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The Effectiveness of an Error Correction Program in Improving EFL Teachers' Error Correction Techniques

A Thesis for the Degree of Master of Education.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of a suggested program on error correction in improving teachers' techniques used for correcting EFL students' writing errors at the secondary stage. The study hypothesized the effect of the program at three levels; performance, knowledge and beliefs. A total of 80 teachers were randomly assigned to a control group and an experimental one. The latter group studied a seven-module program which lasted for nine weeks. Data were gathered through: (a) a performance test on the secondary stage teachers' correction techniques, (b) an analytic rubric on correction techniques, (c) an achievement test on writing error correction techniques and (d) a beliefs scale on error perceptions and correction approaches and techniques. The data were analyzed using the t-test. Results of the post-tests revealed significant differences between the two groups, favoring the experimental one. The program improved not only the number of teachers' error correction techniques, but also the quality of these techniques. The study recommends more consideration to be given to training teachers on writing and speaking error correction techniques and following up their performance at schools.

CHAPTER ONE

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

Within the foreign language context, students are expected to make errors as a result of insufficient practice. Nunan (1991) pointed out that students are expected to make more errors when they study EFL since they are not required to practice English once the class has ended. On the basis of considering studying English as a foreign language, viewing students' errors would be more illuminated (Judd et al., 1999; Mode, 2002 and Absalom, 2003). Oldin (1994) and Caceres and Obilinovic (2000) have indicated that it is unrealistic and impractical in a foreign language context to expect error-free production whether oral or written. Fujioka (2001) and Takagi (2001) have found out that teachers edit or proofread their students' writing in a way that makes students come to believe that only mechanics of writing matter.

With this indication in mind, a pilot study was conducted on three secondary school classes (125 students) for studying their writing error characteristics such as frequency and commonality. Errors of meaning were found to be more common than errors of form while errors of form were found to be more frequent. Common errors refer to errors made by a group of your students while frequent errors refer to errors that the same student makes so repeatedly. As for their correction, errors of meaning were underestimated while errors of form were over-emphasized. Common and frequent errors were corrected the same as uncommon and infrequent errors by counting errors, over correction of all errors or by overall impression marking.

Ancker (2000) stated that errors occur for many reasons such as interference from the native language, incomplete knowledge of the foreign language, complexity of the target language and fossilization. Edge (2001) suggested that students make errors because of their first language which may interfere with English and end at producing errors. Myles (2002) found that the more rich and creative the text, the greater the possibility there is for errors. Thereupon some teachers urge their students to write less to avoid making errors. Under the banner of accuracy, fluency is therefore threatened (Lennon, 1990; Arevart & Nation, 1991; Johnson, 1992 and Borg, 2003). Myles (2002) commented

that the situation is not so simple and that students' making of errors is affected by both social and cognitive factors.

Correction of students' errors remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language profession (Ancker, 2000 and Gosse, 2001). Some scholars argue that error correction is helpful and highly desirable (Gebhard, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Murray, 1999 and Yashima, 2002). Others focus on the idea that error correction is ineffective and perhaps harmful (Roberts, 1998; Ellis, 1994; Jones, 2004 and Brown, 2001). White & Arndt (1991), Leki (1992), Raimes (1995), Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Hong (2004) indicated that a variety of factors influence the effectiveness of error correction such as on what part of the writing process to offer correction, what type of errors to correct, whether students are children or adults, how much information to provide, students' proficiency level and the period of time over which correction is given. Lavezzo and Dunford (2001) concluded that with non-native students, correction has to be reevaluated. They focused on the ideas that correction does not necessarily help, and that not all errors are easy to correct or have to be corrected in the same way.

The correction of all or some errors, either directly or indirectly, has been a crucial subject of debate. Behaviorists advocated the idea that it is important to prevent students from making errors (Schwartz 1993 and Minier, 1998). Bates et al. (1993), Mahili (1994) and EL Koumy (2000) indicated many disadvantages of this approach such as hindering fluent writing. Another approach to error correction is "no correction" which draws on the cognitive view on learning and the whole language approach to language learning (Minier, 1998 and Brown, 2001). Keh (1990) advocated the idea that errors are natural and are supposed to disappear gradually through communication, and therefore, no correction at all is preferred. But Hammerly (1991) assured that this approach sacrifices quality for the sake of quantity. Whitus (1990), Ashwell (2000), El Koumy (2000) and Truscott (2001) stated that correction has to be performed selectively as they found that selective error correction improved the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing. Frodesen (2001), Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Hong (2004) recommended

selective correction for pedagogical reasons among which is the relationship between selective and self-correction.

As a result of the controversy regarding what kind of error correction helps which learner to improve which parts of the writing process, it was indicated that many ESL/EFL writing teachers are often confused about how to help their students self-correct their errors (Keh, 1990; Wood, 1993 and Hong, 2004). Kubota (2001) found that teachers need to be trained on how to help their students make use of error correction for the sake of achieving self-correction. Furneaux et at. (2007) indicated that the main problem with the secondary school teachers' correction techniques is the lack of definite criteria to guide teachers' corrective decisions.

To put it simply, within the foreign language context students are expected to make more errors as a result of insufficient practice. But errors that are recognized by one teacher may be ignored by another. The paper that receives positive comments from one teacher may be criticized by another. One teacher would focus on the form and consider accurate writing as the target of his correction while another would over-emphasize the correction of meaning errors for achieving fluency in his students' writing. Even teachers' positive beliefs on error correction and correction techniques are not well reflected into practice as a result of a lack of training. Additionally, self correction is not planned for in spite of its being the correct and worth-seeking goal of error correction techniques.

Statement of the problem:

The research main problem is the ineffectiveness of the traditional error correction techniques employed by secondary school teachers in helping students improve their writing and self-correct their errors. The problem would be more clarified on the basis of considering the following:

- Foreign language students are more expected to make errors as a result of insufficient practice outside the classroom.
- Counting errors does not consider some important characteristics such as error frequency and error commonality.

- Overall-impression marking devalues writing traits and lessens the probability for students to make use of error correction.
- Comprehensive correction could badly affect students' fluency in writing.
- Traditional error correction techniques are subjective since they are not criteria–based.

The study question:

- What is the effectiveness of the suggested error correction program in improving secondary school teachers' error correction techniques?

The study hypotheses:

1. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the post-analytic rubric.
2. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the post-achievement test.
3. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the post-beliefs scale.
4. There is no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post- mean scores of the experimental group on the analytic rubric.
5. There is no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post- mean scores of the experimental group on the achievement test.
6. There is no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post- mean scores of the experimental group on the beliefs scale.

The study aims:

The present study aims at examining the effectiveness of the suggested error correction program in improving secondary school teachers' error correction techniques. For achieving such a goal, the study starts with the foreign language context of writing errors and error analysis to answer the question of what types of errors to be corrected. Then, the study steps forward to focus on training teachers on how to

correct their students rationally and consistently for achieving the ultimate goal of self-correction by the students.

The study significance:

The main value of the study is represented in improving secondary school teachers' error correction techniques. For more explanation, a number of considerations that would give value and importance to the study would be stated as follows:

- Reviewing the literature on writing error correction and correction approaches and techniques showed that there is no research evidence on how to improve teachers' error correction techniques. The present study responds to this gap and therefore suggested the program.
- Suggesting an authentic classification of error types. The present study classifies errors into errors of form and errors of meaning on the basis of analyzing a sample for students' errors at the secondary stage.
- Providing definite criteria on how to rationally and consistently correct students' writing errors. According to these criteria, errors would not be of equal importance and prioritizing errors would be more facilitated. Correction techniques consider such criteria for preparing students to self-correct their errors.
- The study investigated some factors that may affect the use of correction techniques such as teachers' beliefs and their conceptual knowledge on errors, error correction and correction techniques.
- Training courses vary in terms of goals and contents. As a result of surveying these courses over the past ten years, it was found that there was no training course that had error correction and correction techniques as its main focus. Some of these courses had generally addressed the issue for not more than one or two modules or chapters. These courses were basically limited to differentiating between errors and mistakes, correction codes, and correction strategies (who corrects errors?). The present study suggests a program for improving teachers' errors correction techniques and investigates the effectiveness of the program and its practical value.

The study sample:

A sample of 80 EFL teachers participated in the study. They were randomly selected from a total population of 445 teachers. Subjects of the