



# New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Volume 5, Issue 1 (2018) 43-48

ISSN 2547-8818

[www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selected Paper of 10th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2018) 01-03 February 2018 Top Hotel Praha  
Congress Centre, Prague, Czech Republic

## An analysis of EFL learners' error self-correction attitudes

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### Suggested Citation:

Yavuz, F. (2018). An analysis of EFL learners' error self-correction attitudes. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences* [Online]. 5(1), 043–048. Available from: [www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcala, Spain.

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### Abstract

During language teaching and learning, the focus is on how correct or wrong the input is reflected in the output. Accuracy first approaches reject errors due to the risk of interference whereas the communicative approaches use them as signs of learning. So, errors play a vital role in foreign language learning. It is viewed as improvement in different language learning approaches. This paper after reviewing the literature about error and error correction in English language teaching examines the types of errors the students can self-correct. The procedure is as follows: Twenty erroneous sentences from examination papers were chosen as student errors and learners were asked to correct any kind of errors in the sentences. The results were categorised, analysed and commented. The results show that students are better at correcting the structural errors and worst in discourse ones. Under these findings, it is suggested that learner training should focus more on contextual learning.

**Keywords:** Error correction, EFL, self-correction, accuracy, exam papers.

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has always been a challenge for learners. While learning the foreign language, the concentration is more on language itself than the communication as the meaning of knowing a language is knowing its grammar in traditional teaching. Learners are expected to produce first correct and later meaningful sentences in the target language. The problem that the foreign language classrooms encounter anytime is whether students should produce error-free sentences in explicit or implicit output. If the output should be modified, who and how it should be done is another issue to be discussed. As it is seen in the literature review, self-correction gives more fruitful results in language learning in formal settings. So, this study giving the scope first deals with the literature review and by explaining the methodology classifies and describes the phenomena shaped by the learners.

## 2. Literature review

Before mentioning the previous research studies, some conventional definitions and classifications are needed. The first is the common tendency to consider it as 'error' if it breaks the intelligibility of the message and to ignore if it is the slip, trial or typos (Ellis, 1997). The second issue is to classify the errors under some group names such as developmental, simplification, structural, interference and transfer or discourse errors (Corder, 1974; Richards, 1970; Scovel, 2001). The third is the error treatment supporting the different techniques in correcting the errors. Lyster (1998) classifies these as the negation of form, recasts and explicit correction.

Foreign language learning has been encountering various challenges emerging from teaching approaches, teachers or the learners. Errors are the main issues for debate for each of the three factors given above. It matters for the approach, the teacher and the learners how an error is made or how it affects the learning process. Although errors can be defined as not knowing what the correct form is and a sign of the gaps in learner's knowledge, it is also true that those errors are to tell us where further work is needed.

Depending on the language teaching theory, it is widely witnessed in ELT classrooms that some errors are tolerated, some immediately corrected and some are delayed for later correction or treatment. The best method—which has never existed—is the one in which the teacher knowing the syllabus, the learner and the learning outcome decide how to deal with the errors. The prescribed solutions in error correction or error treatment are like the recipe in the cookbook of which application has never been the same. So, teachers fed by theory, application and experience may have better results in coping with the student errors.

Ellis (2009) supports the above statement by asserting that the error correction continuum has two sides; one is the strategies to deal with errors and the other is the responses of the learners to the feedback given by teachers.

Under influence of behaviouristic approaches, language classrooms had many obstacles in the errors correction procedures. Hendrickson (1978) refuses the idea of immediate correcting of all errors. Moving from authoritative approaches to more humanistic approaches, it is noticed that errors are highly tolerated. Again, this is not the case as over tolerating may cause fossilisation. With the emergence of the communicative approaches, the tolerance finds its limits where the teacher has some degree of control over the learners' errors but not causing the debilitating anxiety while doing that.

The cause of an error is not the same for all learners as the input and learning process vary in each learner. Davies (1983) states that depending on whether it is L1, L2 or foreign language, it may show differences in the evaluation of the errors.

Another issue is which errors or what type of errors can be corrected or even noticed by learners. The study conducted by Srichanyachon (2011) shows that students who were given feedback by peers, teachers and who also had the self-revision stage could focus more on surface errors which can be named as structural errors than semantic or discourse errors. She also found that without teacher feedback, realisation of errors, self-correction or self-satisfaction on the achievement of the task is missing.

A more striking point is also linking the learner error to the level of proficiency to decide if the error shows the sign of development, interference or fossilisation. Nezami and Sadraie Najafi's (2012) study tried to see if there was any relation between errors and students' proficiency levels and concluded that the relation was significant and learners were having different types of errors at different proficiency levels. Erdogan (2005) explained the strategies and procedures that learners refer to when they are learning a foreign language by examining the student errors.

What matters is the way of correction if the error will be corrected. The common techniques are the negation of form, recasting and explicit correction. Lyster (1998) examines how learner errors are corrected among the correction types. The results of this study show that negation of form is more effective in immediate error correction for grammatical errors while phonological ones are more in recasting.

The scope of this study differs from other studies as it focuses on determining students' awareness of their own errors and their self-correction abilities. Furthermore, this study classifies the error types that the students can correct on their own.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research questions**

This study focuses on the error types, the classification of errors and attitudes against error correction. The questions this study tries to answer are:

1. What kind of errors students have on their exam papers?
2. Which type of errors can be self-corrected or more corrected by the learners?
3. Are there any differences between male and female learners for self-correction of errors?

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study was conducted at Balikesir University, Necatibey Education Faculty and ELT programme. The subjects were 2nd year pre-service ELT students. The students taking the formal midterm examination for the approaches in ELT course II were included in the study. Fifty students' examination papers were assessed and the errors/mistakes in their sentences were noted. Twenty most common erroneous sentences were typed in a different paper and given to the students. They were asked to analyse each sentence and decide if the sentence is correct or false and correct the sentence if they think it is wrong.

#### **3.3. Data analysis**

Data were analysed using the SPSS program. The answers of the students were classified under four headings. Their gender was also included in the study to see if gender plays any role in error correction and error type.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of the items used in the study

Sentences were taken from students' examination papers of methodology. 19 erroneous sentences made by students were chosen. They were classified as below.

- Vocabulary errors: these errors include the wrong word choice, the sentences of this group are 1 and 3.
- Grammar errors: these errors include subject verb agreement, using wrong tense and wrong sentence formation. These sentences are 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 14, 14, 17, 18, 19, 12, 13, 15 and 16.
- Discourse errors: the sentences that students do not know how it is expressed in the target language. The sentence is 9.

	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5		Q6		Q7		Q8		Q9		Q10	
	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False
<b>Frequency</b>	48	1	40	9	47	2	44	5	27	22	44	5	43	6	35	14	47	2	45	4
<b>Percentage</b>	98,0	2,0	81,6	18,4	95,9	4,1	89,8	10,2	55,1	44,9	89,8	10,2	87,8	12,2	71,4	28,6	98,9	4,1	91,8	8,2
	Q11		Q12		Q13		Q14		Q15		Q16		Q17		Q18		Q19		Total	
	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False	True	False		
<b>Frequency</b>	21	28	38	11	32	17	31	18	33	16	38	11	22	27	18	31	37	12	49	
<b>Percentage</b>	42,9	57,1	77,6	22,4	65,3	34,7	63,3	36,7	67,3	32,7	77,6	22,4	44,9	55,1	36,7	63,3	75,5	24,5	100	

Figure 1. The distribution of students answers for each item

Table 1. Distribution of answers according to gender

Question	Male %	Female %
1	0	2.9
2	13	20.6
3	0	5.9
4	13	8.8
5	46.7	44.1
6	13	8.8
7	13	11.8
8	20	32.4
9	6.7	2.9
10	6.7	8.8
11	60	55.9
12	26.7	20.6
13	33.3	35.3
14	26.7	41.2
15	40	29.4
16	20	23.5
17	60	52.9
18	46.7	70.6
19	40	17.6

## 4.2. Findings

The overall examination of Table 1 shows that students are not able to see their own errors. This is what makes us call those errors 'errors' in fact. There is a reasonable explanation for this; if they knew what was correct they wouldn't make it in their exam papers. The first question of this research was to see the type of errors made by the students in the exam papers. The examination shows that errors are related to grammar, vocabulary and discourse errors. The answer for the second research question shows that some errors are not corrected at all or by very few (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9). But there are a few errors that could be corrected by more (5, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19) For the classification, it can be concluded that vocabulary errors (1 and 3) are less corrected than grammar errors and for the discourse error (9), the correction level is below the average (24.5%). The third research question does not have significant values. Most of the errors have been similarly corrected by both males and females which mean gender has not a very important effect on error correction in this study (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 16).

Females are better at correcting some errors (2, 8, 14 and 18) and males are better at correcting some errors (15, 17 and 19), there is not a meaningful explanation for this as the type of correction is not different; both are grammar group. A further study might include an interview to learn the reason from the learners.

## 5. Conclusions

It is obvious that learners cannot correct their errors on their own. They need recasting, teacher or peer implicit or explicit correction for the errors they can't correct on their own. The solution of this issue has three dimensions. The first one is that teachers should create friendly, humanistic atmosphere in which learners can depend on their own sources to think cognitively. The second is for the syllabus writers; the syllabus should include peer and group activities to support learners to see their production from someone else's eyes. The last and the most important responsibility is for the higher education council (HEC) to train the teacher. They should train the future teachers to create the optimum classroom settings, and language teaching methodology courses should include more practical issues including student-student and student-teacher interactions. The final words are for the HEC; the teacher training faculties should modify the curriculum for pre-service teachers.

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