

Teachers' Attitude Towards Errors

Adéla Antlová^a, Štefan Chudý^b, Danping Peng^c

* Corresponding author: Adéla Antlová, adela.antlova01@upol.cz

^aAdéla Antlová, Žižkovo nám. 5, Olomouc, 77140, the Czech Republic, adela.antlova01@upol.cz

^bŠtefan, Chudý, Žižkovo nám. 5, Olomouc, 77140, the Czech Republic, stefan.chudy@upol.cz

^cDanping Peng, Žižkovo nám. 5, Olomouc, 77140, the Czech Republic, peng.danping2013@gmail.com

Abstract

Error-making becomes a topic studied from different points of view through different fields. This study aims to focus on teachers' attitude towards errors-making especially, it is to investigate whether there is a difference in attitude of teachers to their own errors if they are committed in front of their learners, in front of their colleagues, or on their own. The second aim of this study is to reveal whether there is a difference in attitude of teachers to their own errors, to errors of their learners and to errors in general. Many studies dealing with errors in school environment start from investigating teachers' attitude to errors. Normally, they treat errors as if they were all the same however, there might be a great difference if they occur in different context and this is what this study should prove.

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1. Introduction

According to a constructivist approach, school environment should bring plenty of opportunities triggering the conflict between learners' conceptions and new information coming from the outside so that it enables learners to learn naturally. Nevertheless, school after its establishment took an opposite direction and the fact that learner's conceptions differ from what was taught leaves in all who are involved somehow in the process of teaching and learning mostly negative connotation, which is simultaneously transmitted to the term error. As a result of this, learners try to avoid making errors and thus, instead of taking any trace of risk, they prefer safe choices. If we creatively try new ways, on the way to perfection, the probability that we make errors increases. But this way of learning is fruitful and often promoted by numerous authors (e.g. Robinson, 2015).

Every educator must teach the young that on the way to perfection we have to overcome difficulties which sometimes result in errors. At the same time, every human performance could be done better and every piece of human knowledge might be broadened. In this view, errors and imperfections should be regarded a temporary state which needs to be overcome, not obeyed.

To commit error is not the end of the learning process, it continues and that is why some authors see errors as learning opportunities (compare Borasi, 1996; Heinze, & Reiss, 2007). Despite the lack of empirical evidence available to prove that favourable error climate (Steuer, 2014) or error-tolerant classroom culture (Rach et al., 2012) develops in learners the competence to cognitively process errors or improve their learning outcomes, Steuer (2015) proved there is a little correlation between error climate and achievement on student and classroom level, especially the aspect of analysing errors in the learning process was proved an important element affecting achievement. Moreover, the positive effect on the affective level was acceptably proved (Rach et al., 2012; Tulis, 2013). Teachers' attitude towards errors which is mirrored in their conduct in class is an important step towards learners' positive attitude to errors (Tulis, 2013, pp. 56, 65).

Besides, Cyr (2015) found that learning through certain type of mistakes is more effective than being told directly, which was proved for both, the young and the older learners.

In our view, the study of teachers' attitude to errors and the class error climate is the foundation for every research concerning errors as learning opportunities. Therefore, proper research tools must be invented to measure both. In our study we focus on the first of the two - teachers' attitude to errors.

2. Terminology and problem statement

Before we approach further in our research, it is necessary to make clear what we understand by basic terms we use.

The term attitude is very close to term value. In both cases we describe the relationship between a person and an object. In this case the object is an error. For every person an attitude to some object is unique as it contains the context in which this relationship develops (compare Brožík, 2004). Therefore, the attitude to error is unique for every person. We can say, attitude is what some object means for a certain person or what value it has for him or her. Even though, sometimes our attitude might not be recognized and sometimes the person might hide true feelings.

The term error is crucial in our study. According to the constructivist view, every person creates a unique meaning for this word as every person is unique himself or herself. Therefore, what one person considers an error another might not perceive in the same way. We let every person participating in our research keep their notion of error, yet some generalisation must be made. In our attempt to generalize various definitions of errors we come to definition that error is a deviation from norm and/or from what is expected (either by actor or by other people).

In school environment we encounter all types of errors which are, according to Reason's (1995) division: slips, lapses and mistakes¹ and all of these errors can be committed by teachers in front of their learners, in front of their colleagues, or on their own. This gives us a wide range of unlike

¹ What Reason calls mistakes, Bauer (2008) more appropriately calls knowledge- and rule- based errors.

situations to which teachers might not react in the same way. In current studies, researchers do not distinguish between these situations, which we consider insufficient. Besides the errors teachers make, there are also errors learners make and errors in general to which teachers adopt certain attitude as well.

It is our intention to prove there is or is not the difference in teachers' attitude to errors according to the source of the error. We expect that the attitude to errors generally will be reflected in the attitude to errors teachers make and/or attitude to errors learners make as it is superordinate to the other two and it affects them. If the difference among the attitudes is proved, researchers must consider the results of this study when constructing research tools measuring teachers' attitude to errors. Next expectation is that teachers are more tolerant to their own errors and less tolerant to errors of their learners. Our expectations need to be proved, though.

3. Research questions

The intention of this study is to give answers to these questions:

Is there a difference in attitude of teachers to their own errors if it is committed in front of their learners, in front of their colleagues, or on their own?

Is there a difference in attitude of teachers to their own errors, to errors of their learners and to errors in general?

4. Purpose of the study

Errors are investigated in different work environments. School environment is special, though, in one aspect. Errors teachers make occur in very different contexts and it is not clear whether we can treat them in questionnaires as if they were components of a unit called error. In our study we separated errors into three groups according to who is the maker of the error. Further, the errors committed by a teacher are divided into three groups according to the presence of a witness of the error. We consider it necessary to state whether there is a difference between teachers' attitude to errors they make in front of their colleagues, in front of learners and when they find them out on their own. Present research does not pay enough attention to this.

5. Research methods

The study uses qualitative research methodology. Its purpose is to enable deepen the understanding of teachers' attitude to different kinds of errors. It distinguishes between different types of errors and it examines the attitude through its three components. Rather than large number of respondents it studies small number of respondents' profoundly. They are asked to answer the questions in detail so that the amount of data is sufficient. For gathering data a qualitatively constructed questionnaire is used so that respondents can feel higher degree of anonymity. Still they will have a chance to check if they understood all items well as they are asked to make clear any uncertainties when questionnaires are gathered.

The attitude of teachers to their own errors, their learners' errors and to errors in general will be measured by questionnaire consisting of three parts (attitude to their own errors, their learners' errors

and to errors in general), each part investigating the three components of attitudes. These components are: cognitive component expressing our opinion about errors, affective component expressing the degree of our sympathy or antipathy to errors and behavioural component which is mirrored in behaviour following after we commit errors (components of attitudes e.g. Čáp, Mareš, 2007). In comparison, Rokeach (1973), uses the same division for values, which underpins the proximity of these terms. This design contributes to the triangulation of the research tool (Hendl, 2005), as all components of attitude should correlate.

All items in the questionnaire are open ended questions encouraging respondents to reflect on the situations in which they made an error or encountered an error. The items in the questionnaire are constructed very plain so that they do not lead to a specific response. Respondents are asked to think about typical, common situations rather than to unusual situations.

Three items relate to behavioural component of attitude, three items concern affective and three a cognitive component. Individual items related to affective and behavioural and cognitive component differ according to who was present when an error was committed. Three items concern teachers' attitude to errors of their learners and three items to errors generally. Both sets are divided to affective, cognitive and behavioural component of attitude.

The similarities and differences in attitude of teachers to their own errors committed on their own, in front of their learners and in front of their colleagues will be studied. Besides, their attitude to errors of their learners and of errors in general will be studied in order to reveal any similarities and differences. Division into three components enable validate the tool by triangulation.

6. Conclusions

If the results of our study prove that there is a difference in the attitude of teachers to errors when they commit it in front of their learners, in front of their colleagues and on their own, future research tools will have to count with this difference. Items in questionnaires will have to be constructed in such a way that it is clear, whether there is a victim of teacher's error making or not.

If the difference in attitude of teachers to their own errors, errors of their learners and errors in general is proved, future research tools should make distinction between them and not treat them as if they were automatically the same.

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