

An Exploration of Chinese EFL University Students' Attitudes Toward Error Treatment

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Abstract: This study focuses on Chinese EFL university students' attitudes toward error correction and their preferences for corrective feedback. To be specific, forty respondents from various majors get involved in the study to share their opinions about error correction. After analyzing the results, this study is expected to provide teachers with some pedagogical suggestions to help them reflect on their practice in the field of error correction, so that learning efficiency will be promoted.

Keywords: Error correction; Correction feedback; Chinese EFL learners

1. The motivation for conducting this study

During the process of learning language, making errors cannot be avoided no matter who you are^[2] due to the fact that language learning is not just to form a habit of using a language but to discover the nature of a language, such as the grammar rules, collocation rules or pragmatics^[1]. Apart from this, Hendrickson points out that "systematic analyses of errors can provide useful insights into the processes of language acquisition". In other words, errors play an essential role in the process of language learning for the reason that both learners and teachers can benefit a lot from the errors if errors can be treated seriously. Just as Ellis^[3] emphasized, successful error analyses can change people's views of errors from undesirability to acceptance, since errors can guide the internal process of language learning.

As for teachers, based on the errors made by students, they can realize the problems students still have and spend more time on this aspect. In addition, teachers can be provided with some pedagogical suggestions after analyzing the errors carefully, for example, errors can evaluate the usefulness of their teaching materials and the effectiveness of their teaching techniques. Meanwhile, errors can give teachers signals to decide whether they can continue teaching the following contents they have already prepared. More importantly, errors can force teachers to re-plan their lesson plans in order to satisfy students' needs better. When it comes to learners, they can find out their weakness through errors and be aware of which aspects they should make more efforts.

According to all mentioned above, it is obvious to find that errors are useful for language learning. Only the errors are corrected, to some degree, will the language learning efficiency be promoted. Otherwise, learners' motivation, confidence and interest of language learning might be affected. Therefore, how to correct the errors effectively is a question worth thinking. In this study, it investigates Chinese EFL college learners' attitudes toward error treatment and their preferences for corrective feedback.

2. The design of this study

2.1 Participants

Forty Chinese EFL college learners get involved in this study, and more than half of them have been learning English for more than ten years. To be specific, all the respondents begin to learn some grammar and do some listening, reading and writing practice in junior high school. After passing into high school, they have to learn more complicated grammar rules and try to write essays with logic to express opinions. Apart from this, learners still need to attend English class in university no matter which majors they choose. Therefore, all the participants get exposure to English at an early age, and their English level is intermediate.

2.2 Methodology

In this study, all the data will be collected through questionnaire. And the questionnaire contains eleven questions, which

requires participants to spend no more than ten minutes to complete. To be specific, question one to four mainly devote to find out learners' general attitude toward error treatment. For question five and six, they are designed to explore Chinese EFL learners' opinions about error correction in oral aspect. On the contrary, question seven and eight are used to investigate participants' views of error correction in writing area. Question nine and ten would like to know learners' preference for error corrector. When it comes to the final question, learners need to assess the utility of six types of corrective feedback, which can reflect their preferences for feedback types to some extent.

3. The results of the study

To begin with, forty participants are required to rate their level of agreement for the statement that I do not worry about making errors when I begin to learn English. Just as the consequence shown in Chart 1, 40% of respondents disagree with the statement. By contrast, 22.5% of the participants indicate that they do not feel afraid of making errors. In addition, 25% of the learners hold neutral attitude toward making errors. All in all, most Chinese EFL college learners show negative attitude toward making error in the process of language acquisition.

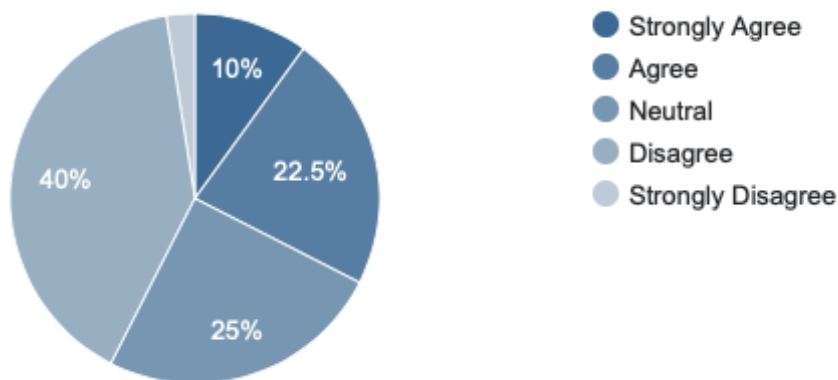


Chart 1: Chinese EFL learners' agreement for statement 1

When the participants are asked to assess their agreement with the statement that I would like to receive corrective feedback from others when I make errors, 87.5% of the respondents agree that they are willing to receive other people's help when they make errors. And among them, twenty participants (50%) highly agree with the statement. More interestingly, none of the respondents consider that they do not prefer to receive corrective feedback from others when make errors. That is to say, the majority of Chinese EFL college learners want the errors to be corrected with the help of people' feedback.

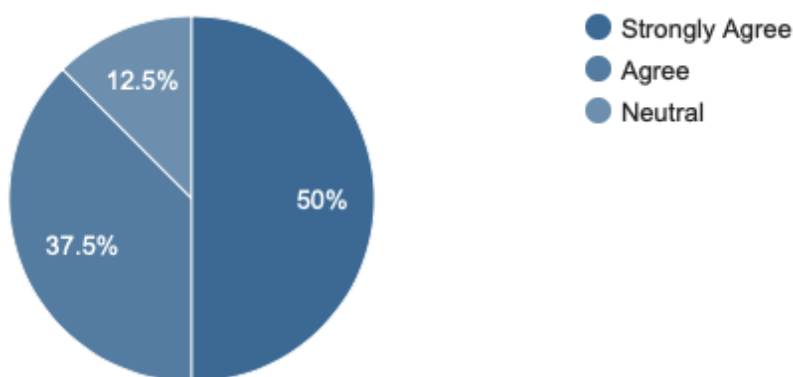


Chart 2: Chinese EFL learners' agreement for statement 2

What is more, when the respondents are asked how often they want other people to provide corrective feedback on their errors, various responses are collected in Chart 3. A quarter of participants claim that they always want to receive corrective feedback from others, while most learners prefer others to provide corrective feedback sometimes, which takes up 35% of the participants. Meanwhile, one-third of the respondents choose the second option "Usually". More importantly, none of the subjects choose the fifth option "Never", which to some degree proves that most Chinese EFL learners hold positive attitude toward receiving corrective feedback from others, just as what mentioned above.

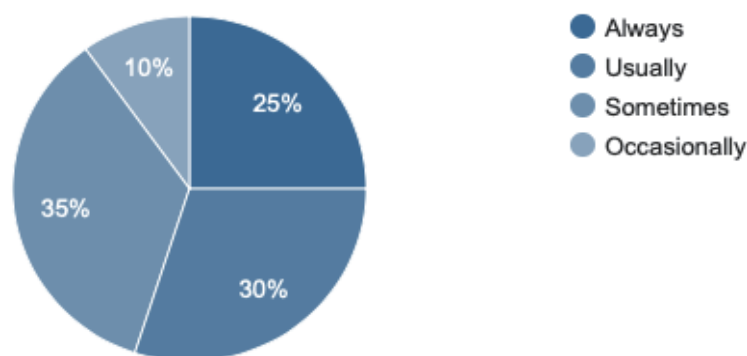


Chart 3: Chinese EFL learners' opinions about the frequency of providing corrective feedback

Finally, all the participants are required to assess how important it is for teachers to point out their errors. And more than half of the learners (55%) think that it is vitally important for teachers to point out where the errors are. In addition, 37.5% of the respondents also highlight the importance of correcting errors. By contrast, only three learners hold neutral attitude toward such behaviour, which takes up 7.5% of all the participants. Therefore, it can be inferred that almost every participant emphasizes the importance of error correction.

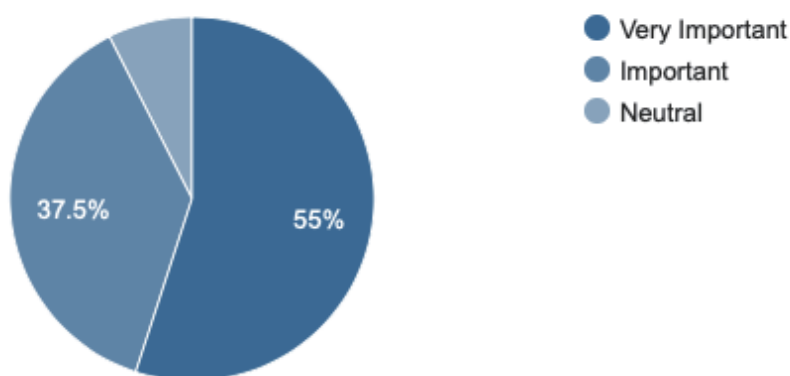


Chart 4: Participants' attitude toward the importance of error correction

4. Pedagogical implications

Based on the findings of this study, some pedagogical suggestions are concluded for teachers to consider as follows:

4.1 Paying attention to learners' attitude toward error correction.

In this study, some participants admit that they feel afraid of making errors in the process of learning English, because they think that classmates will laugh at them, and teachers will blame them for making such a silly error. Meanwhile, they feel extremely nervous when others correct their errors, because learners worry that they cannot fully understand other people's feedback and fail to give the correct response. Under such a situation, teachers need to take action to solve this problem due to the fact that "the degree of effectiveness of error correction may also be influenced by the learner's attitude toward such correction".

As for teachers, they should regularly reflect on their practice in the field of error correction. Besides, teachers should help students find out the errors and correct them in an effective way rather than criticizing the students all the time or complaining about why the students always make the same errors repeatedly. More importantly, teachers should give students some verbal praises to build up confidence, when students make correct changes to the answers, such as "Excellent!", "Well done!" and "Great!" etc. Just as Richards and Rodger revealed, "reinforcement not only can serve to mark the response as being appropriate, but also encourage the repetition of the response in the future". Only under this circumstance, learners' negative attitude towards error correction can be relieved to some degree, so that they are able to make further progress in English language learning.

4.2 Encouraging learners to do self-correction.

In this study, 95% of the participants consider that teachers should be responsible for error correction. However, according to the statement of Schulz, it points out that "nowadays the importance of training students to actively direct their learning process has been increasingly emphasized". That is to say, learners themselves also play a leading role in the process of learning. Therefore, teachers should provide learners with more opportunities to correct their errors. For example, in writing, teachers only need to circle the errors

and give learners some hints instead of showing them correct forms. As for the errors made while communicating, teachers can attract students' attention by changing the tone of voice or saying "Excuse me?", "Sorry?", or "Pardon?" to remind students that there is an error waiting to be corrected.

More importantly, by doing this, learners are more likely to form a habit of correcting errors alone rather than excessively relying on their teachers. Meanwhile, such a process can also develop learners' ability to think alone. All in all, through self-correction, learners' learning autonomy might be improved to some extent, which agrees with the statement that "a self-discovery approach reduces the likelihood of students' dependence on external assistance". What is more, because of the large class size in China, teachers do not have enough time to pay attention to every student's errors, so encouraging students to do self-correction is an effective way to solve this problem.

4.3 Using peer-correction with caution.

It has been found that learner's English language proficiency may impact on the efficiency of peer-correction. Therefore, teachers need to take student's situation into consideration when they decide to adopt peer-correction. For instance, for those learners whose language level is intermediate, peer-correction might not work well due to the fact that learners cannot learn something useful from others' feedback. On the contrary, for those advanced learners who have higher learning autonomy, peer-correction turns out to be an effective way for them to interact with other peers and to learn something from them. Therefore, if teachers decide to use peer-correction, they have to consider whether the teaching context is suitable for this method, or whether teachers need to take some measures to improve the efficiency of peer-correction, like supervision.

4.4 Taking learner's preference into consideration.

This study indicates that learner's preference for corrective feedback is not consistent with that of the teacher. In addition, in participants' opinions, some errors might deserve more attention than others. What is more, according to the statements of Fantozzi^[4], they highly emphasize the importance of teachers to be aware of learner's preference, because only when teachers have a clear overview of learner's needs, they are more likely to choose an appropriate way of error correction. And only when student's needs have been satisfied, their motivation for language learning will be promoted.

Therefore, on this occasion, teachers must take some measures to find out learner's favour. For example, before deciding to use which types of correction methods in the class, teachers have to spend time designing a well-prepared questionnaire to know about learner's beliefs about error correction. And after analyzing the results, teachers can combine learner's ideas with their own experience to decide how to correct errors more effectively.

5. Conclusion

It is inevitable for learners to make errors in the process of language learning. What is more, errors play a significant role in language learning, since errors are regarded as an access not only for learners to realize their weakness in language learning, but also for teachers to reflect on their practice in language teaching. More importantly, as long as the errors are corrected effectively, learner's learning performance will be promoted to some degree. Otherwise, learner's motivation, confidence and interest might be influenced. Under such circumstance, this study decides to investigate Chinese EFL learners' attitudes toward error correction in order to provide teachers with some useful advice for their teaching practice.

According to the results, the following pedagogical suggestions have been concluded. First of all, it is teacher's responsibility to help learners have positive attitude toward error correction. To be specific, teachers should reflect on their practice in the field of error correction so as to find the problems which might affect learner's motivation for error correction. Apart from this, teachers should behave as a guide and encourage learners to do self-correction in order to promote learner's language learning autonomy. More importantly, when teachers plan to use peer-correction, they need to take some factors into consideration before adopting it, like learner's language proficiency or their learning ability. Otherwise, peer-correction cannot achieve teachers' expectation. Last but not least, teachers need to consider learner's preference when they choose the way for correction. And only in this case, the efficiency of error correction can be improved eventually.

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