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Error Correction. Case Study: Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) Speaking Activities

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Abstract

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In what error correction during the speaking activities in a foreign language is concerned the opinions are divergent. While some specialists claim that the best way is to discuss them separately with the students, others argue saying that all the errors should be corrected on the spot. In this paper we will try to approach this issue by presenting the most important opinions on the matter in contrast with the actual situation – what it really happens in the classroom. After the administration of a set of questionnaires to both teachers and students of Romanian as foreign language we try to discover how errors in spoken language during the teaching and assessing activities are corrected. Finally, we will establish which are the most common, and liked methods of error correction, but also which of those are giving best results in the teaching process.

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1. Introduction

In what error correction in a foreign language is concerned there are known and used various methods. The goal of the present study is to illustrate the most used and appreciated methods of error correction during the speaking activities in Romanian as a foreign language (RFL). During several discussions had with our colleagues, teachers of Romanian and other foreign languages we came to realize that each teacher had his own way of correcting the mistakes during the speaking activities, and even more every method was quite different from the other one. Interesting was also the fact that each person had strong arguments in favour of the method used, and none of the methods could be considered as wrong by the others, if explained. Given the described situation, through our study we wanted to answer a simple but important question, in our opinion: *Is there an ideal way of correcting speaking in RFL?* And the best way of obtaining an answer to this question we considered is by administering questionnaires to the both groups involved in this matter – the teachers and the students.

2. Participants

In order to get a first result, we decided to focus only on our university, taking into consideration the fact that the first doubts appeared exactly there. We sent questionnaires to 12 teachers, with the age between 29 and 70, and to 50 students, with the age ranging from 16 to 32. The teachers were selected taking into consideration the age (we wanted that each age stage to be represented) and the involvement in the teaching activity. It should be kept in mind that our department has only 7 members and several collaborators, so the total number isn't very high compared to the 12 members selected here. So, this is another reason why the number of the participants is so low. Regarding the students involved, we only used our groups, from this academic year, but also from the previous one, students that already are studying in different faculties and who are able to see their goal more clearly. We've had a very heterogeneous group, with different mother tongue languages (L1). We are talking about: Arabic, Albanian, French, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian. And quite homogeneous foreign languages known (L2), also: English, Hebrew, Russian, Italian and Greek. Mainly, the regional languages in their countries, and English, added to everyone. So, it is safe to say that all of them had already had an experience with learning a foreign language, so they could state an opinion on the best method it suits them in error correction.

3. Methodology Outline

We've started our research by looking to the specialists' opinions on this topic and continued by administering questionnaires to both students and teachers of RFL in our university. Following this path we wanted to compare the general recommendations regarding error correction in a foreign language with the actual situation. The main objective was to find out if the methods usually used by the teachers are following the specialists' recommendations and furthermore if these methods are matching with what the students want and feel comfortable with during the classes. The questionnaires used in this study were realized by the authors of the article, containing 2 parts, for the teachers, and 3 parts, for the students. The questions will be presented when discussing the results, while the entire

questionnaires can be seen upon request. Taking into account the limited space for the paper, we've decided not to include them in the article, but to present the most important aspects where it's necessary.

3.1. The general recommendations

It is said that “few things are more discouraging to the production of a foreign language than to be interrupted and corrected (or even to know that someone is hovering beside you ready to interrupt and correct).” (Brown & Yule, 1984, p. 37) Opposite to what the children usually react (or don't, because they don't value so much others' opinions), the adults might pay more attention to this fact. (Burlacu, Platon & Sonea, 2011, p. 42) Agreeing with this statement the obvious question appears: *what do we do with the mistakes during the spoken productions?* Do we let the student talk, without paying attention to his mistakes or, do we interrupt him and help him, correcting the errors? Of course that our first instinct, as teachers and native speakers is to correct what is unnatural to our ear. That is why we tried to find some other specialized opinions on this matter. It seems that all depends on the type of the activity – centred on pronunciation, on grammar, or it's a real-life speaking activity. Harmer claims that in the case of a situation centred on pronunciation, the teacher should interrupt and correct: “When students are repeating sentences, trying to get their pronunciation exactly right, then the teacher will often correct (appropriately) every time there's a problem” (Harmer, 2007, p. 131). The same observation is valid from Scrivener's point of view in what concerns the grammatical structures, too (Scrivener, 2005, p. 160-161). On the other hand, Linse and Bailey (Linse, 2005, pp. 60-61; Bailey, 2005) argue on the fact that not all the errors should be corrected, even though they are pronunciation or grammatical mistakes: “I decide which errors I will focus on. I think about the children's development and any errors they may make because of interference from their native language” (Linse, 2005, p. 61). In the help of this last statement comes Brown and Yule's statement “After years of rigorous attention to pronunciation during the fifties and early sixties many teachers now accept that the aim of achieving native-like pronunciation is not only unattainable but unreasonable. Nowadays the teacher probably tries to achieve the set of phonological contrasts, but does not worry too much about the phonetic detail” (Brown & Yule, 1984, p. 26). We tend to agree with the last statement, even more knowing that there are students with great difficulties in using and mastering Romanian specific sounds that are inexistent in their native languages. For example, if we have an Arabic native speaker learning Romanian he will most certainly have difficulties in recognizing and uttering the differences between the following phonemes: *p-b, t-d, f-v, j-g, a-e-i* and *o-u*. On the other hand, Spanish native speakers will have a problem in pronouncing *s* at the beginning, they will always help themselves in pronunciation by adding an *e*, like in their language and the examples can continue. There was a period when the teachers insisted on discriminating between the pair sounds, using the well-known technique of minimal pairs. “Later writers have criticized this approach as being artificial and lacking in relevance to language learners' needs.” (Brown, 1990, pp. 144-146) This is argued by Gillian Brown in her book *Listening to Spoken Language*, because as the author shows the students didn't learn to use the specific phonemes in text, but the most, in words, which was an artificial and inefficient way of using the sounds. She had showed that if a student not so well prepared wouldn't be able to recognize

and to repeat exactly the words/phrases he was asked to repeat, only demonstrates that the method wasn't necessary useful. (Brown, 1990, pp. 144-146) So, even practicing and correcting many times, for sure even at advance level, C1 or C2 (***, 2001, pp. 21-42), the speakers will have specific errors based on their mother-tongue language. Even Lado affirms that "learners are likely not to hear differences between phonemes if the difference is not a phonemic one" (Lado, 1961, p. 15).

More convergent are the ideas when referring to real-life speaking activities. In those situations all the authors we've seen agree on the fact that the fluency shouldn't be affected by the accuracy (Linse, 2005, p. 61; Harmer, 2007; Brown & Yule, 1984; Scrivener, 2005, pp. 161-161). What is different in all these last views is the way the errors are recommended to be corrected. While Linse suggests reformulation (Linse, 2005, p. 61), Jeremy Harmer offers several different possibilities: reformulation, discussion with the class or separately with the student and even the immediate correction, if this was decided with the students before (Harmer, 2007).

3.2. *The questionnaires administered to teachers*

The teachers' questionnaire had two parts, one referring to teaching and one, to assessment. In the first part there was a question with 6 options (from *a-f*), the choices offered were in fact the correction practices that were presented in the studies we've seen. The question was: *In the case of speaking activities during the class, how do you correct the mistakes that occur (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, word order or other type of mistakes): a. I interrupt and correct immediately; b. I ask the other students to say the right form; c. I write the mistake on the blackboard, I explain and correct it; d. I reformulate immediately the mistaken phrase; e. I note down the mistakes and I discuss them with all the students at the end of the activity; f. I write down the mistakes and I discuss them with the student that made them.* There was also a dotted line where the teachers could have written other methods used.

The first remark we should make is that the teachers chose up to four different ways of correcting spoken productions, some even in contradiction (for example, *a, e*), without giving any explanations. We can easily affirm that the teachers use more than one ways of correction. The preferred methods are presented in *Fig. 1*. So, from looking at the graph we can easily state that the teachers tend to use the easiest technique for correction, the immediate correction, which was also one of the least recommended ones by the specialists. On the other hand it's the feedback offered separately, which wasn't chosen by anybody, because it wasn't considered as a valid technique. The teachers commented on this option as it follows: "usually there isn't enough time to use this method. Anyway, a group discussion seems to be more useful for everyone" or "If there are students that do not accept to be corrected with their colleagues present, then we can use it, but we don't trust is a profitable technique for anyone."

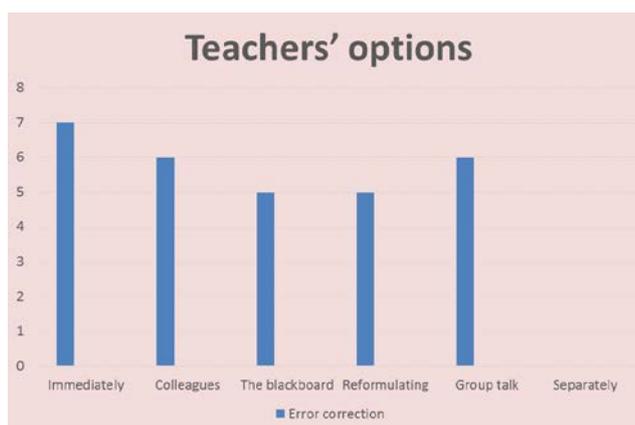


Fig. 1. Teachers' preferred methods in correcting spoken productions

The teachers that chose the first option in spite of the recommendations motivated their choice saying that “experience shows them that there are different types of students that need to be corrected on the spot, otherwise they do not realize they’ve made a mistake.” We agree with the stated idea, there are for sure students that prefer these option, but you might tend to use this method for everyone, situation that will make uncomfortable some of the other students. Besides these teachers, there are others that didn’t wanted to use this method, but “after discussing with their students they started to use it”, due to the fact that this was the right way for those students. We’ve observed a third category, those believing that simple mistakes need short interventions: “being a simple mistake, which doesn’t need explanations, which might be a slip, can be immediately corrected” or “Being communicative activities, I do not believe the errors are so serious, that is why I don’t give a lot of time to correct them, so I correct them on the spot.” So, the contradiction comes between the statements that the errors aren’t so important while the focus is on communication, and the fact that the teacher still interrupts the communication in favour of accuracy, thing that undoes the initial idea. We’ve been able to see in all the answers the tendency to give more importance to the accuracy (especially phonetic and grammatical accuracy) in the expense of the fluency. The teachers tend to interrupt the speech in order to correct a word said incorrectly or a grammatical structure used inappropriately instead of leaving the act of communication taking place. If we want a real-life situation we consider that the right choice is to let the partners do their parts, for sure the interlocutor will ask the speaker to repeat what he didn’t understand or even more, he will correct his partner in speech by reformulating the idea stated before or just resaying it correctly. So, everything might be solved in the end without our intervention. If not, there will always be the other methods we can use.

From the graph we can see that option *b*, the help of the colleagues is on the second place, 6 teachers declared to use it. They justified their options saying that they use it “only when the focus of the activity is the accuracy itself.” or “in the case of a mistake that shouldn’t be happening at one specific level”. Those that chose the option *c*, referred also to the preceding ones. “I write the sentence on the backboard and I try to obtain the right answer from the student that made the mistake, then from the colleagues” or, they say they use it if more students make the same error. On the other hand, if the mistake is not so serious, the teachers say they use reformulation, especially in questions or when it is a word order error. The last type of correction, the discussion at the end, with the group, based on the errors written down during the activity, the teachers say they use it when “there is time” or when “the

same mistakes repeat frequently and explanations are needed”, especially during discussions, debates or arguments. There are teachers that consider this method to be time consuming and also difficult for the teacher. It is true it needs a lot of energy and attention from teacher’s part, but we believe it can be very useful for all the group. Maybe the teacher can choose to focus on a certain type of errors after the activity.

Besides the 6 methods known in the specialized literature and included in the questionnaire, the teachers questioned proposed 2 other ways, some with equivalent in the literature, some not. So, one teacher said that she established a code with the students so that she is able to correct some mistakes (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) on the spot. When she takes the hand to the ear the student knows that there is an error that he tries to correct, and if he isn’t able to, his intervention isn’t stopped. We believe that this technique could be useful in the case of simple errors like a word used or said inadequately, or in the situation of a grammatical structure used incorrectly, because it doesn’t put the student in an uncomfortable situation, but it can’t be used if the message is not well-transmitted or the order of the words in phrase is inadequate. Maybe, it could be useful to set three signs, one for each problem, to give more clues to the student talking and making the self-correction more probable. Another method used by one of the RFL teachers is tongue twisters, in order to fix the pronunciation errors, but also for learning new grammatical structures, exercises recommended also by Linse, to develop fluency. Furthermore, the author suggests real-life examples of tongue twisters, made by the students after some examples (Linse, 2005, p. 60).

In what the evaluation is concerned we could notice that the teachers share a common opinion: “we do not interrupt and correct during assessment”. However, two out of the twelve subjects use to note down the errors during assessment and discuss them with the students, without naming the ones that did the mistakes. Not forgetting that the purpose of our activity is teaching the students a foreign language, we don’t think that discussing the errors after the exams is a wrong choice, but helpful for the students, even though many errors might have been made due to the pressure of the exam. So, maybe in the case that the teacher from the group is also examining/evaluating his own students he will be able to keep in mind only the important mistakes or situations in which the message wasn’t transmitted, and omitting to discuss the errors that the student wouldn’t make in a stress-free situation.

3.3. The questionnaires administered to students

A very similar questionnaire was given to the students, too. The first question intended to verify if the answers given by the teachers matched with the ones given by the students. So, they were asked to say how the teachers correct the mistakes made during speaking activities. The same options the teachers had were given to them, too, and the answers are presented below. We should keep in mind that some of the students chose two options, confirming the idea stated in subsection 3.2 that the teachers use more than one method for correction. Out of the 50 students 35 said that the teacher corrects the mistakes immediately, while 15 of them claimed that the teacher interrupts, but asks for the right form from the students. The rest of 20 students said that the correcting of the mistakes takes place after finishing the sentence/intervention, by writing the answer on the blackboard. None of the students said that the teacher discusses at the end of the activity with the group or separately the errors occurred

during that activity. If we go back to the answers given by the teachers it is easy to notice that there are some inconsistencies between the two groups at the answers unregistered by the students. Even though the first three options coincide, that is correction occurring immediately, with the help of the colleagues and by writing the right form on the blackboard, none of the students chose the options referring to the teacher reformulating the sentence or the one referring to the group discussion at the end of the class. We could notice that 5, respectively, 6 teachers claimed to use that method of error correction. So, we could conclude saying that this inconsistency might be happening due to the fact that the students do not realize the error correction which could show that the method isn't in fact working, if they do not see that they are corrected, they won't change the way they use the language.

With the second question given to the students we've tried to find out how they are feeling while different types of error correction happen. So, the question was: *How do you feel when: a. the teacher interrupts you and corrects what you were saying?, b. the teacher writes the error you made on the blackboard and explains it for all your colleagues?, c. the teacher explains why is something wrong without saying who did the mistake?, d. the teacher explains separately what you said wrong?*

At the first option *a*, 44 of the students said that they feel good, don't have a problem being interrupted, even more they think that "in this way they will talk better" against what the studies say on the immediate error correction (*see above, section 3.1*). This difference may result from the fact that our students are exclusively adults, really motivated to learn and to use the language as efficiently as possible. And even working with the adults, there were 6 students confessing that they do not feel comfortable if they are corrected and their colleagues can see that. This situation might result from the fact that the adults are also very competitive, so they do not want the others see them *mistaking*. At the second option *b*, 36 of the students said that they are interested in finding what they did wrong, so the way they find out it's not a problem. There were also a number of 10 students that said *they feel ashamed and/or bad* when this happens. This might have the same explanation as the situation presented before. They are competitive, they don't feel comfortable knowing that others see them doing something wrong. Four of the students didn't write anything at this question. At the third option *c*, 42 students consider is a good way of error correction and that they feel comfortable, have more self-confidence, while 4 think is necessary for the teacher to say who did the mistake, because they might not know it is about them. Again, four students didn't give an answer. In what concerns the last option *d*, 38 say that they feel more confident if the teacher talks directly to them, because they are more motivated and they understand quicker if they are alone. Only 7 of them believe it's not a good way of error correction, because they trust that other students make the same mistakes and the explanations can be useful for the others, too. Again, five students didn't answer. It is a bit strange this last answer taking into account the fact that the students stated that there isn't happening that the error correction to be given separately, fact confirmed by the teachers' answers. This inconsistency can result from the fact that the students might have said what they think they would feel in this case, not what really happens.

The last question directed to the students was: *If you were to choose, while speaking how would you like to be corrected?* In Fig. 2 we are able to see their choices. It is easily to observe that the first option coincides with the practice confessed by the teachers that is immediate error correction, and in

contradiction with what the specialists recommended. The other choices, at distance from the first one, are: at the end, with the colleagues, explanations on the blackboard and 2 students chose separately.

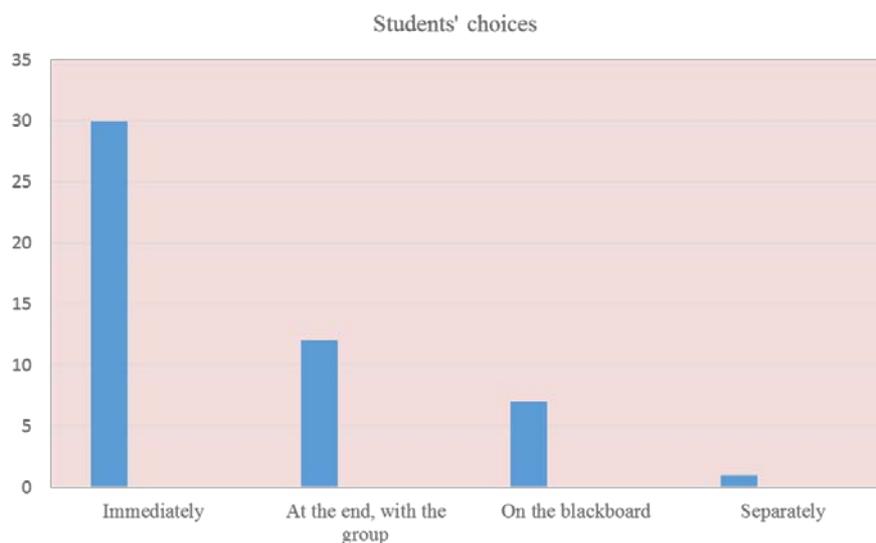


Fig. 2. Students' choices regarding error correction in spoken productions

4. Discussions

Even though this subject was approached in several studies in RFL, until this point we couldn't find a practical analysis on this matter, only a description of the recommended error correction methods by the specialists. By our study we think we confirm these recommendations and furthermore we bring the students' point of view on this subject compared to the teachers' one. A general observation we can draw from our study regarding the questioned teachers is the fact that they are aware of what the current theories are recommending. So, one teachers says: "we shouldn't intervene immediately because if we have an emotional student there is a big chance that he will stop and will not find the courage to continue. That is why it is preferable to write down the errors and explain what isn't correct after his intervention is finished." Another one declares: "it isn't recommended to correct immediately the mistakes, because we'll make the student not to speak anymore". And even knowing these implications, they are still using more other ways of correction, as described in section 3.2, especially the least recommended technique, the immediate correction. On the other hand, we were able to see that many of the students questioned don't have a problem with this method, even more they find it useful. But we should keep in mind that the responses were different, which shows us that the teachers' intuition might have been right when using various error correction techniques in class. From the results obtained we can say that in order to have better results during the speaking activities the teachers should customize the method they use depending on the student in question. In our help comes Harmer with a very interesting and efficient idea, from our point of view. He suggests that "perhaps the best way of correcting errors in speaking activities appropriately is to talk to students about it. You can ask them how and when they would prefer to be corrected; you can explain how you intend to correct during these stages, and show them how different activities may mean different correction behaviour on your part." (Harmer, 2007))

5. Limitations and Further Research

From our analysis, we were able to see that the three opinions taken into discussion in this study come and don't come so much together. In what concerns the preferred method in error correction of spoken productions, both the teachers and the students chose the immediate correction, which was confusing taking into account the fact that the suggested one is the correction after the spoken intervention, which was the second choice for both groups. The reason behind this option could be the fact that all our subjects were adults, much more motivated. Another conclusion we can draw from here is the fact that neither of the choice was unanimous, in any case there were subjects opposing to one method or the other. This might suggest we need to talk to all the students in order to find the right error correction method suitable for everyone, because learning a new language needs cosines.

We realize that the results of this study, for the moment are representative only for our university's situation, due to the small number of our subjects and cannot be considered as illustrative for RFL in general. In order to confirm our findings and to make suggestions on the efficiency of one method or the other a larger number of subjects is needed, from different universities.

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