



Error Correction in Teaching Writing Skill: From Teacher's Point of View to Practice, A Study at A Pedagogical University in Vietnam

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Abstract

In English learning, writing skill is considered, by many people, the most difficult skill to be mastered. In fact, errors and mistakes in writing are unavoidable and a large amount of them has been detected with a variety of types. Previous researchers have also proved the significance of error analysis and correction in enhancing the writing skills of English learners, but the beliefs and applications of teachers in error correction methods still differ. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate these two factors in the teaching and learning environment of a university in Vietnam. The study is conducted in two phases: teacher interview and class observation in practice, with the participation of two English teachers who are in charge of teaching writing skill to two classes of 21 and 28 students. The recorded results give emphasis to the need of error correction in writing classes, some commonly effective activities utilized; furthermore, there is a remarkable outcome that teachers seldom have academic basis on error correction but mainly depend on their own experience in teaching practice, and their approaching methods to correcting mistakes on students' paper can be both direct and indirect. In addition, some ideal activities for error correction, namely peer feedback, on-going writing quizzes, and error codes, are presented.

Key words: error correction, writing, teacher's belief, practice, contrast.

Introduction

For language learners in general and those of English in particular, writing is considerably the most difficult skill to be mastered. Error correction is one among a variety of methods suggested by ESL teachers to aid students in improving their writing competence and is considered a very effective way to help language learners identify their writing strengths and weaknesses. However, the advantages and constraints of this favorable teaching method are still debatable with a vast array of opinions

raised among scholars. Ferris (2003) and Chandler (2003) supported this method by stating that error correction can help improve the accuracy of students' writings whilst Truscott (1996) and Krashen (1992) considered this method ineffective. Recently, Corpuz (2011) in his thesis has provided some robust evidences to prove the effectiveness of error correction method through a survey on teachers and learners' viewpoints over the method in theory and practice.

In fact, previous studies conducted by

Vietnamese authors just can point out the basic errors committed by students in language class or in each of the four skills in particular, but the currents of ideas given by teachers toward error correction method in theory and practice has not been directed.

Material and Methods

Aims of the Study

The current study aims at investigating the teachers' points of view about error correction in teaching writing skill and their method applied in real teaching context. To reach this aim, the following points are focused: (1) writing teachers' points of view towards error correction; (2) the error correction methods applied in writing teaching practice at the selected university; and (3) the differences between their opinions and their teaching practice in applying the method.

Participants

The participants of the study are two lecturers of English coded as teacher A and teacher B in the report. These teachers are 28 and 30 years old and are experienced in teaching writing skill. They are in charge of two reading-speaking classes in the faculty with the numbers of students are 21 and 28 respectively in 8 classes, each class is divided into 2 sections with a total length of 100 minutes.

Research Approaches

This is a qualitative study applying the method suggested by Cohen et al (2007, cited in Corpuz, 2011) in organizing and presenting the data: (1) by group of participants; (2) by individuals; (3) by issues; (4) by research questions; and (5) by instrument.

The data of the current study are presented based on three criteria (1), (2) and (4) with the participants and research focuses discussed in the current report.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

The study will be conducted in two phases: phase 1: We survey the writing teachers' viewpoints about error correction as well as the correction methods they apply in their real teaching; phase 2: We observe the teachers dur-

ing their real teaching to record their methods in error correction. After that, the opinion of the teachers and their real teaching methods will be compared to find the key differences.

Firstly, the researchers interview each teacher to record their viewpoint about error correction. The interview questions (*see appendix 2*) are designed to focus on the methods applied by these teachers in correcting students' writing errors, the reason why these methods are chosen as well as the results of the methods. Each interview lasts approximately 30 minutes and is transcribed as in the following sample table, in each transcript, the important information is highlighted

Table 1: Teacher Interview Transcript Sample

<p>[INTERVIEWER] Do you use error correction strategies to correct grammatical errors in your students' writing? Why?</p> <p>[TEACHER A] oh. Actually I don't have a lot of experience with error correction. ...yes, in fact I don't base on any theories, so I just find out some major grammatical errors in students' writing.</p> <p>[INTERVIEWER] So why?</p> <p>[TEACHER A] Because I think the errors of student may vary. So I don't think that there's a theory that can cover all the errors and mistakes of students...</p>

In the second phase, the researchers observe the participant teachers teaching in their class to investigate the way they apply their error correction methods and to survey the relationships between they viewpoints and their methods in teaching practice. The *Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT)* by Spada & Frohlich (1995) (*Appendix 1*) is employed during the observation. This table consists of two parts: part A focuses on the interaction between teachers and learners in class and part B pays attention to the post-classroom elements. Because the focus of the current study is on teachers only, the part concerning students' interaction is not employed. Markers also highlight the important information in this phase. .

Results and Discussion

As mentioned, the study was conducted in two phases: teachers' interview and class observation. From data collected from the interview process, the following points have been found:

Firstly, both of the teachers share the opin-

ion that error correction can benefit their students in identifying correcting the errors in their writing, especially the fossilized mistakes which are often ignored. Besides, according to these two teachers, error corrections methods can also help students in enhance their writing competence and their writing accuracy. These results are similar to that of the study by Ferris (1999).

Teacher A, in particular, considered error correction a necessary method in her teaching and highly appreciated the teachers' role in the method. She also claimed that she possess little amount of theoretical background about error correction, therefore, the application of her error correction methods are mainly based on teaching experience and little theory is employed. This teacher also points out the important role of feedback in error correction. As said by this teacher, the combination of peer and teacher feedback can help students correct their mistakes effectively without wasting much time of both teachers and students. According to teacher B, in error correcting process, the role of teachers is to point out the mistakes committed by students so that they can self-correct them. Sometimes, it is important that the teachers correct the difficult mistake and provide their students with a clear guide. She claimed that, with these methods, teachers can help students avoid the corrected mistake in their forth-coming pieces of writing.

From the interview and class observation, the methods applied by the two teachers were also recorded. It can be realized that the teachers apply both explicit and implicit methods (of error correction and the methods are also effective to some extends. By explicit, the teachers point out clearly the mistakes in students' writing and the way to correct these errors. By implicit, the teachers also locate the errors and have students correct these errors by themselves. Teacher A used two main methods namely *peer-feedback and teacher-feedback*. This teacher writes the common errors on the board and helps her students analyze the mistakes as well as suggest some corrections. In class, the teacher shares her own experience in error correction and has her students work in pair to mutually correct their errors. Henceforth, the teacher reviews the corrections of students

and makes necessary adjustments. After identifying the errors, the teacher have her students write their first drafts and conduct a peer and teacher feed back if needed. After the feedback, students write their final papers and these papers are assessed by the teacher herself. The methods used by teacher B are slightly different. This teacher provides an *errors checklist* so that students can find the errors themselves. This *checklist* mainly focuses on the roles of the sentence patterns and the common errors in the check list are collected by this teacher from students' writings. The idea of this teacher is that students have to self-correct their own mistakes.

From the results of the data collection procedure, the researchers found that the teachers also can recognize the drawbacks of their teaching method. The first problem, as mentioned by both of the participants, is that the methods take teachers too much times and students often do not appreciate the help from their teachers. Besides, since students do not recognize the importance of error correction in their writings and do not pay attention to correcting their mistakes, they tend to repeat the same errors in different pieces of writing. Secondly, despite the help from teachers, error correction sometimes does not prove enough effectiveness in enhancing students' writing accuracy. As said by the teachers, due to the limitation of time, occasionally, they cannot cover all students' writing and only choose the papers by random to review. The teachers are also confused about whether they should correct students' mistakes or have the students self-correct them because sometimes students do not have enough skill and knowledge to recognize and correct the errors. They are also afraid that if too many errors are found in the writings, students may feel scared and thus lose their self-confidence.

The comparison between the teachers' viewpoints and teaching practice also reveal some good points and constraints. The first advantage is that, both of the teachers can recognize the importance of error correction in students' writing and try to apply different methods in their real teaching to improve the competence of their students. Besides, they can also realize the drawbacks of the methods, for example, teacher A understand that *peer and teacher feedback* methods are important but time consuming and ineffective if conducted separately, therefore, she tries to

combine them in teaching. Teacher B, knowing that students' knowledge and skills are limited, also uses a check list of common errors which works as a reference for her students to identify the mistakes by themselves. Beside the good points, some constraints also exist. At first, the teachers recognize that they do not have enough theoretical background in error correction, but in fact, they seem not to take any effort to enhance their own knowledge. The second drawback is that some problems recognized in teaching practice such as the students' attitude towards error correction and feedback or the limitation of time are still not directed adequately. The teachers appear to be able to spot these problems; however, they also do not try to find out the best way to improve the situation. These teachers only base on teaching experience to find the methods in correcting students' error, which sometimes can bring a problem that they cannot recognize the advantages and disadvantages of the methods and thus cannot find out an appropriate solution. This situation can be exemplified that both of the teachers do not know if they should have their students correct their errors.

Conclusion

The current study directs a common problem in teaching and has found some principal points in which the lack of a comprehensive background of knowledge in error correction plays the central role: (1) Teachers can recognize the importance of error correction in students' writing but they have little access to the theoretical background of this issue. In fact, most of the skills and activities are learned from their own experience or from that of the colleague teachers. (2) From the lack of theory, the application of the methods in real teaching has to face some difficulties namely students' attitude and competence or time limitation. (3) The teacher can recognize some of the drawbacks; however, they do not try to direct the problems adequately or do not have enough knowledge to find the appropriate solutions and still apply the methods in the way they are used to. Therefore, it is necessary for each ESL teachers to enhance their own background knowledge in error correcting methodology so that they can find ap-

propriate solutions for the problems and improve the teaching and learning quality in writing and moreover in other skills.

Suggestion

The results of the study are still limited in length and scale due to the limitation of time and content. In further studies, the researchers suggest to increase the scale of the study by, firstly, increasing the number of the participant teachers and secondly surveying the viewpoints from learners as well to have a closer and more accurate assessment over the problem in real teaching contexts. Besides, the current study can only investigate the opinions and methods of the teachers but has not yet given any theoretical and practical suggestions for the difficulties faced by these teachers. This problem is hoped to be adequately directed in the further studies.

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