Errors as a Part of Teaching of Foreign Languages

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Abstract

The purpose working with errors is to gradually teach students to use errors and their corrections as an additional source of learning. Does the knowledge and foreign language proficiency correlate with the ability to be able to find and correct errors in the text in a foreign language? The aim of this study is to present the research project on this area with its preliminary findings. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were applied. Several kinds of analysis were carried out (the analysis of mistakes in written assignments of students of German language, the analysis of error corrections made by these students, the analysis of the ability to identify the errors). The research was started at the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové in April 2016 and the data was analysed in autumn 2016. However, it can be claimed that foreign language proficiency does not in itself guarantee that a person can identify, correct and explain mistakes and errors in the text created by another person. Professional training in this sphere is essential for foreign language teachers.

1. Introduction

Besides being pedagogically competent, teachers of foreign languages have to be competent in other spheres directly linked with their profession. Chodera (2007) talks about four kinds of competences – the linguistic competence (metalingually-mediated language awareness), language or lingual competence (non-mediated awareness of elements of the language system), speech competence (the ability to receive or produce a text in accordance with the norm of a foreign language) and communicative competence (consideration of particular usage in a given communicative situation). A

similar approach is expressed in the text of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002), which in connection with the communicative linguistic competence emphasizes linguistic components (lexical, phonological and syntactic knowledge), socio-linguistic components (socio-cultural conditions of using the language) and pragmatic ones (the use of language means).

2. Problem statement

2.1 Requirements imposed on foreign language teachers

Without being pedagogically and didactically trained, human beings mastering a foreign language because of having lived abroad for a longer time (or because of being a native speaker of the language taught) are not able to non-problematically transfer their experience, skills and habits to their pupils. However, neither is this transfer realizable by pedagogically proficient and empathetic persons who are not professional experts in the language taught. A clear and unquestionable definition of the term "to master a foreign language"does not exist. In the school environment, foreign language teachers are obviously expected to teach a particular foreign language but also to process the foreign language agenda, to translate most various texts from and to the mother tongue, to interpret texts performed by foreign visitors and representatives of partner schools, to organize and realize foreign trips and contests in foreign languages, to make pupils ready for their foreign language performances at school cultural events and to carry out a lot of other activities, including taking care of a foreign lecturer, which involves negotiations with the employment office, customs office and foreign police, etc. The general public is not aware of the fact that university studies of foreign languages are of three different kinds: those focusing on teaching, those focusing on translating and the ones focusing on interpreting. The profiles of the graduates are not interchangeable.

A teacher has an irreplaceable role in the controlled process of foreign language teaching. At the beginning of their learning a foreign language, pupils naturally respect their teachers and consider them as real experts because of their ability to communicate in a foreign language. However, with pupils´ growing linguistic competences and with the beginning of their puberty period (that period in which the institutionalized process of foreign language teaching usually develops), pupils´ respect for the teacher´s abilities and knowledge fluctuates and can be replaced by a critical approach. Most of foreign language teachers are not native speakers of a particular language taught. These teachers themselves, similarly to their students, had to learn the language at school. Besides some advantages of this fact, e. g. the ability of these teachers to put themselves in the pupils´ shoes, or to successfully expect which phenomena can be especially complicated for understanding, certain feelings of uncertainty are brought by this situation as well (Edge, 1994).

The basic precondition of a successful teaching process is a linguistically and methodologically well-prepared teacher. In the beginning phase of foreign language learning this precondition is even more important because pupils acquire basics of the audio form of a foreign language, and they also start to develop their basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. A pupil´s positive relation to the subject is gradually created; this kind of relation has a later impact on pupils´ further interest in language studies. It is very difficult for a teacher whose knowledge of a foreign language is just a few lessons more advanced than his / her pupils´ knowledge to get respected by the pupils and to maintain

his / her authority. And nothing decreases a pupil´s respect for the teacher´s authority more than the feeling of being unfairly or incorrectly evaluated.

2.2 Errors in performances in foreign languages

Errors are inevitably made during the process of teaching and learning a language. These errors are just typical of the process of the language acquisition, and they are linked with so called legitimate phases 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 analysis it is possible to get aware of probable sources of the errors, and then aim at them with the intention to prevent these errors. Experts in linguistic disciplines, psychology and didactics keep discussing the issue of a clear definition of the error. Varied definitions result from discussions about deviations from the linguistic norms, or discussions about non-perfect realizations of a communicative intention or non-perfect speech production. But no matter which kind of the deviation from the norm appears in a student´s performance, it is still the teacher who decides what needs correcting. Kleppin (1998) draws attention to the fact that it is a teacher who decides what is considered as an error. A teacher´s opinion is considered to be infallible and non-reviewable because there are no directives applied to corrections made by teachers. If a teacher is inconsistent in the process of error correction, the pupils become convinced that they actually do not make errors and mistakes.

Also physical and psychical factors are involved in errors; these factors are linked with both the pupil and the teacher. For example, in case of longer correction processes, teachers´ attention fluctuates, which results in different assessments of pupils´ performances. A teacher´s work is also influenced by his / her professional sureness and life experience. According to Nickel (1973), with their growing age, teachers are becoming more benevolent to pupils´ incorrect performances and their sense of fairness is growing. However, the opposite tendency is not necessarily exceptional.

Nowadays, broad-mindedness is propagated in case of errors; this broad-mindedness is coming close to underestimating of errors in case they do not impair communication. However, errors have never lost their importance in the training process of undergraduate teachers of languages. In that case it is not possible to prefer just communicability of the utterance to its correctness because pre-service teachers are supposed to later pass on their knowledge to their pupils and to become authorities for them. That is why pre-service teachers have to learn how to work with errors. Students majoring in teaching foreign languages are in a specific position – a kind of an intermediary position between a teacher and a pupil. They themselves need to improve the knowledge of the language (a pupil´s position), simultaneously they already learn how to teach a foreign language to other people (a teacher´s position). So these pre-service teachers look at errors simultaneously through pupils´ and teachers´ eyes. At this point it is not possible to ignore a kind of conflict which exists at universities between teachers-linguists and methodologists of foreign languages. Methodologists demand a bigger number of courses in methodology and didactics, which can develop students´ ability to teach, whereas linguists object to this demand because according to them students first have to be competent in "what is taught". In our opinion, a convenient compromise is realizable. The issue of training in error correction can be included in courses in linguistic disciplines and other courses within the framework

of the language studies. It is not possible to rely on the fact that students will get sufficient didactic skills only within the limited framework of courses in the particular didactics.

2.3 Teachers and their work with errors

When assessing the work of teachers, Haeberli (1980) recommends to also monitor how many errors were corrected by the teacher, what types of the errors were corrected and in which way the corrections were justified. According to him it is also interesting to monitor how many mistakes were ignored by the teacher. These ideas and also our own practical experience made us deal with the successfulness of teachers´ corrections of errors in a more detailed way. 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 Králové since 1990. The errors are analysed from various angles, and several kinds of extensive research have been realized. The analysis of pupils´ errors has been always carried out in connection with the tests which were already 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.

An interesting experiment which was carried out at the end of the eighties in Leipzig (Karl-Marx-Universität and Pädagogische Hochschule „Clara Zetkin") is presented by Kühn (?). 276 international teachers of German (from 25 countries) were involved into the experiment. Their task was to correct a text consisting of 158 lexical units and containing 20 cases of deviations from the codified norm (9 lexical errors, 6 grammar errors, 3 punctuation errors and 2 spelling errors). The contents of the text were quite demanding (the process of establishing the institution called "Goethe-Gesellschaft"was described. All the cases of the violations of the linguistic norm were the cases of authentic errors made by foreign students of German. The teachers involved were not allowed to use any aids; the correction time was, however, not limited in order not to put the correcting persons under time pressure. In most cases the correction time was from 20 to 30 minutes. The teachers were asked to underline incorrect forms, to write an abbreviation referring to the type of the error (on the left side of the test), and to write the correct form (on the right side of the sheet). The abbreviations were not given beforehand; each teacher could use his / her own marks.

To keep the system of evaluations of corrections unified, the evaluation of the corrected tests was made by only one person. Firstly, the system of the correction symbols was checked. It was revealed that quite often the number of correction signs was different, the number of underlined forms was different, the number of correct forms was different. Sometimes more correction symbols were used for the same mistake, or, on contrary, no correction symbols were used at all or just one kind of correction symbols was used. Then a conclusion can be made that in most cases pupils are not given proper information through correction symbols, so they do not know in which sphere they make errors.

The corrections were evaluated according to the following criteria:

- the error was found and correctly corrected;
- the error was found but it was not corrected or it was wrongly corrected;

- the error was not found;

- the correct form was identified as an error and it was replaced with another correct form;

- the correct form was identified as an error and it was replaced with an incorrect form.

Each correct and complete correction was scored with 2 points; most varied varieties of the corrections were accepted. 2 points were subtracted for each incorrect correction. 1 point was subtracted if a correct form was replaced by another correct (but unexpected) form.

It is quite interesting to mention that none of the participants in the experiment reached the full score of 40 points, which means that nobody managed to identify all the errors in the text. Only one person found and corrected 19 errors, however, that person reached the score of only 37 points because s/he did not identify one mistake and replaced one correct form with another correct form. Only 9 persons (4.1 %) reached the score of 30 or more points, 77 persons (35.8 %) reached the score lower than 10 points. 14 persons (out of the 77 ones mentioned) reached even a minus score, which means that their incorrect and / or excessive corrections were so numerous that they outnumbered all the correct ones.

Even for native speakers it is not always easy to decide about the correct form, various native speakers often make different decisions and evaluations. Eckes has been long-term involved in analysing of corrections made by correctors from the TestDaF Institute in Hagen. The presentation about the research into the quality of teachers´ corrections was given at the FaDaF (Fachverband Deutsch als Fremdsprache) conference in Essen in 2003. The results of his research findings point to problems which frequently appear in correcting and assessing of tests. The resulting assessments are very subjective; there are differences in personal approaches to particular errors. As a kind of evidence Eckes also presented the experiment realized by Birkel and Birkel (2002), who asked 88 teachers to correct the same test. The results were really surprising: in one case the test was graded with A, in 18 cases the grade was B, there were 51 cases of D, 16 cases of E, and two cases of F.

The importance of certificates proving the knowledge of foreign languages is increasing nowadays. Therefore it is essential to assure that written parts of the exams are assessed objectively and in unified and mutually comparable ways.

Our experience with errors in correctors´ work is quite rich. In 2003 an introductory written test of 27 participants in a language course in Austria was analysed. During that analysing process, the correctors´ (i.e. persons who were correcting the tests) work was simultaneously monitored. These people´s activity was obviously influenced by the time period planned for the corrections, by the number of the tests to be corrected, and (in our opinion) also by the fact the whole process was not organized in a good way.

According to the way in which the individual tests were corrected, we revealed what the whole error correction process had been like (and then the principal of the language school confirmed that we had made right revelations). When the 60-minute time limit set for the test expired, the tests were collected and brought to the room designated for the error correction process. The tests were corrected by the people who then taught in the courses – teachers and students of German. They were seated round one large table; all the collected tests were piled on that table. Each correcting person corrected all the exercises of the test at his / her own pace. Each correcting person also decided about his/her correction instruments (a pen / marker / pencil of any colour), his / her ways of corrections (ticking,

crossing, underlining, commenting, completing, etc.), correction symbols and placement of these symbols. Individual tasks were evaluated with scoring points; after finishing the correction of the whole test, the correcting person added up all the awarded scoring points and s/he wrote the total score down on the first page of the test file. Then s/he started another correcting process.

Our findings revealed that in 78 cases the correction was not of a good quality: incorrect forms had been accepted as correct, correct forms had been "corrected" into incorrect ones, or incorrect forms had been ignored and tolerated as correct ones. On average, there were nearly three cases of wrong corrections in each test. These errors appeared in 23 tests, that means that only four tests had been correctly corrected.

Another kind of research into correctors´ work was realised by us during 2006. 140 persons participated in this research; they were subdivided into three groups. The first group was formed from in-service teachers of German (55 persons) working mostly at the upper level of primary schools in various regions of the Czech Republic. The age distribution of these teachers was not monitored; it can be supposed, however, that the teachers were from the age of 25 to 55. The other two groups were formed by students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové who majored in teaching German at primary schools. In one group (Group 2) there were students in their third term at university; these students still had not enrolled for the course in methodology and didactics of German language (in total 60 persons of the approximate age of 21). In the other group (Group 3) there were students in their seventh term at university (25 persons of the approximate age of 23); these students had already taken the course in methodology and didactics. The testing of the first group was realized in the period March – August 2006, the other two groups were tested in October 2006. It was supposed that the corrections made by the teachers´ group would be the same as the corrections made by the other two groups and that there would be no statistically significant difference between the teachers´ group and the two students´ groups.

The 140 respondents were expected to correct all the incorrect forms which were included in the distributed text written in German. The text consisted of seven sentences in which 18 various errors appeared in total: 4 orthographic errors, 8 morphological and syntactic ones, 6 lexicological errors. 4 errors out of the total number mentioned above resulted from interference (a negative transfer from the mother tongue). If the respondents had really corrected all the errors, 2,520 forms in total would have been corrected in the correct way. However, only 1,198 forms (that is 47.54 %) were identified and corrected by the respondents, 1,322 forms (52.46 %) were corrected in a wrong way or remained non-corrected. That means that every other correction was inadequate. The worst situation was revealed in case of errors resulted from the interference of the mother tongue – 72.5 % of the wrong forms were not corrected (406 wrong corrections out of the total number of all 560 forms), that means that only one quarter of the errors resulted from interference was corrected in the right way, three quarters of the errors of this kind were corrected in a non-adequate way.

Research findings presented in literature and our own research findings have proved that the process of error correction is demanding. Similarly to other cases in which the human factor is decisive, wrong performances appear also in the sphere of correctors´ work. That means that test correction and assessment are rather subjective and influenced by a lot of internal and external factors

(e.g. momentary disposition of the correcting person, his/ her experience and knowledge, time pressure and peer pressure, the form and readability of the evaluated tests, etc.). All these factors are understandable. It is human to make errors, nobody can claim that s/he is always right and makes no mistakes. However, the issue is that the results of the correctors´ work decide not only about the test results of particular tested persons, but quite often other consequences (which can be more or less fatal for the tested people) can appear. Successful test results are required for enrolling for university studies in the home country or abroad, for being offered an attractive post or a better paid working position, etc. Therefore it is important to assure that corrections are made in the most objective way and that the correctors   make no errors at all (or as few errors as possible). It is important to apply the same criteria and scoring scales and the same demands when evaluating the performances. Since the position of correctors of texts in foreign languages is very often taken by foreign language teachers, the work with errors must be sufficiently involved also in university courses offered to pre-service teachers.

2.4 Training undergraduate teachers in working with errors

The revealed reality that teachers make errors when correcting their students´ performances made us look into the issue of teachers´ training. How is teachers´ ability to correct a foreign language test developed? How is this issue included in syllabi of the courses offered to students of foreign languages at Faculties of Education (the institutions educating future teachers of languages)?

Looking into the data and documents presented by individual Faculties of Education on their websites, we have made a conclusion that courses in foreign language methodology vary not only from university to university but also from one language department to another language department within one faculty. The issue of evaluations of performances and error corrections is usually presented within the framework of only one seminar course usually called in the following three ways:

- Errors and their conception, error analysis, assessment, self-assessment
- Testing and evaluating of performances given by children of various age groups
- Ways of assessment in the process of foreign language teaching

If there are two seminar courses available, then the following issues are presented and analysed: error characterization; ways of assessment; testing, examining and evaluation; teaching and correcting of speaking skills; teaching and correcting of writing skills. The issues of the aims of evaluation, choice of tests and evaluation criteria are included quite exceptionally.

Another interesting finding is that courses focusing on errors, assessment, testing and evaluation are often scheduled in last weeks of the term, when the courses are quite often not held at all.

In our opinion, at the undergraduate level of university education, only a marginal attention is paid to the issue of working with errors and error correction. The situation is usually even worse in case of post-graduate courses. Working with errors in the process of foreign language teaching should not be limited to one course or two courses in the didactics of a particular foreign language (for time reasons it is not possible to offer more courses), it should be spread within the whole framework of the university studies of a particular foreign language. Training in correction of errors made in oral performances can be realized in all courses for undergraduate teachers in which students are supposed to present papers and make presentations (e.g. courses in life and institutions of a particular country, conversation courses, courses in literature, history and cultural development, etc.). Apart from language errors it is

also possible to correct errors in pronunciation (which is usually realized just in phonetics courses). In case of power point presentations it is necessary to pay attention not only to the way in which the topic is presented but also to orthographic and linguistic errors. In courses in linguistic disciplines (morphology, syntax, lexicology), in which the knowledge is usually tested with written tests, it is ideal to also practise various ways in which errors are corrected in written performances.

In accordance with the Bologna Declaration, in 2011 the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové started to offer two-year masters´ degree studies of teaching German language. These are the follow-up studies offered to those graduates who successfully completed the three-year bachelor´s degree studies specializing in teaching of German language. Apart from theoretical subjects, these follow-up studies focus mainly on didactic-methodological training in teaching German at primary schools. The theoretical fundamentals were laid already at the bachelor´s level of studies. (The morphology of German language, for example, is presented for three terms in forms of lectures and seminars; students have to pass credit tests and the overall examination.) In the follow-up studies, German morphology is studied for one term, and focuses not only on practising of grammar phenomena but also on correcting of errors in written texts. Students are distributed texts containing approximately 15 sentences, and their task is to correct the errors they are able to find. This task is followed by group discussions about the corrections and explanations of errors.

A kind of specific research was started at the Department of German Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové in April 2016. The research is supposed to support or refute the following hypotheses:

- The level of active skills and abilities in the sphere of using a foreign language does not correlate with the level of the abilities of identification, correction and prophylaxis of errors. That is why we cannot agree with the statement that the persons who excellently master a language are also able to identify and correctly correct errors which appear in students´ tests.

- The ability to identify and correct errors gets increased with teaching practice. However, even in-service teachers make errors in correcting their pupils´ texts.

- Performances made by in-service teachers and those made by pre-service teachers after their finishing the course in morphology (which provides them with theoretical knowledge) will be different. The length of the teaching practice has an impact on the quality of corrections.

The aims of the project are as follows:

a) To summarize findings from literature, to get the knowledge of various definitions of errors in foreign language teaching and the knowledge of different opinions on the importance of errors in foreign language learning; and to partially fill in the gap in the professional literature specializing in evaluations of performances in foreign languages.

b) To draw attention to the fact that errors are made not only by pupils, that educating of future teachers in error corrections is underestimated even by the teaching public, and that it is necessary to remedy this situation.

c) To reveal, on the basis of analyses of written tests, the causes of errors made by students majoring in teaching German when they start the course in German morphology and when they finish this three-term course, and to reveal their learning effectiveness (quantitative research).

d)   To specify, on the basis of a test, the ability of students majoring in teaching German to identify and correct errors appearing in the given text (quantitative research) and to compare the obtained results with the results of similar testing of in-service teachers of German.

e)   To realize individual interviews with the respondents to reveal the arguments and explanations linked with their performances and their errors (qualitative research).

Having in mind the expected career development and life-long learning process, we consider the issue of working with errors in the process of foreign language teaching as a very important one. A potential further training of teachers which would include the work with errors (their identification, explanation, correction and prevention) into the framework of the overall studies of a particular language can make these teachers aware of the language development and of the stratification of the language. This would be appreciated especially by those teachers who graduated from universities a longer time ago. The results of our research can attract teachers´ interest in this issue and can make teachers aware of the necessity to keep dealing with this issue. A fact of not a lesser importance is that the analysis of working with errors clearly shows that foreign languages can be taught only by fully qualified teachers graduated from universities, that for teaching it is not sufficient to practically master a foreign language (to be a native speaker of the language or to gain the language skills just through living abroad or sharing the living environment with a native speaker of that particular language). A native speaker is usually able to correct an incorrect text; however, s/he is not able to explain the essence of the errors made. Teachers have to be able to present explanations to their pupils – the pupils have to be made aware of causes of errors and also of ways how to prevent making them. In our opinion, a person without theoretically and practically oriented university education is hardly able to manage all the required tasks mentioned above.

3. Conclusions

To a lesser of bigger extent, errors always appear in foreign language performances. There are various causes of errors and various reasons for making them, there are also various approaches to errors. The communicative approach to language teaching emphasises the idea that it is not important for pupils to communicate without errors, but that it is necessary for them to make themselves understood and to use their foreign language knowledge and skills as another source of knowledge acquisition and as a kind of access to new information. Learning a foreign language and being constantly corrected, especially during oral performances, learners could become psychically blocked, and this could result in their refusing to speak that foreign language.

A particular situation develops when a pupil or student respectively enters a university to major in teaching of foreign languages. A paradoxical situation develops – students themselves continue their learning of a language (so they still have a right to make errors), but simultaneously they start being in the teacher´s position (and teachers are not expected to make errors). Is it possible to successfully combine the right to make errors and not to be distracted by being corrected, with the principle that no error can remain non-corrected, and with the statement that teachers must not make errors because they cannot be bad examples for their pupils? It is quite interesting that students majoring in teaching languages support the opinion that it is better to let pupils speak even with errors (the main point is that

they use a foreign language), but on the other hand they themselves want to be corrected because these corrections are considered as an important feedback for which these students are grateful.

Also our research findings have revealed and have brought evidence that teachers often make errors when correcting their students´ written texts. Is this situation caused also by the fact that teachers (being tolerant to errors and respectful for students´ right to make errors) are not systematically educated and trained in error corrections during their undergraduate studies?

Since the final results of written tests are decided not only by the errors made by the tested persons but also by the quality of the work done by the correcting persons, our opinion is that training in error corrections must be included in courses for undergraduate teachers. From the existing syllabi and curricula it is clear that working with errors is very underestimated at university departments specializing in educating pre-service foreign language teachers.

The hypothesis supposing that teachers with an excellent active knowledge of the language will be the best at correcting tests was not confirmed during the research. The research results have revealed that the issue of error corrections has to be dealt with and that teachers´ ability to make right corrections has to be developed (e.g. in courses of further education of teachers). Furthermore, it is necessary to create new teaching materials used for practising of identification and correction of errors.

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