Foreign Language Learners' Errors and Error Correction in Writing Class

უცხო ენის შემსწავლელების შეცდომები და მათ შესწორებაა წერის სწავლებისას

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Abstract

Error and error correction play an important role in foreign language teaching. The purpose of this study was to examine foreign language learners' and teachers' attitudes towards error correction and the time of correction. Research was held in Georgia, Tbilisi. Participants were freshman students of foreign language department and teachers who teach or taught writing as a separate discipline at university. Optional type questionnaires were distributed to research subjects. It was revealed that both students and teachers are aware of the importance of error correction. Most students want their errors to be corrected, but not in front of the class, while teachers think that it is beneficial to correct errors in class. Students admit that they feel shy and humiliated when their errors are revealed. Teachers should be very careful with it not to discourage the students.

Keywords: error correction, writing, student, teacher

რეზიუმე

თანაბარი მნიშვნელობა აქვთ ენის სწავლებაში. კვლევის მიზანი იყო დაგვედგინა როგორც სტუდენტების, ისე მასწავლებლების დამოკიდებულება შეცდომებისა და შესაბამისად მათი შესწორების მიმართ. კვლევა ჩატარდა საქართველოში, ქერძოდ, თბილისში. კვლევის მონაწილეები იყვნენ უცხო ენის ფაკულტეტის პირველი კურსის სტუდენტები და მასწავლებლები, რომლებიც წერას ასწავლიან ან ასწავლიდნენ წარსულში როგორც საგანს. დადგინდა, რომ ორივე ჯგუფს ესმის შეცდომების შესწორების მნიშვნელობა. სტუდენტების უმრავლესობას სურს, რომ მათი ნაშრომები შესწორებულ იქნეს არა აუდიტორიაში, არამედ მოგვიანებით, პირადად მათან. მასწავლებლების უმრავლესობას კი მიაჩნია, რომ შეცდომების კლასში შესწორება და განხილვა საკმაოდ ნაყოფიერია. სტუდენტები აღნიშნავენ, რომ ისინი დამცირებულად გრძნობენ თავს, როცა მათი შეცდომები მეგობრების თანდასწრებით განიხილება. მასწავლებლებს დიდი სიფრთხილე მართებთ ამ საკითხში, რადგან ამან შეიძლება ინტერესის დაკარგვა გამოიწვიოს სტუდენტებში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: შეცდომების გასწორება, წერა, მასწავლებელი, სტუდენტი

Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a lifelong process and it is often a challenging experience for language learners. Most if not all writing teachers would agree that composition writing is one of the most difficult subjects for foreign language learners and especially for freshman students. They may be better at planning, idea generation, and revision steps than they were before coming to University, but EFL student compositions still contain lexical and grammatical inaccuracies. Among EFL and ESL professionals it is understood that language acquisition is a difficult process that takes time and energy. Expectation of perfect papers is not realistic, especially from freshman students.

When they look at their work after correction, they are often discouraged and learners are not eager to perform their homework or class assignments anymore. Teachers' task is to help students to overcome the problems and encourage them to compose better papers. We should identify their errors and correct them but the problem is how and when. This paper will discuss some error problems and possible solutions to create a better learning atmosphere for foreign language learners.

A brief history of error correction

Before the advent of process-oriented instruction in language literacy, teacher feedback to second or foreign

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language writing students was excessively concerned with eradicating student errors (Zamel, 1985). Often, that feedback was notably unsuccessful in helping to reduce error frequency in subsequent student writing. As process-oriented practices achieved a wide-spread acceptance, some instructors swung to the opposite extreme, giving little or no attention to the morpho-syntactic or lexical accuracy of students' final products (Horowitz, 1986). According to Zamel, "engaging students in the process of composing does not eliminate our obligation to upgrade their linguistic competences… If, however, students learn that writing is a process through their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well".

Eskey (1983) and Horowitz (1986) raised questions about whether fervent adherence to process approaches would meet the needs of writers, who are struggling with language acquisition and the development of their literacy skills. Many writing teachers who were trained in process pedagogies also found that students' errors "were not magically disappearing as the sure result of a more enlightened process and view of writing" (Ferris, 2002b). Worse, they "helplessly watched some of their students fail the course final exam and the university's writing proficiency exam" (Ferris, 2002a). Teachers in the late 1980s and the early 1990s began seeking better answers about techniques and strategies to help students improve the accuracy of their writing while working within a process-oriented paradigm (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2009).

Truscott (1996) strongly argued for the abolition of grammar correction in writing courses. Truscott's article led to a published debate, spurring new research efforts.

For most teachers, students, and readers, the "debate" is academic. Everybody knows that students have gaps in morphological, syntactic, and lexical knowledge different from L1 learners. Foreign students do not have enough language practice, especially in written language. As a result, students' errors in writing class may be quite serious with the vague message in paper and stigmatizing as well. To conclude, they know that learners need expert help to improve text accuracy. Most of educators would agree with me that primary concern in writing class is not error correction, but it is still an important one.

What is the error itself?

Making mistakes is an important and useful part in language learning because it allows learners to experiment with language and measure their success in communicating. Errors are mistakes which students cannot correct without help – and which, therefore, need explanation. Errors occur when learners try to say something that is beyond their current level of knowledge or language processing. Because they are still processing and/or don't know this part of language, learners cannot correct errors

themselves because they do not understand what is wrong.

According to Harmer (2009), there are two distinct sources for the errors which most, if not all, students display: L1 interference and developmental errors. Students who learn English as a second language already have a deep knowledge of at least one other language. Where L1 and the variety of English they are learning come into contact with each other, there are often confusions which provoke errors in a learner's use of English. This may be at the level of sounds, grammar (where a student's first language has a different system), and vocabulary, word usage (where similarly sounding words have different meanings). In my writing class Georgian students mainly have problems with sentence structure (because the Georgian language has a different sentence structure) and using articles (there are no articles in the Georgian language). Among different kinds of problems in writing one stands out with my Turkish and Azerbaijani students is omission of verbs in present tense, let alone other problems, such as vocabulary and sentence structure.

Another error category is often described as developmental errors. These types of errors occur when students' language knowledge develops, they are the result of making apparently sensible (but mistaken) assumptions about the way language works (Harmer, 2009).

Error correction

Learning a foreign language is a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected on all stages of learning. Mistakes will not disappear simply because they have been pointed out to the learner, contrary to what some language learners and teachers believe. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. In order to overcome learners' fear, it is essential to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in language classrooms, to create special correction techniques to help our students improve their writing skills.

Most of teachers consider in-class error correction very useful and productive, yet students consider it as a sort of humiliation in front of the class and friends, which is a serious problem. The purpose of this research is to report the data on learners' perceptions of teachers' correction and learners' peer and self-correction of written work. The findings give some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in mitigating or even eradicating learner fear of mistakes, facilitating the process of learning by developing language awareness and encouraging learner autonomy in learning English as a foreign Language.

In this research, we have only dealt with the preferences for correcting errors in the written work of the university freshman students in Georgia, thus, the study deals with:
- How learners prefer to be corrected in the class and
- Professors' experience in students' preferences in

correcting them in class

The study justifies that students prefer to be corrected at home and not in class. It also shows that professors are aware of learners' preferences for correction of work at home, but they prefer to discuss learners' errors in class. They think that it really helps to improve writing skills.

Method

Two versions of optional type questionnaires, one for students and the other for teachers (made up of questions and selections of answers), written in English, were distributed to respondents. All of them were freshman students of English language department. The research was done in three different universities located in the capital city of Georgia, Tbilisi. Research participants were students of different nationality. Majority of them were Georgians and an equal number of Turkish and Azerbaijani students. Another, teachers' version, was distributed to thirty teachers of the same universities. All of them are currently teaching writing as a university course or taught it in the past.

Results

Students: question 1: *How often does your writing teacher correct your written work?*
(A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Rarely; D. Never).

When asked about the frequency of correcting their written work 55% of students answered that they are always corrected, 25% responded that they are sometimes corrected. Only 15% responded to be corrected rarely and 5% thought that they are never corrected. Correcting written work is not appealing to teachers as it is a time consuming process. Though, if asked all would answer that they always correct their students' papers. It is notable from the survey that teachers are not very active in correcting their students' written papers which might discourage their students.
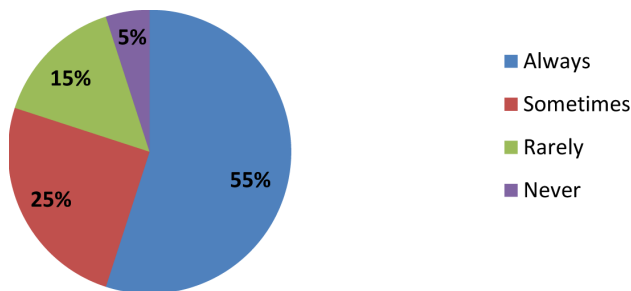

Figure 1: Students' opinions about correction frequency of written work

Teachers: question 1: *How often do you correct your students' written work in writing class?*
(A. Always; B. Sometimes; C. Rarely; D. Never).

As the given chart shows, 74% of teachers responded that they always correct students' written work, while 20% do it sometimes. Only 3% corrects it rarely and a very low percentage - 3% -responded that they never correct it.
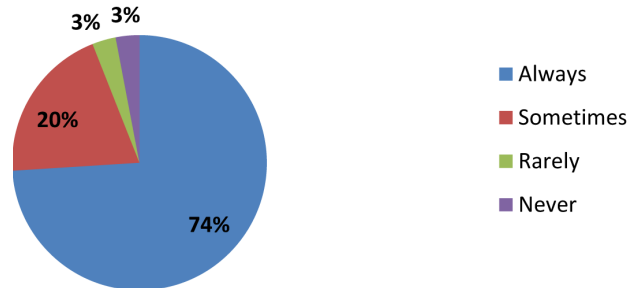

Figure 2: Teachers' opinions about correcting frequency of their students' written work

Students: question 2: *When do you want to be corrected by your teacher in writing class?*
(A: At the end of the activity, in front of other students; B: After lecture, in private; C: At home, but discussed later, in private; D: It does not matter).

When asked about the correction time of their written work 7% of the participants prefer to be corrected at the end of the activity, in front of others, while 15% of students want to be corrected by the teacher after lecture, in private. The highest percentage of research subjects - 73% - responded that they prefer their work to be corrected at home, but discussed later with them, while only 5% do not mind at all when and where they would be corrected. It shows that majority of students feel shy if their weakness is shown in front of other students.
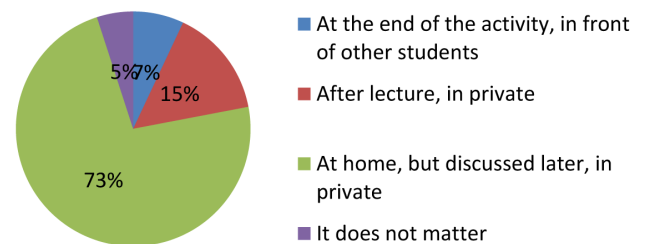

Figure 3: Students' opinions about correction time of their written work

Teachers: Question 2: *When do you correct your students' written work?*
(A: At the end of the activity, in front of other students; B: After lecture, in private; C: At home, but discussed later, in private; D: It does not matter).

Survey shows that 60% of teachers prefer to correct their students publicly, at the end of the activity, while 15% - prefer to correct their students later, in private. 28% of research participants prefer to correct their students' writ-

ten work at home, but with later discussion and only 2% - do not mind about the time and place of correction. It is notable from this survey that teachers prefer to correct mistakes in class and discuss, while students do not. In a student-centered methodology it is teachers who need to change their practices.
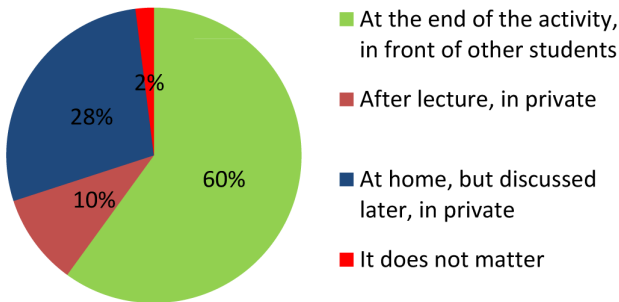

Figure 4: Teachers' opinions about correction time of their students' written work

Students: Question 3: *Do you mind if other students correct your own work? (A: Yes; B: No).*

The study shows that a significant number, 72% of students, would not mind having their written work corrected by their friends, though they commented that only successful students should do it. On the other hand, 28% of participants would mind.
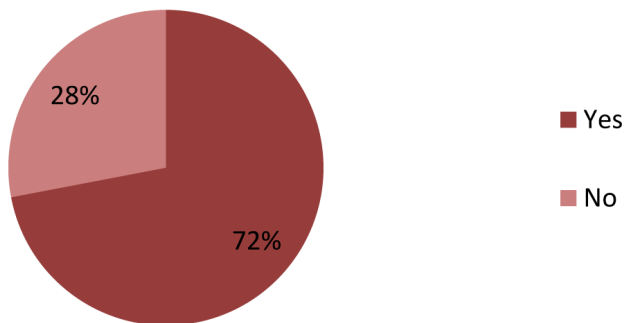

Figure 5: Students' opinion about peer-correction

Teacher: Question 3: *Do your students mind if other students correct your students' works?(A: Yes; B: No)*

According to the survey, 76% of the teachers answered that their students do not mind peer editing; while 24% replied in the negative way. Teachers find this activity entertaining as it makes their students to be involved in the writing process, making the process more interesting and active.
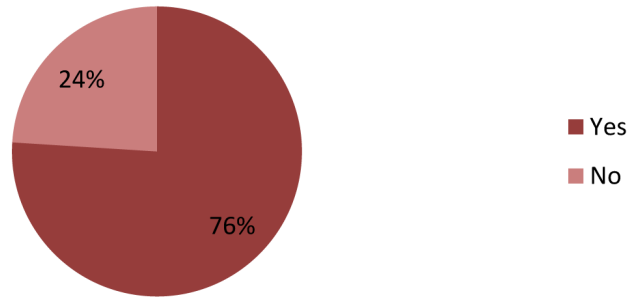

Figure 6: Teachers' response on peer-editing

Students: Question 4: *Do you mind if the teacher sometimes asks you to correct your own work? (A: Yes; B: No)*

With regard to the subjects' views whether or not they would like to correct their own work 60% of the students replied that they would gladly correct themselves without external intervention, while 40% of the students disliked the idea. As the survey shows, both teachers and students are aware of the importance of peer-editing and respond positively with minor differences in percentage terms. This practice should be supported.
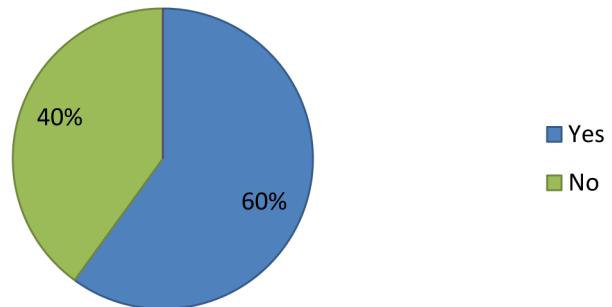

Figure 7: Students' preference for self-editing

Teachers: Question 4: *Do your students mind if you ask them to correct their works themselves? (A: Yes; B: No)*

When asked about their students' preference for self-editing, the highest percentage of teachers - 77% - answered positively, while 23% disliked the idea. Self-correction of written work is easier for students and is less threatening to learners. However, they may not have enough qualification to carry it out totally independently.
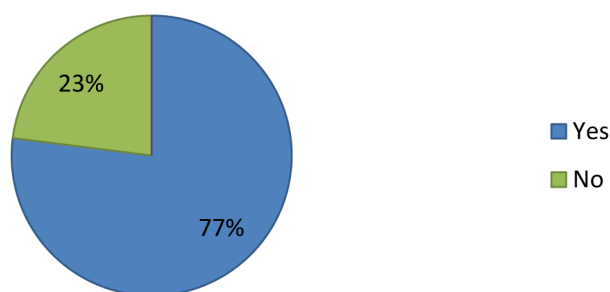
Figure 8: Teachers' response on students self-editing

Conclusion

Errors are important in learning and teaching language. They are important for teachers as they show students accomplishment, on the other hand, they are equally important for learners, as students can learn from these errors. Language acquisition does not happen unless the learner is relaxed and keen on learning. Fear of making mistakes prevents students from being responsive (73% in our research). Teachers should try to create a friendly atmosphere to help freshmen learners to overcome this fear, as it is very important stage in their education. We can do it by encouraging cooperation through peer work or small group work and apply different techniques for language acquisition that suit individual learners. Correction is an essential condition for successful acquisition of any language. Our research justifies the idea that learners must be given practice in self-correction of their own work either individually or in pairs. This kind of correction is a kind of motivation for students in writing class. Lectures become more interesting for students. However, students need practice and training in rectifying mistakes without teachers' interference.

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