

# CORRECTION OF STUDENT'S SPEECH ERRORS

Trần Thi Nga \*,  
Trương Thu Hà <sup>α</sup>,

**Abstract:** *The paper aims to gain some insights into and practice of the correction of student's speech errors. The authors focus on the questions of when corrections should be given, which errors need to be corrected, and how corrective feedback affects student's attempts at speaking. Two classes of the Faculty of English Language Studies, Hanoi University of Business and Technology - K22.01 and K22.02 participated in the study. Two methods of obtaining the needed information were used: class observations and deep interviews with key informants to learn why they discontinued speaking. The results show that transitional points are suited for correction. Remedial work needs to gear towards three error types. Selective corrections have a positive influence on the learner's desire to communicate orally while vigorous corrections result in a situation when students abort their attempts at speaking.*

**Keywords:** *error, correction.*

## 1. Introduction

Effective teaching of speaking abilities depends on many facets of language instruction. One is correcting student's speech errors. Like children learning their first language, second language learners, in an attempt to speak, make numerous mistakes. However, they learn from making mistakes through interactions in which their errors are given corrective feedback. Considering such an aspect of language teaching, this paper will focus on three questions: when it is the right time for correction, what types of speech errors need correcting, and how corrective feedback affects the learner's attempts at speaking.

## 2. Brief review of literature

### 2.1. Definitions of key terms

An *error* is defined by Hendrickson (1980:169) as "an utterance, form, or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in real-life discourse". In this light, an error could be a deviation from a phonological or grammatical rule, an incorrect form or expression in a particular situation. Meanwhile, *mistake* refers to "a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip" in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly" (Brown, 1994: 205). Referring to these definitions, this paper uses the two terms *error* and *mistake* alternatively.

\* Lecturer, Hanoi University of Business and Technology  
<sup>α</sup> Lecturer, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

The term *correction*, as is used by Chaudron (1986: 66), means “any reaction by the teacher which transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of a student’s behaviour or utterance”. The act of correction, on the other hand, indicates that the teacher, “in response to what is perceived to be an error ... supplied an appropriate item” (Chun et al, 1982: 538). In supplying an appropriate item, the teacher has to do more than just giving modelling/remodelling. He/she indeed needs to make explicit to the student how the right form of language should be produced.

## **2.2 Changing views on error correction**

When foreign language teaching was heavily influenced by the Audio-Lingual Method whose principal underpinnings for language learning is through mimicry and memorization, errors were not tolerated. Moreover, with the emergence of the Contrastive Analysis, which advocates that errors occur because of the interference when the learner transfers his/her first language’s “habits” into the second’s (Ellis 1994: 47), error prevention became a fashionable style in language teaching; therefore, learners are not allowed to commit errors.

However, the view changed when people realized that languages cannot be learned mainly through imitation and memorization, and that language learning involves active mental process whereby learner “builds up internal representations of the language system ... that regulate and guide performance” (McLaughlin 1987: 133-148). In this process of learning, making errors is seen as inevitable. Indeed, people do make mistakes when they learn new skills and they learn from

their mistakes. In this light, errors are signals of student actual learning, of their progress, and of success in learning. With the goal of developing communicative competence, foreign language teaching methodology regards tolerance of errors as one of its underpinnings for language instruction. This view is also shared not only by teachers of English, but also by students of Hanoi University of Business and Technology.

Undoubtedly, the changing views on correction of errors have reflected innovations of methods and changes in theories of the nature of language and language teaching and learning.

## **2.3. When to correct an error**

The “when to correct an error” question considers the decision made by the teacher on whether or not to correct a student’s mistake and looks at what point an error should be treated. Actually, this question proposes a difficult task for the teacher to decide whether or not to correct a student’s errors at all. Crichton (1977: 59) argues that if a teacher ignores an error, he/she may fail to provide appropriate feedback; but if he/she decides to treat an error, he/she might fail to encourage the student to elicit a correct response. He even pinpoints the “crisis point” (breakdown of communication between student(s) and teacher) in error correction. So remedial work must be considered whether it would improve learner’s performance and result in a feeling of success in students or whenever it seems appropriate (George 1972: 73).

It is important for the teacher to decide whether or not to treat an error and when to stop an individual student for correction. In fact, the teacher has four

time points for correction: right after an error is made, at transitional points, at the end of a speaking task/opportunity assigned to individual students, and at the end of the class. In a study by Tran Thi Nga (2006), one aspect she found was that most of the teachers gave corrections at transitional points.

#### **2.4. Which errors to correct**

The “which errors to correct” question considers the types of errors for treatment. Burt (1975: 61) discerns the difference between two types of errors: “global” and “local” errors. Global errors are those which affect the overall organization of the sentence and hinder successful communication, whereas “local” errors are those which affect a single element of the sentence, but do not prevent a message from being heard. To use these terms more straightforward, Brown (1994: 208) calls them “discourse level” and ‘sentence level’ errors.

Many researchers agree that “global” or “discourse level” errors should receive priority for correction since they affect communication in such aspects as intelligibility, acceptability, and irritation (George 1972; Burt 1975; Pham Minh Cuong 2014). Some studies have validated this claim (Burt & Kiparsky 1972; Murphy 1986; Edge 1989). Three research works by Vietnamese teachers of English have also illuminated those types of errors that merit treatment (Nguyen Nguyet Minh 2003; Nguyen Quynh Trang 2010; Tran Thi Nga *et al* 2013). Furthermore, an emphasis is even placed on correcting errors which occur frequently in a student’s speech (George 1972; Allwright 1975; Lee 1991). In addition, common errors (ones which affect a large group of students) should

be given correction as well (Nguyen Nguyet Minh 2003; Tran Thi Nga *et al* 2013).

In short, these appear to be three types of errors which deserve more focused attention; those that affect or impair communication significantly (global errors), those that occur repeatedly on the part of an individual student (high-frequency errors), and those that are common to a number of students.

#### **2.5. Effects of corrective feedback on student’s attempts at speaking**

A study by Crichton (1990), who examined a series of factors attributable to problematic correction revealed that teacher’s attempts to provide corrective feedback can sometimes lead to confusion and ambiguity when the students are not aware of the teacher’s intention in trying to elicit correct responses from them. This factual performance requires the teacher to make explicit to learners what and why they are doing that (Hendrickson 1980; Lightbown & Spada 1995).

In summarizing the teacher’s role at the point an error is made in classroom verbal interaction, Allwright (1985: 111) stated that “The key task for the teacher, then, is firstly to sum up the whole situation on the spot, and then to react appropriately, in public, conscious of the need to treat the problems of the individual without misleading or confusing the other learners.” Moreover, seen from the learner’s perspective, the effectiveness of error treatment will “depend on how it is perceived rather than on what it is intended to be”.

Obviously, correction must be done in a way that can encourage students to continue speaking and help instil confidence in language learners.

### 3. Method

The study was undertaken at Hanoi University of Business and Technology, first semester of academic year 2019-2020. Fifty-three students from two classes K22.01 and K22.02, Faculty of English Language Studies participated in this study. They were in their third year at University and their level of English was upper intermediate. Each class met three days a week for language instruction (four hours each day).

Two methods of collecting information were used: class observations and deep interviews with key informants to find out why they discontinued speaking. Four observations were done. Each observation lasts for one classroom hour (50 minutes). During class observations, the authors noted down the time points for corrections, the error types which received remedial work, and the effects of the correction instances on the learners. If students

made some attempts to speak in any forms - retrying, restating, repeating, adjusting, and making change(s) in their speech, positive influence was achieved. Conversely, if they aborted their attempts at speaking, negative impact resulted.

Based on class observations, further informants (those who had aborted their efforts at speaking) were identified and then interviewed. Central to the interviews were the messages intended to communicate and the “why to discontinue speaking” question. The interviews were conducted immediately after the class was over. To make sure those students understood the questions, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.

### 4. Results and discussions

#### 4.1. Class observations

All in all, 4 hours of observations have been done, two hours with class K22.01 and two hours with class K22.02. The results of when to correct errors are summed up in Table 1. below.

Table 1. Time points for correction

Class	Immediately	At a pause	At termination	At the end of class	Total
K22.01	3	11	5	6	25
K22.02	2	10	5	5	22
<b>Sum</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>47</b>

Most of the correction instances, as presented in the table, took place at transitions. Out of the 47 corrections, 21 (44.7%) - nearly half – were reported with corrections occurring at transitional points. This is the pause of an utterance or at which an individual student finishes part of a sentence or a sentence. Corrections given at the end of the class were 11 (23.4%), followed by those at termination, with 10 instances (21.3%). This is the point at which an individual student finishes his/

her speaking task/opportunity. Immediate stops for correction instances accounted for only five, the smallest percentage (10.6%).

Here, the teachers are aware of the significant points for corrections so as not to interrupt a student’s flow of thought. They also find it important to treat common errors at the end of the lesson in order to bring the class attention to the ones committed by a number of the students in the class.

Table 2 shows the types of errors which receive remedial work from the teacher as well as the total number of errors made by the learner. Three types are presented: global (errors that block communication

or cause misunderstanding), high-frequency errors (those that are committed repeatedly by an individual student), and common errors (those that are common to a number of students).

*Table 2. Correction of error types*

Class	Global/No. errors	Repeated/No. of errors	Common/No. of errors	Total/No. of errors
K22.01	3/4	16/22	6/6	25/32
K22.02	2/2	15/21	5/6	22/29
<b>Sum</b>	<b>5/6</b>	<b>31/43</b>	<b>11/12</b>	<b>47/61</b>

As we can see from the table, most of the errors made by students in those classes fell into repeated errors with 43 out of 61 (almost 70.5 %), followed by the common type, which accounted for 12 (19.7%). The smallest number, only 6 (9.8%), was reported with global errors.

A lot of the repeated errors were of phonetics, stress, and intonation. It is a common place that many vietnamese learners of English have difficulty in pronouncing and stressing English words correctly. Furthermore, it is sometimes also problematic for them to speak with the right intonation patterns.

As far as the percentages for correction instances are concerned, the highest percentage for correction was seen in the common type, with 11 out of 12, accounting for over 91.6%, then the

global errors, with 83.3% and the least in repeated errors, with just slightly over 72%.

So in such classes, the teacher paid more attention to treating common as well as global errors. And for other kinds, selective feedback was given. Moreover, the teacher did not correct all the errors, but selective ones. In these student's speaking opportunities, the teachers did tolerate some errors, especially those of local errors so as to instil a sense of confidence and success in the students.

Table 3 represents how corrections affect student's willingness to go on speaking. When correction is positive, it must lead to a situation where students make some attempts to continue speaking. Conversely, if students abort their efforts at speaking, negative impact results.

*Table 3. Effects of correction instances*

Class	No. of errors	Correction instances	Positive effects	Negative effects
K22.01	32	25	23	2
K22.02	29	22	22	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>2</b>

As is shown in the table, the total number of corrections observed was 47 out of the 61 recorded errors, of which 45 (nearly 96 %) did have positive effects on student's efforts to go on speaking. The learner continued communicating in such

a way as repeating, retrying, adjusting, paraphrasing, clarifying, making some changes in their speech or repeating after the teacher. Only two out of the 47 instances created negative effects on the students. Those two students, after some corrections

from the teacher, discontinued speaking.

#### 4.2. Interviews

The results from the four observations indicated two negative correction instances. Those students, after receiving

corrective feedback from the teacher, aborted their attempts at speaking. Interviews with these students yielded the following results as shown in the following table, Table 4.

Table 4: Negative effects of corrections

Cases	Interruption of thoughts	Feeling of shame	Feeling of incompetence
Students 1	v		
Students 2		v	v

The table represents the negative effects, which fell into three categories: interruption of thoughts, feeling of shame, and feeling of incompetence. Student 1 did not continue speaking because the teacher gave too many corrections, resulting in the interruption of thoughts. Student 2 shut off her will at conversing because of vigorous corrections which led to a feeling of losing face and incompetence. This situation illuminates the finding of Walker’s survey study (1973), in which he warns that minor errors in speaking should not be marked down for correction because this destroys the learner confidence.

It is undeniable that the issue of correction becomes complicated when actual classroom interactions take place. Indeed, frequent stops for speech error corrections might yield some counter-productive consequences on learner’s efforts of on-going speaking because they interrupt the learner’s flow of thoughts or ideas, de-motivate them, and increase in their feeling of shame and incompetence.

### 5. Conclusion and recommendation

#### 5.1. Conclusion

The outcome of the study can be summarized as follows: (1) Transitional points are suitable time points for corrections; (2) Not all errors made by students need correcting. Common and global errors are of first priority. Other

types of local errors merit selective treatment; (3) Selective corrections can have a profound impact on incurring desired responses from students. Vigorous corrections can result in situations where students abort their attempts at speaking.

#### 5.2. Recommendation

Obviously, correction of speech errors in formal foreign language instruction at Hanoi University of Business and Technology lends both encouraging and discouraging effects on the learner’s attempts to orally communicate.

This study has focused on the short-term effects of correction (the immediate effects on attempts made by the students to continue speaking). The long-term effects need to be traced for further scrutiny. Potentially, more future investigations into correction can be undertaken, for example, studies on the relationship between short-term and long-term effects or on cultural aspects that might influence the teacher’s practices in class.

Actually, when correction is motivating, reinforcing, and informative, effective learning is more likely to result. Treating student’s speech errors is a complex phenomenon and the tasks rely on the teacher, without whom, success can hardly be achieved “whatever advanced and modern methods of education there are” (Nguyen Trong Dan 2015: 2)/.

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## SỬA LỖI NÓI CHO SINH VIÊN

*Trần Thị Nga  
Trương Thu Hà*

**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết nhằm trang bị thêm những hiểu biết cơ bản về việc sửa lỗi khi sinh viên thực hành nói tiếng Anh trên lớp. Tác giả đặt trọng tâm nghiên cứu vào thời điểm sửa lỗi, loại lỗi nào cần sửa và ảnh hưởng của việc sửa lỗi tới mong muốn tiếp tục nói của sinh viên như thế nào. Sinh viên hai lớp K22.01 và K22.02 thuộc Khoa Ngôn ngữ Anh, Trường Đại học Kinh doanh và Công nghệ Hà Nội là những đối tượng được nghiên cứu. Tác giả sử dụng hai phương thức thu thập số liệu: quan sát lớp và phỏng vấn sâu đối với những sinh viên không tiếp tục thực hành nói. Kết quả cho thấy thời điểm thích hợp để sửa lỗi là lúc dừng trong chuỗi lời nói. Việc sửa lỗi tập trung vào ba loại lỗi. Sửa lỗi có chọn lọc có ảnh hưởng tốt tới mong muốn của sinh viên tiếp tục thực hành nói, trong khi đó nếu sửa lỗi quá nhiều sẽ làm cho sinh viên từ bỏ mong muốn tiếp tục thực hành.

**Từ khóa:** lỗi, sửa lỗi.