, in his seminal work "Second Language Teaching and Learning" (1999), writes about the importance of learner output in the language class by arguing that learners with higher amounts of communicative output are far better language learners than those learners in a more traditional classroom setting. This may be true; however, Nunan does not consider the overwhelming importance of the corresponding higher amount of correction of errors and negotiation of meaning. In other words, although the amount of learner output is vital for learner improvement, there is no indication that learner output would be more precise and successful without the correction process and the subsequent negotiation of passing a message successfully. Learner output without appropriate feedback would be useless without the necessary requirement of negotiation of meaning and the "greenlight' of successfully communicating a message. In fact, Selinker points out that there is argument to be made that even negative feedback is helpful in language acquisition, (Selinker 2001). Therefore, any language production in the classroom warrants an appropriate amount of assessment with positive and possibly negative feedback comprised therein. Additionally, Lightbrown and Spada summarize the role of the instructor quite well by saying that "teachers have a responsibility to help learners do their best, and this sometimes means drawing their attention to persistent errors. Excessive feedback on error can have a negative effect on motivation, of course, and teachers must be sensitive to the way their students react to correction," (Lightbrown and Spada, pg. 167).

In contrast, some researchers have found that feedback is not a necessary component of language acquisition. Truscott states clearly that "learning is most successful when it involves only a limited amount of stress, when students are relaxed and confident and enjoying their learning; but the use of correction encourages exactly the opposite condition," (Truscott, pg. 354). This implies that correction might be a hindrance to language acquisition. Semke (1984) has a similar argument for students in a German writing class, stating that "the time which teachers use in correcting students' original compositions is not well spent. The results of this study indicate that student achievement is enhanced by writing practice alone and that corrections do not significantly increase writing skills," (Semke, pg. 201).

Therefore, through the analysis and discussion of a survey of eighty-six English language learners, more instructors may gain insight into learner attitudes toward error correction, a better appreciation of contemporary perspectives, and a more effective treatment of classroom error correction.

3. Methodology

In order to analyze these perspectives, 86 IES students from the current academic year (AY 2022-2023) were given a survey of their attitudes toward error correction after completing the first semester. The survey was sent electronically to over 90 students, and they were asked to respond on a voluntary basis. The survey questions were varied in format in order to give students different lexical variation, and they were sometimes rephrased in order to confirm both understanding and the validity of the responses. Their responses were illustrated graphically while also allowing them the opportunity to elaborate about their responses for some questions in more detail. All of those additional responses were then included below the graphical representation. All of these students are following a one-and-a-half-year English for academic purposes (EAP) preparation program before eventually departing for their host institutions abroad. This program included one year of intensive English language courses that included reading and writing, speaking and listening, integrated language skills, content-based courses that focused on academic skills, and two electives offered each semester. Furthermore, these learners also were required to achieve a TOEFL PBT score of 530-550 in order to participate and be accepted to their host institution. Most, if not all, students were planning on a long-term stay ranging from one semester

to one academic year in various participating destinations including the United States, Australia, Canada, and various European countries. The goal of the research was to answer the question of what techniques of error correction are best utilized in the classroom, what techniques students respond best to, and how instructors should consider error correction in student language acquisition. It is hoped that the survey will therefore improve the language teaching and learning process.

4. Survey Results and Analyses

1. I want my teacher to correct my errors.

1. I want my teacher to correct my errors. (86 responses)
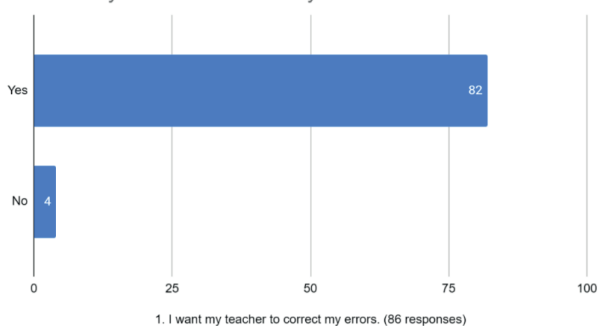
From this question it is quite clear that a majority of students believe that error correction is necessary and needed. This is significant for the instructor because it indicates that learners have the expectation of feedback in the classroom and are accepting of feedback. Therefore, it can be concluded that a majority of learners clearly state that an instructors' feedback regarding errors is critical.

2. What type of error do you want your teacher to correct?

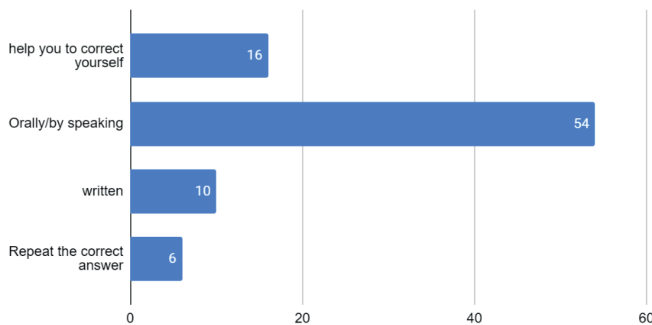2. What type of error do you want your teacher to correct? (86 responses)
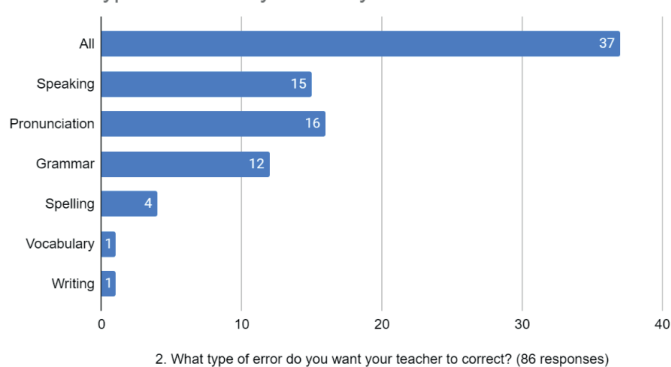
If you answered "none", why?　0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

This question aims to discover which errors learners perceive as the most important language areas for correction. The results here could be considered as twofold. First, 37 respondents were quite adamant in their belief that all errors were important for the instructor to correct, and therefore believing every aspect of language learning needs to have attention and correction drawn to it. Second, the areas of grammar, speaking, and pronunciation (besides "all" errors) were the leading areas for correction. These learners may believe that all errors are equally important, but they designated grammar and pronunciation as crucial to their learning. Overall, it seems clear that most learners prioritize all errors for instructor correction, followed closely by grammar, speaking, and pronunciation as highly valued areas for correction.

3. How do you want your teacher to correct your errors?

Category	Value
help you to correct yourself	16
Orally/by speaking	54
written	10
Repeat the correct answer	6

3. How do you want your teacher to correct your errors? (86 responses)

4. When do you want your teacher to correct your errors?

| Category	Value
Right away/immediately	52
After I finish	33
Never	1
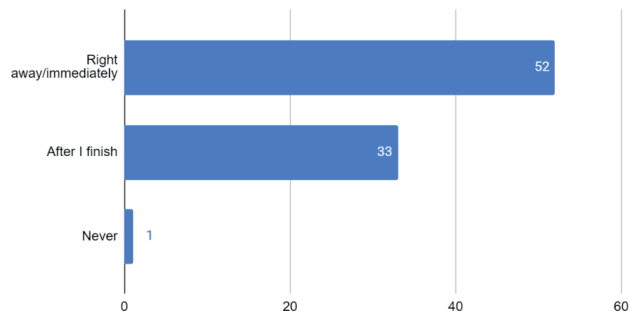
4. When do you want your teacher to correct your errors? (86 responses)

If you answered "other" please specify.1 response

I will take TOEFL Preparation in next semester too. Therefore, I want to correct my error in next semester.

Question 4 shows an interesting result in that 52 out of the 86 students wished for error correction in a very prompt manner either right as the error is made or immediately after. The remaining learner (1) said that they did not want any correction, and though this is certainly something for the instructor to consider, the vast majority of learners were adamant in the necessity for correction. Furthermore, it is also clear that students preferred to not wait for sufficient error correction. It seems overwhelmingly clear that learners wish for prompt feedback. In addition, the results of question 3 demonstrate that the preferred mode of delivery for feedback is orally. Another interesting point from question 3 is some learners' preference for the instructor to help either learners correct themselves (represented by 16) or the exact opposite, namely the instructor "repeating the correct answer" which are two rather divergent learning techniques. In a future survey, it would be interesting to separate these two questions in order to truly gauge learners' preferences for both the mode of feedback delivery and the underlying reasons for the feedback. However, as a minimal takeaway for instructors, it seems clear that error correction in a timely manner is definitely important for learners.

5. Where do you want your teacher to correct your errors?
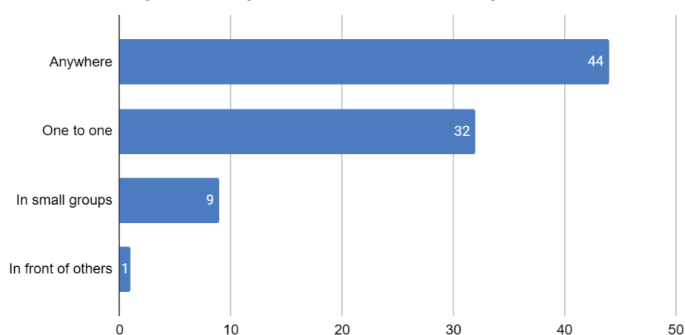
5. Where do you want your teacher to correct your errors? (86 responses)

The goal of this question was to find out where students preferred their errors corrected with the intent being that students may prefer to be corrected/prompted in class, one-to-one, or in small groups. It seems clear from the responses that most students did not have any

hesitancy with being corrected in front of other students or one-to-one. In fact, nearly 44 students had no negative attitudes towards being corrected "anywhere", that is, under any circumstances whether that be in group work, pair work, or the full class. This was rather surprising in that most learners are known to avoid making mistakes and therefore will hesitate greatly before responding to certain classroom situations. However, it seems that from their responses, many learners do not feel the slightest bit of fear or embarrassment when it is time for corrective feedback.

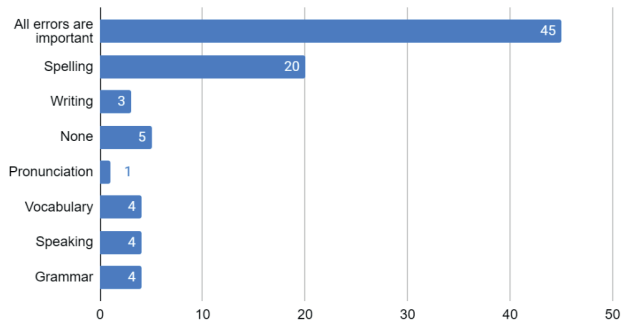6. What type of error is the most important to correct?
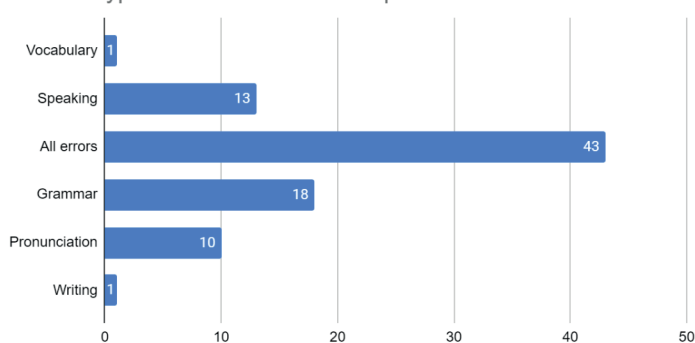
6. What type of error is the most important to correct? (86 responses)

This response reveals student attitudes towards the type of errors students believe are important and want to have corrected. As instructors, there could be possible disagreements on the authenticity of these attitudes; however, learner attitudes should certainly be taken into consideration. Nearly 43 out of 86 learners strongly felt that all errors are important opportunities for correction. This may seem like an impossible task for instructors, but the notion that should be internalized from this question is that students indeed desire correction from the instructor. In addition, nearly all of the remaining half of respondents (43) were strongly advocating for either grammar or pronunciation errors as the most important. However, the notable trend revealed here is twofold. First, there is a tendency toward a whole-language attitude toward learning as all areas of language acquisition are considered equally important to the learner. Second, in this survey, speaking and pronunciation have become almost as important to learners as grammar. This could illustrate that learners have become more mindful of other aspects of language.

7. What type of error is the least important to correct?

7. What type of error is the least important to correct? (86 responses)

If you answered "none" please explain.4 responses

because people can learn from mistakes

every technic is important

Every skill is important.

I think all of them is important.

In order to reinforce and clarify the responses to the previous question, this question was designed to confirm a similar response. Foremost demonstrated in the responses is that all errors are important to the learner. This is clearly seen in the few additional comments left by the respondents. Also, by interpreting "all errors are important" and "none" as basically the same response, a total of 50 students surveyed feel that all errors have significance and should not be ignored. The second most responded answer was "spelling" and this apathy towards correct spelling could be the result of current technological capabilities such as auto-correct and spell check which assist the language producer to avoid errors; therefore, resulting in the belief that internalizing correct spelling rules is not as critical as other language skills.
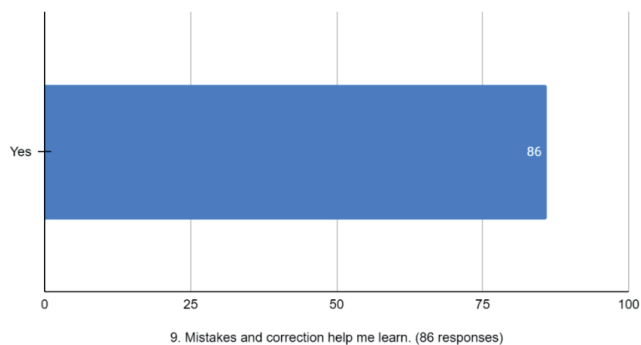
8. It is okay to make mistakes.

Yes	77
No	5
Sometimes	4

8. It is okay to make mistakes.
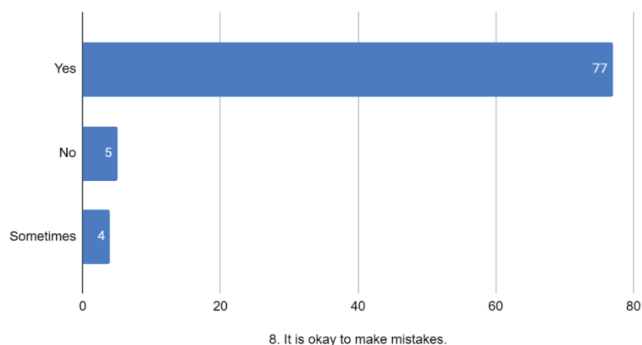
If you answered "sometimes", please explain.3 responses

If I made a mistake, it is bad to make the same mistake.
When I take an important exam or presentation, I don't want to make mistakes.
When we mistake on exam, it isn't good for us and for our grade.

9. Mistakes and correction help me learn.

Yes	86

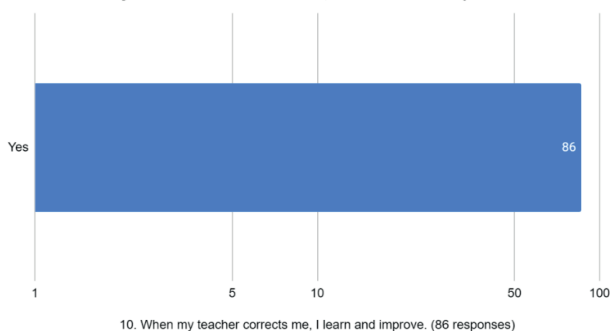9. Mistakes and correction help me learn. (86 responses)

If you answered "sometimes", please explain. 0 responses
No responses yet for this question.

This is one of the more striking and intriguing results in this survey. The responses to these questions demonstrate students' attitude toward language acquisition errors, and how learners believe errors are a necessary natural part of the learning process. With almost 100% of responses indicating that errors should be a tolerated stage in the language learning process, it demonstrates the belief that in order for learners to progress in their learning

then mistakes will be made and perhaps the learners could benefit from those errors. Bakan reinforces this idea by stating "it is therefore indispensable for foreign language teachers to discuss with learners the importance of making errors and being corrected, to create an atmosphere where errors are accepted as an integral part of learning and to develop a sense of how to apply corrective feedback so as not to make the learners feel uncomfortable. This may eliminate negative feelings surrounding errors for both the teacher and the learners and make the learners value errors and corrective feedback and start seeing them as an effective and efficient way to acquire a non-native language," (Bakan, pg.10). By creating a classroom environment where learners see the possible benefits of errors in their language acquisition, students will have a higher tolerance for making errors and assign greater value to the instructor's corrective feedback. Furthermore, as previously addressed in this survey, when feedback is made promptly, clearly, and patiently, learners' attitudes may change towards the view of reaping the benefits from errors.

10. When my teacher corrects me, I learn and improve.

10. When my teacher corrects me, I learn and improve. (86 responses)

If you answered "sometimes", please explain. 0 responses
No responses yet for this question.

These responses demonstrate learner attitudes toward the value of error correction. An overwhelming majority of learners believe that error correction leads to better acquisition, and thus it stands to reason that learners also believe that the teacher is an integral part in the negotiation of meaning and syntax.

11. It is okay if my classmates correct me.
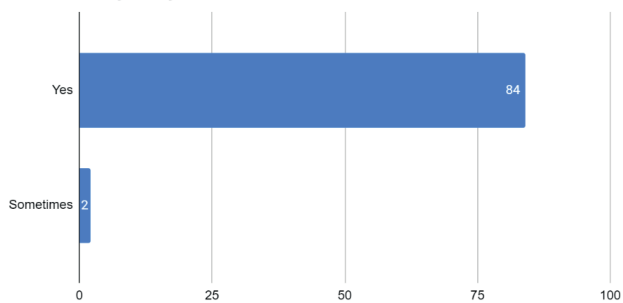
11. It is okay if my classmates correct me. (86 responses)

If you answered "sometimes", please explain.2 responses

There is a possibility for other students to make a same mistake too.

Students may have wrong answers.

Even though the question does not ask how error feedback should be given, it could be concluded that learners desire their instructor or classmates to fill that role. It is also interesting to note that learners value their classmates' feedback just as highly as the instructor's feedback. Although this may differ depending on the cultural context, here it is rather clear that contemporary learners value feedback regardless of from whom it originates.

12. When I am speaking I want my teacher to correct me.....
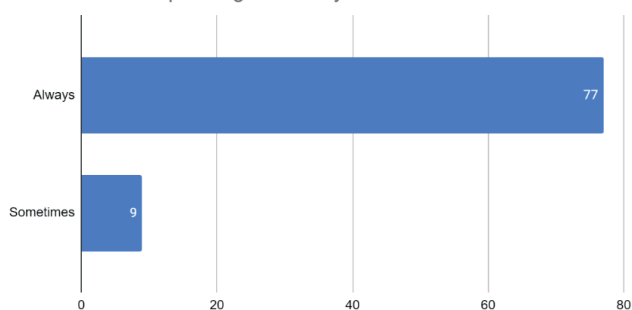
12. When I am speaking I want my teacher to correct me..... (86 responses)

If you answered "sometimes" or "never", please explain.4 responses

Because lack of opportunity

I want to speak freely.

Except for in front of others

I want my teacher to listen to what I say until I end to speak.

This question was intended to specifically focus on feedback regarding oral language skills, and it was asked in order to discover students' attitudes toward the frequency and desire for that feedback from the instructor. For instructors, giving feedback on a learner's oral performance can be challenging. There is no desire from the instructor to overcorrect the learner and thus cause frustration going forward in the acquisition process. However, little to no corrective feedback from the instructor can lead to a slower rate of language acquisition for the learner. The responses to this question demonstrate that when it comes to speaking, there is a higher threshold that learners will tolerate in order to facilitate their learning. In addition, it is clear that these learners have a strong desire to receive performative feedback as often as possible. Therefore, instructors should not be weary of corrective feedback, but instead treat it like any other curricular point that is necessary for the students to receive over the course of the acquisition process.

13. When I am writing I want my teacher to correct.....

every error — 85

No errors — 1

0   25   50   75   100
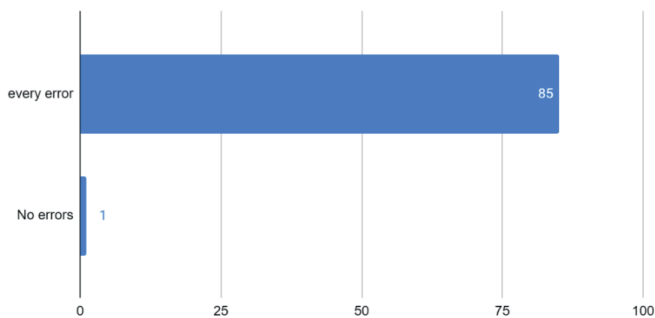
13. When I am writing I want my teacher to correct.....(86 responses)

If you answered "some" or "no", please explain.1 response
I want them to correct after we write because my hands will stop when I'm asked to correct by my teacher.

Similar to the previous question, but looking specifically at writing, the results here reveal that students have comparable attitudes toward speaking and writing error correction. For both questions, learners responded with a desire for high-frequency error correction feedback which could be signaling the learners' belief that language acquisition occurs more efficiently by both committing errors and paying attention to the resulting feedback. Another rather intriguing notion that comes as a result of these two questions is the majority of learners' desire to be corrected for every error. This may differ depending

on the program and its goals, but in this contemporary intensive EAP program there is no doubt that when learners produce language, they want prompt and extensive corrective feedback.

14. I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes
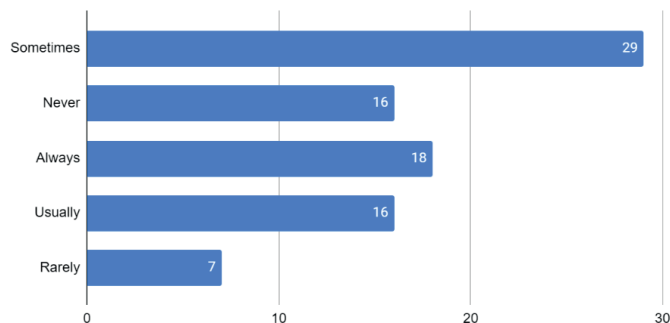
14. I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes (86 responses)

If you answered "sometimes", please explain. (31 responses)

1. I feel embarrassed when I made mistakes that I know why they are wrong.

2. When I make a mistake about easy question

3. I mistake a easy ward or grammer.

4. When I was corrected by a teacher in front of other students.

5. When I made wrong answer that everyone should have correct answer

6. When I speak in English in front of people.

7. When I make mistakes in front of others.

8. If it was a careful mistake.

9. When I mistake in front of many students.

10. When I make mistakes that everyone correct

11. presentation time

12. when I speak infront of people

13. I feel embarrassed to talk in front of people.

14. I talked in front of everyone.

15. when I make mistake in front of others

16. when I can't answer a question.

17. When I can't say anything.

18. When I mistake something that I have believed it is true.

19. When I can't ansewed an easy question.

20. I feel embarrassed when I do not have confidence about speaking.

21. When I make mistakes in front of others, I feel embarrassed.

22. When I mistake pronanciation.

23. When I make very different mistakes.

24. speaking in front of many people

25. When I mistake pronounce.

26. When someone laughs

27. When I make mistakes in front of others and correct my mistakes by my classmate.

28. when I make a big mistake

29. When I answer inthe opposite sense.

30. When I speak in front of others.

31. When I speak in English in front of people.

Although the comments demonstrate a fear of errors and the possible embarrassment that may come with committing errors, the graph shows that 42 out of 86 learners can tolerate making errors and only sometimes feel embarrassed when making mistakes. Making errors may be something that learners want to avoid, but many learners recognize that committing errors can be a beneficial aspect of learning a new language (see question 9). Bakan points out a similar idea by explaining that

> "*Making errors in a foreign language classroom can sometimes be an embarrassing experience and can cause the learner to refrain from saying anything in the target language so as to avoid making any further errors. However, it is often not the error correction itself that induces this feeling, but the general idea that errors are something bad, something that should be avoided at any cost. A confirmation of this idea can be found at school, where it is easy to notice that primary school learners usually tend to be less afraid of making errors and being corrected as opposed to high school or university learners. This might suggest that, in the process of growing up, one learns to interpret errors as a negative occurrence because the word error has connotations of somebody having done something wrong, and nobody likes doing things wrong,*" (Bakan, pg. 9).

On further examination of individual comments above such as 1, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12 and 26, it could be determined that social anxiety is an important factor in learner attitudes

toward errors. Other cultural contexts may yield different responses; however, it is evident that even though many learners feel anxiety toward committing errors, errors and error correction can be tolerated in order to further the language acquisition process. For instructors, it is essential these attitudes be considered, and it seems that a comfortable classroom atmosphere coupled with prompt and efficient feedback may be able to lower this anxiety while fulfilling learner expectations especially when evidence of effective learning can be demonstrated to the learners.

Finally, instructors may want to spend significant class time in creating an atmosphere where students feel comfortable making mistakes and receiving feedback from the instructor and their classmates. If a level of trust, understanding, and most of all empathy can exist in the classroom, it may significantly build confidence while reducing the stress, stigma, and anxiety of committing errors.

15. Making mistakes is not important as long as people understand me.
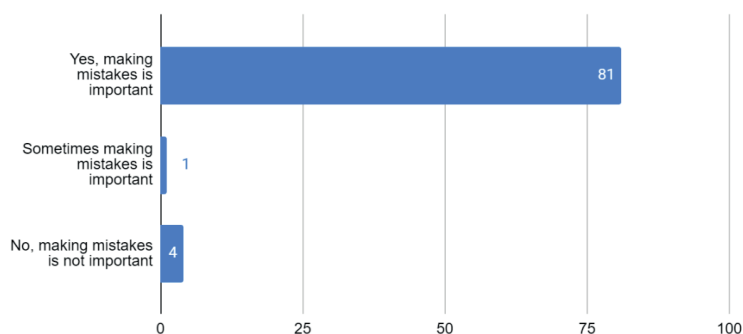
15. Making mistakes is not important as long as people understand me. (86 resp…

If you answered "sometimes", please explain.0 responses
No responses yet for this question.

Finally, the responses to this question demonstrate with little doubt that most learners believe that accuracy is at times more important than simply passing a message. In fact, 81 of all 86 respondents believe that simply "passing a message" is not enough to be competent in a language, but instead accuracy in language is just as important as what Selinker refers to as getting "a green light" in a communicative situation. With an additional 1 respondent stating that "sometimes" making mistakes is important, a combined total of 82 learners reveal that making mistakes at times does have an effect on communication. Some

researchers, such as Allwright, may argue that making mistakes has little effect on passing a message pointing out that "this focus on linguistic accuracy is very persistent among language teachers, for obvious reasons, but it can easily be counterproductive, of course tending to produce learners afraid to risk using the target language for fear of making some linguistic mistake that may well be almost totally irrelevant to effective communication," (Allwright, pg. 175). Other instructors may argue the opposite. However, the result is that contemporary learners' attitudes show a concern for making errors and an inclination to avoid those errors. However, through instructor feedback, an empathetic classroom environment, and a clear demonstration of the value and benefits of learning through errors, the anxiety associated with committing errors can be successfully managed and a return to Balkan's fearless stage of "primary school" learning could be achieved.

5. Conclusion

Learners in the EAP of Kansai Gaidai University want correction and prompt feedback usually orally when possible. Although there is some sensitivity to where the errors are corrected, most students prioritize the feedback over the embarrassment of making an error. In addition, learners are taking more of a whole-language approach to language acquisition in which all aspects of language hold equal importance. This in turn may cause learners to have a higher tolerance for errors and a desire to be corrected as often as possible.

Garret and Shortall (2002) recommended teachers to regularly listen to students' views on the practice of error feedback so that the types of feedback strategies preferred by the students and the effectiveness of teachers' actual error feedback methods can be discussed and modified if necessary. Therefore, using this data to better understand the preferences of learners may lead to more successful language acquisition in the classroom.

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