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**ERRORS THROUGH THE EYES OF STUDENTS MAJORING  
IN TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

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*Abstract*

Errors appear in any learning process. Quite a specific position is taken by students majoring in foreign language teaching. Since they themselves learn a foreign language, they are justified to make mistakes. Simultaneously, as future teachers, they should not make errors because their language performances will become models for their learners. Students majoring in teaching foreign languages know and understand the fact that frequent corrections of wrong performances make the real communication difficult. However, they also know that errors will become fixed and they will negatively influence the further development of the learners' language competences if they are not corrected.

The paper presents students' opinions on error corrections in the process of foreign language teaching. These opinions reflect the students' theoretical knowledge acquired during their courses in methodology, and their views on corrections of their own mistakes and mistakes made by their classmates and also by their teachers. The data were obtained within the framework of the specific research project realized in 2017, and they were compared with the results of the research carried out by Gnutzmann & Kiffe in 1993. The main purpose of these comparisons was to evaluate how errors were tolerated in the past and how they are tolerated at present.

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**Keywords:** Foreign language teaching, error, mistake, correction, pre-service teacher.



## 1. Introduction

In the academic year 2016/2017, the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove launched a research project whose aim was to learn about reactions of students to their own errors and also to errors made by their teachers in the process of foreign language teaching. The project was inspired by similar kinds of research which were carried out in Germany (Kleppin, 1989; Gnutzmann and Kiffe, 1993) and which were presented in literature. The level of three kinds of tolerance for errors was researched into – the respondents' tolerance for their own errors, and also the tolerance for errors made by their classmates and by their teachers. The research carried out at the University of Hradec Kralove included also questions on the most convenient time of corrections of spoken performances, on persons who are involved in corrections, on the feelings about mistakes made by teachers, etc.

The analysis of errors has been carried out at the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove since 1990. The errors have been analysed from various angles, and several kinds of extensive research have been realized. The analysis of learners' errors is carried out simultaneously with the analysis of the correctors' work. The tests completed by learners are corrected by competent persons (teachers of German). However, there have been quite repetitive cases of wrong corrections (an incorrect form was ignored and not corrected, a correct form was replaced with another correct form, sometimes a correct form was even replaced with an incorrect form). Therefore, the issue of ways of working with errors has become the centre of our further research. The following examples taken from the real error correction practice can be taken as a kind of evidence that this issue deserves an increased attention.

### 1.1. Research sample

The research into students' opinions was being carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove in May 2017; 154 students in total participated in it. Nearly one half of the respondents (47.4 %) were finishing the first year of their university studies at the time of the research. The students finishing their third year of university studies were also quite strongly represented (19.5 %).

68.18% of the total number of the respondents were students majoring in teaching, 14.29% of the respondents majored in philology (foreign languages in tourism), 17.5% majored in other branches than teaching or philology. 62 respondents majored in one foreign language, 35 respondents majored in two foreign languages, the others did not major in any foreign language. All the respondents had had experience with learning foreign languages because they had started learning at least one foreign language already at primary school. The age range of the respondents was from 18 to 26, the average age of the respondents was 22. 132 female beings (85.71 %) and 22 male beings (14.29 %) participated in the research. Their mother tongue was Czech (96.10 %), Russian (1.95 %) and German, Slovak, Ukrainian (0.65 % in total).

The students involved in the research had learnt English (in 152 cases), German (100 persons), Russian (72 persons), French (45 persons) and Spanish (23 persons). When evaluating the level of the knowledge of English, 62 % of the respondents considered themselves as advanced, 27 % of the

respondents considered themselves as intermediate, 9.7% as beginners and 1.3 % of the respondents had not learnt English. The level of their knowledge of German was evaluated as advanced by 32% of the respondents, as intermediate by 16.23 % of the respondents. 16.88% of the respondents considered themselves as beginners in German, 35 % of the respondents had not learnt German at all. Only 15 % of the total number of the respondents had learnt more than one foreign language, the remaining 85% of the respondents claimed that they had not learnt another foreign language. Approximately 10 % of the respondents had been taught foreign languages by native speakers, 90 % of them had not had such teaching and learning experience. |

## **2. Problem Statement**

|Since the process of learning languages is not any exceptional one, smaller and bigger mistakes appear within its framework as well. It can be said that errors are a legitimate part of the learning process. The causes of errors are varied and a lot of different factors are involved in them. During the process of error analyses, it is possible for educators to become aware of probable sources of the errors, and then focus on them with the intention to prevent them. Errors analyses presented in literature usually focus on wrong performances given by learners. Only exceptionally do they refer to wrong performances given by their teachers, who are the persons supposed to correct their learners' mistakes (see e.g. Kuehn, Birkel & Birkel (2002), Ecke (2003), Ondrakova (2008, 2015, 2016), Ondrakova & Siruckova (2015).|

## **3. Research Questions**

|Three basic questions were asked in our research:

- At which moment to correct errors in spoken performances?
- Who is supposed to correct errors in spoken performances?
- What opinions on errors do students have?|

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

|The main purpose of our project was to reveal the ways in which students majoring in teaching foreign languages react to corrections of the errors in their oral performances, and which correcting procedures these students consider as the best ones. We wanted to know how the students apply their theoretical knowledge gained during their methodological courses to specific situations in which their own errors are being corrected. Furthermore, the results of the research carried out by Gnutzmann and Kiffe in 1993 were compared with the results of our research done in 2017. The purpose of these comparisons was to compare the level of students' tolerance for errors in spoken performances given by their teachers. |

## **5. Research Methods**

|The quantitative method was applied for processing of the questionnaires. The questionnaire which was distributed included 11 multiple-choice questions and other 5 open questions. The respondents also

expressed their opinions on five statements made by Gnutzmann and Kiffe, and they were asked to add their further potential comments on the issue of working with errors. |

## **6. Findings**

|Our research has resulted in the following findings:

### **6.1. At which moment to correct errors in spoken performances?**

When asked about the issues of spoken performances, the respondents were choosing from the answers offered to them. The first question was: “At which moment do you want to be corrected when giving an incorrect spoken performance?” There were actually two prevailing opinions – 51.3 % of the respondents do not want to be corrected until the very end of their spoken performance; 45.45 % of the respondents want to be corrected immediately when they make a mistake. 3.25 % of the respondents do not want to be corrected at all. Most of the respondents who want to be corrected ask for corrections in case of every medium mistake (55.19 %), nearly one third of the respondents (27.7 %) want to be corrected even if making any smallest mistake. Only 17.53 % of the respondents want to be corrected only if they make errors which make understanding impossible. A conclusion can be made that even if the current methodological tendencies rather suppress the importance of errors in oral performances (“because the most important thing is to speak“), students realize how important the feedback given to their performances actually is. Corrections of the mistakes are a kind of the feedback which supports the learner’s development.

Another question addressed to the respondents was: “In which cases should the errors be always corrected?” The format of the multiple-choice was applied again. The below given answers were offered to the respondents, who could choose more options, which brought the following results:

- if that particular mistake made the understanding impossible (87.66 %)
- if a grammar mistake was made, e.g. using an incorrect word form / preposition / word order (85.71 %)
- if an unsuitable expression or phrase was used in the given context (72.73 %)
- if the pronunciation was incorrect (62.99 %)

### **6.2. Who is supposed to correct errors in spoken performances?**

A major part of the respondents (62 %) wish to be corrected by the teacher in the explicit way, i.e. the teacher should directly indicate the mistake and correct it. The rest of the respondents prefer being corrected implicitly – the teacher refers to the mistake indirectly, i.e. s/he presents the originally incorrect unit in the correct way.

Corrections made by the classmates were considered as rather positive or completely positive by 66.88 % of the respondents. 22 % of the respondents considered such corrections as rather or completely negative; 11 % of the respondents had a neutral opinion on this issues. 60 % of the respondents think that they can better remember correct versions if the mistakes have been corrected by their peers. However, 40 % of the respondents claimed that they can get nervous if being corrected by their peers (especially if the

peers laughed at the mistakes). 11 % of the respondents can better cope with being corrected by classmates than with being corrected by the teacher. We have come to the conclusion that teachers are still considered to be the persons whose duty and right is to identify, explain and correct errors, and to make such precautions which will help the learners not to make similar mistakes any more.

Native speakers of the language studied are believed to make the best corrections. (63 % of the respondents prefer being corrected by a teacher who is a native speaker of the target language.) Native speakers who are linguistically and pedagogically educated possess the qualities presented below (the numbers in the brackets give the numbers of persons who share those particular opinions):

- They have better language knowledge and skills; they have a better feeling for the every-day language. (28)
- They know the language and, simultaneously, they can teach the language and explain the problematic issues. (18)
- They are better at noticing errors and at evaluating their seriousness. (17)
- They are more dependable and believable than non-native speakers. Their corrections are correct. (13)
- Their speech is phonetically correct. (2)
- Native speakers are generally nicer and kinder. The ways of their teaching are more fruitful and more natural. (3)
- Classmates can be wrong, corrections made by them can be humiliating or mocking. (2)
- Native speakers use the target language all the time (1).

Some of the respondents prefer being corrected by teachers whose mother tongue is the same as theirs. This opinion was expressed by 24 % of the respondents, who also mentioned the welcomed qualities of these teachers:

- Mistakes can be explained in my native language. I am not scared by a potential misunderstanding. (12)
- They can better understand my mistakes and they can explain to me why I make such mistakes. They can understand inter-linguistic connections and they can guess what I want to say. (8)
- Most foreign language teachers are non-native speakers. (1)
- The students and the teacher work under the equal conditions. (1)

9.74 % of the respondents prefer being corrected by native speakers without linguistic and pedagogical qualifications (e.g. foreign friends or classmates) because:

- Foreigners have better language knowledge than Czechs. They can be better believed. (3)
- It is more convenient to be corrected by classmates than by teachers because teachers make the situation rather dramatic and react in an exaggerated way. (2)
- I can keep contacts with a native speaker although I have left school and I do not attend official classes any more. (1)

The rest of the respondents (3.25 %) sort out their mistakes with another person who has the same mother tongue (most frequently with classmates or friends). The choice of this method was explained by

no respondents. Five respondents claimed that their only requirement imposed on the correcting person is his / her sufficient awareness of the issue.

### **6.3. Students' opinions on their own errors**

One part of the research realized at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove focused on the respondents' approach to and their opinions on their own errors and errors made by their teachers.

Opinions and feelings expressed by students in connection with their own mistakes made in oral performances are presented in Table 01.

**Table 01.** Students' approaches to their own errors made in their oral performances

<b>If I make errors in oral performance, then:</b>	<b>Number of the given response</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I get stressed and try to do something about that (e.g. I watch foreign language films, read foreign language texts, etc.)	60	39 %
I do not get stressed but I try to do something about that (without any concrete specifications)	36	23.1 %
I get stressed and I try to do my best not to make mistakes(e.g. through regular practising of the grammar, vocabulary, etc.)	17	11 %
I get stressed but I do nothing about that	12	8 %
I do not get stressed but I try to do my best not to make mistakes	12	8 %
I do not get stressed and I do nothing about my mistakes because they are a natural component of the learning process	11	7 %
I do not get stressed because I do not make a big number of mistakes	4	2.6 %
I ignore my mistakes	2	1.3%

From Table 01 it is obvious that 89 students out of the total number of 154, i.e. nearly 58 % of the respondents, are made stressed by their mistakes in oral performances, and they make efforts to limit the number of mistakes (through extra-curricular activities or through regular practices of grammar and vocabulary etc.). 63 respondents more or less do not get stressed and 2 students claimed that they even ignore their mistakes.

### **6.4. Students' opinions on errors made by their teachers**

Another sphere of our interest was the issue of the respondents' opinions on the mistakes made by their teachers. The question asked was whether the students register mistakes in the oral performances given by their teachers. 74.68 % of the respondents stated that their teachers made mistakes very rarely. 16.23 % of the respondents claimed that they never registered any mistakes. However, 9.09 % of the respondent noticed the teachers' mistakes quite often. It is human to make mistakes; and foreign language teachers are human beings. Learning the foreign language that they teach is their life-long process, errors are justifiable in this process. It is a question whether those respondents who majored in teaching foreign languages realized that in future also their performances will be monitored (and taken as granted) by their students, and whether they realized what Tauchmanova (2016) says: "Language teachers

should be constantly increasing their language awareness because then they can make more competent judgements and decisions in their teaching process.”

The next part of the questionnaire was inspired by the research carried out by Gnutzmann and Kiffe (1993). They asked 98 students of English to react to four statements concerning errors made by teachers in their oral performances given during the teaching process. The same statements were presented to the students involved in the research project discussed in this paper. Here are the respondents’ reactions to the four given statements:

a) “If a teacher makes errors which I myself can recognize, I consider this situation as embarrassing because teachers should master the language better than their learners.”

53.9 % of the respondents feel that teachers are justified to make mistakes, 28.57 % of the respondents expected teachers’ exemplary knowledge, 17.53 % of the respondents were not sure how to react.

b) “Teachers are usually not native speakers of the taught language; their errors are thus acceptable.”

65.58 % of the respondents agreed because even teachers are continuously learning the language; 8.44 % were not willing to accept teachers’ errors; 25.97 % of the respondents were not sure.

c) “Sometimes I am made amused by especially stupid mistakes made by teachers.”

42.86 % of the respondents agreed, 25.97 % did not agree, 31.17 % of the respondents were not sure.

d) “Mistakes made by teachers should be corrected by their students.”

66.23 % of the respondents agreed with this statement under the condition that the students were not punished or persecuted due to these corrections. 10.39 % did not agree, 23.38 % of the respondents were not sure.

Being asked the question: “What do you consider as useful in the process of error corrections?”, most frequently the respondents gave the following answers:

- a detailed analysis of the mistakes, proper explanations of the causes of the mistakes referring to the mother tongue, proper feedback given by the teacher
- a positive and individual approach of the teacher, his / her helpfulness and good advice
- immediate and fast corrections (mistakes should not be ignored)
- a kind of guidance given by the teacher thanks to which the students themselves reveal the mistakes and then they can better remember the correct versions
- really practical practising of the problematic issues, repeating of the rules
- comments on correct forms as well
- a positive and fair approach to students
- an error analysis, additional explanation, practising in more complex phrases
- making databases of mistakes and their corrections
- practising through other ways than presented in textbooks (e.g. using of films, plays, songs, etc.)

## 6.5. Comparations of the results of two projects

The original and quite inspiring research was done by Gnutzmann and Kiffe already 24 years ago. It was quite challenging for us to compare its results with the results of our new project carried out in 2017. The results of these comparisons are presented in Table 02:

**Table 02.** The research results made by Gnutzmann & Kiffe versus Ondrakova, Tesar, Pavlikova

Statement (in bold) and reactions to it	Gnutzmann & Kiffe (1993)	Ondrakova, Tesar, Pavlikova (2017)
<b>“If a teacher makes errors which I myself can recognize, I consider this situation as embarrassing because teachers should master the language better than their learners.”</b>		
a) I do not agree – teachers are justified to make errors because they are human beings who just cannot know completely everything,	16.5 %	53.90 %
b) I agree – teachers should have an exemplary knowledge of the language.	35.4 %	28.57 %
c) I am not sure about that.	48.1 %	17.53 %
<b>“Teachers are usually not native speakers of the taught language; their errors are thus acceptable.”</b>		
a) I agree – also teachers are continuously learning the language.	29.3 %	65.58 %
b) I am not sure about that.	48.9 %	25.97 %
c) I do not agree – I am not willing to accept teachers’ errors.	21,8 %	8.44 %
<b>“Sometimes I am made amused by especially stupid mistakes made by teachers.”</b>		
a) I agree.	34.6 %	42.86 %
b) I am not sure about that.	?	31.17 %
c) I do not agree.	?	25.97 %
<b>“Mistakes made by teachers should be corrected by their students.”</b>		
a) I agree – under the condition that students are not persecuted due to that.	69.9 %	66.23 %
b) I am not sure about that.	22.6 %	23.38 %
c) I do not agree.	7.5 %	10.39 %

From the above given comparisons of the two projects it is clear that the present generation of students is more tolerant to their teachers than the generation of the students involved in the research in 1993. Current students respect the right of teachers to make errors because even teachers continuously learn foreign languages. Concerning the statement connected with especially stupid mistakes made by teachers, the research realized in 1993 presented the resulting percentage only in case of the “I agree.” response. The percentage of the other two responses was not presented by Gnutzmann and Kiffe. It is interesting that in case of the last statement (“Mistakes made by teachers should be corrected by their students.”), the responses are more or less equivalent. Nearly the same percentage appeared both in 1993 and 2017 in case of the “I agree.” and „I am not sure.“ answers. In 2017 fewer students agreed with the statement “Students should correct their teachers’ mistakes.” than in 1993.



In 2017, one additional statement was added to those used in 1993: “Is a friendly and relaxed atmosphere important in the teaching-learning process?” 94.81 % of the respondents gave the positive answer, 5.19 % of the respondents were not sure about that. The response “I do not agree.” did not appear at all. |

## 7. Conclusion

| Working with errors should be included in the syllabi of pre-gradual teacher training courses because correcting of errors is one of the most frequent activities in the professional career of teachers. The research results show that it is not possible to give a clear answer to the question whether to apply implicit or explicit corrections of mistakes made in oral performances given in foreign languages. Differences appeared also in the respondents’ opinions concerning the phases of the teaching process in which errors are to be corrected. Corrections made by teachers (i.e. persons with linguistic and pedagogical qualifications) are preferred, especially corrections made by native speakers of the target language. The respondents are also aware of the advantages brought by teachers of foreign languages whose mother tongue is the same as the learners’ one. From the research results it is clear that present students are more tolerant to their teachers than the students involved in the research done by Gnutzmann and Kiffe in 1993. They respect the fact that also teachers are justified to make errors, that they cannot know completely everything and that they continuously learn the particular foreign language during all their professional career. The respondents are also aware of their equal position in the teaching process. They support the idea that students should be justified to correct errors made by their teachers without being punished or persecuted because of that. Error corrections is a very individual and sensitive issue. Decisions about the ways of correcting depend on all the persons involved in the process. Not only the teacher’s linguistic knowledge is important; his / her pedagogical-psychological knowledge and professional experience is essential as well. The ways of educating and training future teachers are fully decided by teacher training colleges and institutions. Their work and efforts should be sufficiently appreciated by professionals and the general public. |

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