

# Study on the Influence of Affective Factors on Error Correction in Chinese EFL Teaching

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**Abstract**—It is a natural phenomenon for a language learner to make errors through the whole learning process. In English teaching, linguists and teachers all along have never stopped their research on how to deal with errors. If teachers treat students' errors only from their own perspective, ignoring students' viewpoints, it will be blindfolded so as to weaken teaching effects. Therefore, teachers should try to employ flexible correction techniques on the principle of not hurting students' feelings. The study aims to explore the influence of affective factors on error correction and tries to provide effective techniques for teachers in Chinese EFL teaching.

**Keywords**—error correction; affective factors; EFL teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

In language learning, especially foreign language learning, making errors is an inevitable by-product in the whole process. In spite of diverging viewpoints concerning how the errors should be treated in the formal class, few of the teachers and researchers would support that we might just leave them alone. Language teachers and researchers have always been wondering how to correct errors effectively. One of the major findings reflects that learners' affective state plays an equally important role in error correction. Therefore, in this paper, the author attempts to discuss error correction from the students' perspective.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Affective Filter Hypothesis was first put forward by Dulay & Burt in 1977, aiming to explain how affective factors influence the language acquisition process. They defined affective filter as a screen which blocks the input when learners feel bored, angry, frustrated, nervous, unmotivated or stressed so that learners would not be receptive to the input. The Krashen (1982) further developed the theory by claiming that comprehensible input is not enough to achieve success in language acquisition. This screen is known as the affective filter. A group of affect variables including motivation, self-confidence and anxiety play a facilitative role in second language acquisition. When the filter is "up", it impedes language acquisition. In other words, low motivation, weak self-esteem and anxiety can

attribute a "rise" to the affective filter and form a "mental block" that prevents the comprehensible input from being employed in language acquisition. On the contrary, as Krashen claimed, learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a positive self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped to achieve a good command of the second language. The teaching implications for language teachers would be that they should try to create a low-anxiety atmosphere in the class in order to lower the affective filter. We can easily imagine what the students' filter will take effect if the teacher focuses on dealing with errors they make regardless of the students' emotion.

### B. Learner-centered Learning Approach

Since the 1970s, there have been many researchers who carry out their studies on language learning strategies, focusing on the attitudes and behaviors of diverse learners with more or less successful achievements. Tudor (1996: 76-77) once stated, "Learning strategy research represented a coherent attempt to 'listen' to learners and to use learners' own insight and preferences to shape language practice." In the language teaching community, there is a strong desire among educators to develop means of allowing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in their language acquisition process. Hence, error correction, a part of language classroom teaching, should not be an exception. The language teaching practitioners hold the belief that language teaching will be more efficient if teaching modes are made more responsive to the needs, characteristics and expectations of learners, and if learners are encouraged to play an active role in the shaping of their study program. Communicative language teaching approach is the dominant and most popular approach at present, also makes contribution to the learner-centered learning approach.

### C. Rogers' Humanism

Humanism, holding the opposite extreme to the behaviorist theories of learning, states that the primary thought of education is upon human. As one of the outstanding representatives of humanism, Rogers (1969) emphasized that the development of human's intelligence and affect is of equal significance. Only through humanistic learning methods does education enable learners' potential displayed to the full. Thanks to humanistic teaching methods, learners' optimistic personalities and inner emotions

especially their self-esteem will be promoted, thus, they could definitely have a deeper understanding of their own values along with those of others involved in language learning. One of Roger's constructive viewpoints on education is to cultivate learners' courage. He claims that students in class are fostered to be a "free person", which means that they have courage to decide on what would happen instead of fear or worry in some unknown cases. Roger's humanistic rationales are further illustrated by Gage and Berliner (1991: 218) who proposed a set of basic principles focusing on the significance of students' psychological state of mind in the classroom environment. Gage and Berliner put more emphases on students' internal development rather than external performance in order to achieve more success in language teaching.

### III. CORRECTION TECHNIQUES IN CHINESE EFL TEACHING

In traditional Chinese EFL classroom teaching practice, most teachers are more likely to correct students' errors directly for some reasons. But this is not what students want. Instead, students prefer to be guided to correct their own errors.

#### A. Six Types of Error Correction Techniques

In the history of error correction researches, there have been various ways to classify errors into types proposed by different researchers. According to Lyster & Ranta's (1997) model, there are six types of errors in language teaching class, namely, explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition of error. Firstly, explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form. Secondly, recasts involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error. Thirdly, clarification request refers to the way that the teacher indicates to the students that their preceding utterance has been either misunderstood or ill-formed and the repetition or reformulation is required. Fourthly, metalinguistic feedback contains either comments or questions related to the erroneous part without explicit correction. Fifthly, elicitation means the teacher tries to directly elicit the correct form from the student. Sixthly, repetition of error is the teacher's repetition, in isolation, of the student's erroneous utterance by adjusting their intonation to highlight the error.

#### B. Students' Attitudes and Preferences Toward Correction Techniques

Among all the above correction techniques, recast is commonly regarded as an ineffective and impolite method by students. However, there exists no evident variance among the other five techniques. As taking a closer look at the five techniques, it may be noticed that students prefer the types which leave them much space to correct the errors on their own. If the teacher can provide them with some evident clues to the right answer, that will be much more effective. Hence, the techniques such as elicitation, clarification request, and repetition of error are well accepted by the majority of students.

#### C. Discrepancies Between Students' Preferences and Teachers' Correction Techniques Employment

In general, teachers' employment and students' viewpoints on error correction merely have little correlations. With respect to the question of error correction in Chinese EFL teaching, it can be said that teachers' practice of error correction in class is not student-oriented. In other words, teachers have not set their students in the real center of their classroom teaching when conducting error treatment. If teachers still continue applying the traditional approaches with teachers as the center and neglect the interaction and the bilateral affect exchange on the part of both the teachers and students, "the result is too often deepening alienation, feelings of helplessness, social indifference, intellectual and psychological instability, irrational behavior and egoism" (Smith, 1997: 131). Larsen & Freeman (1986: 53-56) state that "In communicative activities, the teacher is not the pure instructor. He is an active facilitator and echo with the student's needs. As a teacher, he should be one member of the activity and his teaching behavior should concord with the student's requirements." Nunan (1988: 243), a researcher engaged in studies on "learner-centered" teaching mode, proposes that "a collaborative effort between the teachers and learners" is an indispensable formula for teaching effectiveness, "since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the teaching and how it is taught".

### IV. PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

#### A. Proposed Error Correction Techniques

1) *Nonverbal communication*: As one of the frequently used communication ways, nonverbal signals are powerful in expressing inner feelings and evoking immediate action or response. Therefore, in EFL teaching, the relationship between teachers and students can be improved if teachers learn how to make proper use of nonverbal communication. Teachers have different ways to conduct nonverbal communication in classroom teaching, of which, in the author's opinion, facial expression, eye contact, gesture, posture and touch are especially of great help in error correction. Unfortunately, in Chinese EFL teaching practice, few teachers choose nonverbal communication tools when treating errors. It seems that they have not realized the importance of applying nonverbal methods. For the sake of teaching effectiveness, nonverbal communication is taken as a good choice. There is no doubt that a better effect of error correction will certainly be achieved if the teacher introduces a warm and friendly smile together with trusting eye contacts and pleasant intonation. In a word, making good use of nonverbal communication acts is surely a powerful impetus to the effectiveness of error correction in language teaching practice.

2) *Pragmatic empathy*: Another effective solution to bridge the discrepancies between student preferences and teachers' employment is pragmatic empathy. Kuno (1975), a Japanese linguist first applied the concept of empathy in

aesthetics and psychology to the linguistics field. Then, Brown (1980: 107) indicates in his book *Principle of Language Learning and Teaching*, "Empathy is the process of putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, of reaching beyond the self and understanding or feeling what another person is understanding or feeling. It is composed of two processes. One is putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, that is understanding the other person. The other is understanding yourself." In teaching practice, to make this solution work for error correction, the process of "putting yourself in somebody else's shoes" refers to the necessity of teachers to notice students' affective response to error correction and know their attitudes and needs, while the other process "understanding yourself" means teachers' awareness of their view, timing, role, responsibility and so forth in treating errors. In Brown's opinion (1980: 161), there are four strategies of pragmatic empathy, equality strategy, appropriateness strategy, politeness strategy and information strategy, which can work for error correction practice in EFL teaching. In general, when correcting errors, teachers should treat students as equals so as to show respect and politeness to students and provide necessary and appropriate amount of information serving as the motivator for students to conduct self-correction in learning process. As a result, the students will be open to receive the information and feel contented with the authentic expressions kept in mind. So, it is an effective way to lessen students' anxiety and uneasiness.

#### *B. Pedagogic Implications of Error Correction Techniques*

In Chinese EFL classroom teaching, almost all the students desire to have their errors corrected in certain ways since they completely believe that with proper error correction, they can improve their English language level continuously. Consequently, teachers should not hesitate to correct errors. However, what teachers need to focus on is about how to treat errors. Actually, no matter what techniques they employ, teachers should give priority to students' affect state, including their viewpoints, attitudes, preferences and so on. It's necessary for teachers to try their best not to hurt students' feelings even if the errors are rather stupid. Therefore, in correction practice, the form of the language that teachers use enjoys the equal importance to that of the meaning of teachers' utterance.

Furthermore, teachers should try to practice a variety of feedback techniques. Individual learners may totally differ from each other in terms of the most appropriate correction technique for their unique language development needs, so qualified teachers should follow the rule as one size does not fit all. The ability of using a few different types of error correction feedback increases more chances of meeting students' diverse demands.

Additionally, no matter how the particular techniques vary, error correction should put the focus on the learners. It is advisable for teachers to create chances for students' self-correction as many as they can. Students may behave much better if teachers allow enough time and provide appropriate

information for them to conduct self-correction. In this way, students will become more capable in target language usage and will not make the same errors any more. The least effective correction technique is to simply tell students the correct answer.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Based on this study, it is naturally concluded that error correction has really been playing a crucial role during the whole process of language learning, especially in classroom teaching practice. Although some suggestive techniques are proposed, there still exist some limitations in the study. Due to the individual differences among single language learners, such as gender, personality, education background, learning style, motivation and so forth, further researches are in great need to find out more practically effective correction techniques, taking affective factors as research criteria.

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