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**ERROR CORECTION AND THE ABILITY TO USE THE  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITHOUT MISTAKES**

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*Abstract*

The article discusses the correlation of the ability of a human being who learns a foreign language to find and to correct the error, and, simultaneously, of the ability to create his / her own texts in the given foreign language in which no errors appear. The objective of the text is to present a kind of argument with the opinion claiming that foreign languages can be taught by everyone who has acquired them without being properly trained pedagogically and methodologically (for example by people who have acquired the language merely through a stay in the environment in which that language is spoken).

The research examples taken from literature and our own practice prove that an excellent knowledge of the foreign language does not in itself guarantee, that the person with such a high level of the knowledge is able to identify and correct errors made in other people's performances. Furthermore, it is not guaranteed that such a person is able to explain the errors and to give guidelines how to correct them and how to avoid them in future performances. Working with errors is an issue which should not be neglected by institutions training future teachers of foreign languages.

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**Keywords:** Majoring in foreign language teaching, foreign language learning, correction of errors, correctors.



## 1. Introduction

Correction of errors is one of the most important tasks which has been imposed on teachers of foreign languages for centuries. Teachers spend a substantial time period of their professional career and also of their private life on correcting activities. The procedure of error corrections is considered by teachers as a kind of unpopular, time demanding and burdensome work. However, teachers have to cope with this activity since it is needed and unavoidable, and it cannot be excluded from the teaching process. (Ivo, 1982: 39).

### 1.1. Detection of errors

An error is most frequently defined as a deviation from a linguistic norm. There is no absolute and official scale of the classification of errors. All the existing scales are relative and depending on specific pedagogical, psychological and teaching conditions. Specific decisions on both the choice of mistakes which are to be corrected and the ways of corrections are made by teachers. A mistake is anything which the teacher considers as incorrect, and correction of mistakes is a subjective issue influenced by numerous internal and external factors, as for example the momentary disposition of the teacher, his/her experience and professional knowledge, time pressure and peer pressure, and, in case of written texts, also the form and readability of the text which is to be corrected.

## 2. Problem Statement

Error corrections which are made by teachers are usually and generally considered by learners as correct and even perfect, despite the following varied cases appearing in reality: an error is found and correctly corrected; an error is found but it is not corrected or it is wrongly corrected; an error is not found (it is considered as a correct form); a correct form is identified as an error and it is replaced with another correct form; a correct form is identified as an error and it is replaced with an incorrect form.

### 2.1. Correction of errors

The issue of objectivity and reliability of corrections made by correctors has been researched by e.g. Kuehn, Eckes (2003), Birkel & Birkel (2002), Korcakova (2002, 2003), Ondrakova (2015, 2016), Ondrakova and Siruckova (2015) and others. The results of the mentioned authors' research were summarised by Ondrakova (2016)<sup>1</sup>. It is obvious that the skill of error corrections has to be trained and practically rehearsed during pre-gradual studies already. If the skill of error corrections is not acquired and practised during the pre-gradual studies of teaching, then the graduates are not well-prepared for their teaching career.

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<sup>1</sup> Errors as a Part of Teaching of Foreign Languages. In: *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EpSBS*. Rhodes-Greek: Future Academy, 2016, s. 788 - 797)

## 2.2. Projects on error corrections

During her study stay at the University in Jena, the author of this paper got an access to a photocopy of the text whose author she has not managed to reveal. The supposed author of the text accessed in Jena, Kuehn (?), described an experiment which was realized at the University in Leipzig in the late 1980s. Teachers of German who came from non-German speaking countries were asked to correct a text written in German. The text contained 158 lexical units, and 20 errors appeared there. The successfulness of the tested persons correcting the errors was monitored. Out of the 276 persons tested, not a single one was able to find and correct all the incorrect forms. For a more detailed description of this experiment see Ondrakova's text presented at ICEEPSY in 2016 (Ondrakova, 2016).

## 3. Research Questions

- Is there a correlation of the ability to use a foreign language and the ability to correct mistakes?
- Does the teacher's excellent knowledge of the foreign language really guarantee that s/he excellently corrects errors in her/his pupils' performances?

The author of this paper became inspired by the above mentioned research, and in 2016 she started a long-term project. The purpose of this project is to analyse performances given by students majoring in teaching German. The analysis covers all the period of their pre-gradual studies at the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic).

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The research carried out in our institution has revealed that in the process of foreign language teaching errors are made not only by learners but also by their teachers. This fact is completely legitimate – also teachers (who constantly learn the target foreign language) have a right to make errors in their performances. However, only absolutely correct performances are expected from teachers. This issue should be reflected in the curricula of institutions training future teachers of foreign languages – within methodological courses, undergraduate teachers should be specially trained in error correcting. (Ondrakova, 2016)

## 5. Research Methods

The pilot study was carried out on students of the first year of the follow-up master degree's studies of teaching German. The students were tested in the following way: Part A – a written translation from Czech into German (10 isolated sentences); Part B – correction of a German continuous text of the length of 9 lines. The aim was to find out how many mistakes and which kinds of mistakes the students made in the translations (part A) and how many incorrect forms they were able to find in a text written by somebody else (part B). The correlation was our main interest – we wanted to know whether a perfect

performance in the translation part was in correlation with a perfect identification of the mistakes made in a written performance given by another person.

All the respondents involved in the pilot study had successfully finished their bachelor degree's studies. According to the Bologna Declaration, they were thus fully qualified for teaching German at upper-primary school. However, it is important to mention that no methodological and no teaching practice were included in the curricula of their previous bachelor degree's studies.

The pilot study was carried out during the first week of the winter term 2016. Sixteen students were tested, that means all the students enrolled in the first year of the follow-up master degree's studies of teaching German. Only 10 students completed both the parts of the test. The remaining 6 students completed only one part because they were not able to participate in both the parts due to time conflicts in their schedules. (All the students of the above given college who are enrolled in the specialization of teaching at upper-primary schools have to major in two subjects. The choice of these subjects is not limited, combinations of any two subjects are allowed. This freedom, however, results in problems with creating timetables. If two courses are given at the same time, the 50% participation is obligatory for students. The situation is moreover complicated by the fact that the courses in one subject are sometimes held in the building which is different from that one in which the courses in the other subject are held. Then the students can appear later for a course or leave a course earlier.) |

## 6. Findings

|Table 01 gives a survey of the results of the pilot study. The first column indicates (with letters) the persons tested, the second column gives their results reached in Part A. The number of mistakes made by these tested persons in their translations from Czech to German is given in the second column. The other three columns illustrate the results in Part B (corrections of mistakes appearing in an unknown text written in German). Column No. 3 gives the number of the correctly identified and correctly corrected mistakes. The fourth column gives the number of mistakes which were not identified by that particular person, the fifth column gives the number of incorrectly performed corrections. This last column summarizes all the corrections which were not correct: a correct form replaced with an incorrect one, an incorrect form replaced with another incorrect one and a correct form replaced with another correct one.

**Table 01.** Results of the pilot study into the field of translation and error correction

Tested person	Translation - number of mistakes	Correctly corrected mistakes	Mistakes left as non-corrected	Incorrectly corrected mistakes
A	2	7	12	3
B	3	8	10	4
C	5	7	12	3
D	6	3	17	1
E	8	4	15	6
F	9	4	16	0
G	10	3	16	4

H	12	5	12	5
I	14	5	12	11
J	14	6	14	6

The performances given by the persons tested in Part A of the pilot study are quite varied. The best performer made 2 errors, the worst one made 14 errors. The number of errors which could be made in this part was not limited; it depended on the linguistic knowledge and abilities of each of the tested persons. The respondents made all together 83 mistakes in total, which means that the average was 8.3 mistakes per person. The performances of five persons (F– J) were below the average mentioned (see Table 01).

To give a better illustration of these situations, the last column is presented independently, these three above mentioned possibilities are presented separately.

- Tested person A: 2 correct forms incorrectly corrected, 1 incorrect form incorrectly corrected
- Tested person B: 1 correct form incorrectly corrected, 2 incorrect forms incorrectly corrected, 1 correct form replaced with another correct form
- Tested person C: 2 correct forms incorrectly corrected, 1 incorrect form incorrectly corrected,
- Tested person D: 1 correct form replaced with another correct form
- Tested person E: 1 correct form incorrectly corrected, 1 incorrect form incorrectly corrected, 4 correct forms replaced with other correct forms
- Tested person F: no incorrectly corrected mistakes
- Tested person G: 3 correct forms incorrectly corrected, 1 incorrect form incorrectly corrected,
- Tested person H: 2 correct forms incorrectly corrected, 3 incorrect forms incorrectly corrected,
- Tested person I: 8 correct forms incorrectly corrected, 3 incorrect forms incorrectly corrected,
- Tested person J: 6 correct forms incorrectly corrected

The continuous text presented in Part B of our study included 20 errors, these errors had been artificially created. If all these errors had been revealed and correctly corrected by our respondents, then these 10 persons tested would have correctly identified and correctly corrected 200 errors. However, none of the respondents identified and correctly corrected all the mistakes in the text. The person labelled as J, whose performance in the translation part was one of the weakest, surprisingly identified 6 mistakes, which was the fourth best result in the tested group. Out of the total number of 200 errors (10 tests, there were 20 errors in each), only 52 of them, i.e. 26 % out of the total number, were correctly corrected by our respondents.

To obtain comparable results, we drew inspiration from the research into the sphere of error correction carried out at the University in Leipzig (see above). For the further assessment of our respondents, Kuehn's procedure was applied, and the obtained data were transferred into numeric values: Correctly made corrections were awarded with 2 points; in case of incorrect corrections, 2 points were subtracted. If a correct form was substituted by another correct form, then the subtraction of 1 point was applied.

**Table 02.** Assessment of the mistake corrections according to Kuehn’s criteria

<b>Tested person</b>	<b>Correctly corrected mistakes</b>	<b>Mistakes left as non-corrected</b>	<b>Incorrectly corrected mistakes</b>	<b>Total number of points</b>
A	14	-24	-6	-16
B	16	-20	-7	-11
C	14	-24	-6	-16
D	6	-34	-1	-29
E	8	-30	-8	-30
F	8	-32	0	-24
G	6	-32	-8	-34
H	10	-24	-10	-24
I	10	-24	-22	-36
J	12	-28	-12	-28

From the data presented in Table 02 it is obvious that none of the respondents reached a positive score. All the results were in the negative range. Our hypothesis was confirmed: good language knowledge and language abilities do not guarantee a good quality of mistake corrections. Simultaneously it was confirmed that graduates with a bachelor’s degree are still not sufficiently trained and prepared for their teaching career at schools.

In the end, the respondents were ranked according to their results in the individual parts of the test. Their performances were scored (the best performance received 10 points, the worst one received 1 point; in case of equal results, the respondents reached the same placement and the points were equal to the average resulted from those shared places).

The research examples taken from literature and our own practice prove that the correctors’ work is really demanding. Similarly to other spheres where a human being plays a decisive role, incorrect performances are given also in the work of correctors. However, the point is that the quality of their work can have more or less fatal impact on and consequences for the tested persons. The successful test results often guarantee e.g. a possibility of studying at university (in the home country or abroad), a possibility to get an attractive job or to get a promotion or a better paid position at work. Therefore, it is essential for tested people to be corrected in the as precise and as objective way as possible. The correcting persons should ideally make no errors in their work at all. They should apply the same criteria and they should be equally demanding when assessing the performances of the tested persons. Correcting of tests is one of the most usual and frequent activities realized by foreign language teachers. Therefore, it is highly important to sufficiently train pre-service teachers in working with errors. Curricula of pre-gradual studies held at universities have to include systematic practice in identification, interpretation, and correction of errors because these activities are expected and demanded from teachers. This kind of practice should not appear merely marginally in the methodological courses. It should be included in all the spheres of courses in foreign language teaching.

**Table 03.** Scores reached in both the parts of the test and the total results

Tested person	Part A Result	Part A scores	Part B Result	Part B scores	A + B scores in total	Total result
A	1	10	2-3	8.5	18.5	2
B	2	9	1	10	19	1
C	3	8	2-3	8.5	16.5	3
D	4	7	7	4	11	5
E	5	6	8	3	9	7
F	6	5	4-5	6.5	11.5	4
G	7	4	9	2	6	9
H	8	3	4-5	6.5	9.5	6
I	9-10	1.5	10	1	2.5	10
J	9-10	1.5	6	5	6.5	8

Table 03 shows that an imperfect identification and correction of mistakes in the part B has a substantial impact on the assessment of the persons tested, and that the performances given in the part A are not balanced with the performances given in the part B.

## 7. Conclusion

The research into the issue of error corrections within the framework of foreign language teaching is still being carried out at the Department of German Language and Literature. New data and new findings are being obtained, they are being further analysed. At the time being, the results of the entrance tests (the tests completed by applicants for studying German language in the first year of the bachelor degree's study program with specialization in philology) are being processed. Another sphere of interest is monitoring of the study progress of individual students within the framework of the three-term-long course in German morphology (the students are tested at the beginning of their first term, then these test results are compared with those reached at the end of the course in the given subject, i.e. at the end of the third term). Probable accumulations of the most frequent errors are monitored through factor analysis; the considerations are then made how and when to include the problematic phenomena into the teaching process. The results of the analysis are used also for reconsiderations of the syllabi – the problematic phenomena in which the last year's students make errors most frequently, are then repeatedly included in the earlier courses and are repeatedly and thoroughly practised.

The level of the knowledge of and skills in German language of the students coming to universities has decreased in recent years. This situation is caused also by some incompetent decisions made by educational authorities, including the Ministry of Education (e.g. the decision to teach merely one foreign language at Czech primary schools; this decision is not applicable any more). German language is now in the position of the second foreign language. The first foreign language – English – has an impact on the learners' relation to other languages studied. A team of experts chaired by V. Tauchmanova was established at the above mentioned teacher training college of the University of Hradec Kralove in 2016. The main interest is aimed at potential ways of using the already acquired knowledge of English when studying other foreign languages. This research focuses mainly on pre-service teachers of German and

other second foreign languages taught at Czech schools because, as Tauchmanova (2016) says: “Foreign language teachers should be able to anticipate difficulties resulting from the negative impacts, they should be also able to use potentials of positive transfers. Then a more effective teaching – learning process can be expected. “

Another research team focusing on mapping new possibilities in foreign language teaching has been formed at the Faculty. This team is chaired by P. Besedova and focuses on the impact of music on learning of foreign languages. The team consists of experts from numerous departments of the above mentioned University, and experts from the University Hospital of Hradec Kralove and the Faculty of Medicine of Charles University in Hradec Kralove. Clinical studies and preparation procedures are being carried out at the time being. (Besedova, 2016) |

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