Error Correction: Students’ Versus Teachers’ Perceptions

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Few issues in second language teaching have generated as much controversy as that of error correction. In fact, one of the most discouraging experiences of L2 teachers is correcting errors especially those that recur in their students’ production. A possible explanation may be the mismatch between what teachers and students consider to be effective feedback on error correction. Although much has been published on error taxonomies, detection, analysis and evaluation, there is a dearth of research studies comparing teachers’ and students’ perceptions. This article endeavours to help fill this void. The study involved 21 informants. Eleven of them were undergraduate students who had no teaching experience or qualifications, whereas the other 10 were qualified teachers of English as a foreign language with between three and 13 years’ experience. After watching an excerpt from a commercially produced teaching video twice, the participants were asked to detect the error-correction moves made by the teacher, classify them, judge their efficiency and record their opinions individually and in groups. The results indicated that a significant percentage of the teacher’s error-correction moves went unnoticed. Teachers and students agreed that the most efficient corrections occurred when more time, longer explanations, and use of different correction strategies were utilised.

Keywords: error correction, perceptions, recommended strategies

Introduction

One of the most frustrating tasks for foreign-language teachers is that of correcting the same errors time and again. One possible explanation could be the different perceptions that teachers and students have of the most adequate correction of errors. Some years ago a common strategy used by bilingual teachers was to resort to similarities and differences between the students’ L1 and L2 in an attempt to root out and prevent different types of error (morphosyntactic, phonological, lexical, etc.). The new contributions of psycholinguistics (Selinker, 1972, 1992), introducing the concept of Interlanguage, showed the limitations of contrastive analysis, giving rise to a paradigm called error analysis, in which the L1 played second fiddle. One of the main tenets proposed that errors can be described from the L2 without making any reference to the students’ L1. Nowadays, the development of students’ language awareness has come to the fore (Cots & Nussbaum, 2002; James, 1998; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2001), incorporating the advantages of former paradigms, among which the comparison of the learners’ different languages is obviously included.

When students set about learning a foreign language, they are not a tabula rasa, since they know at least their own L1, and perhaps also an L2, as is the case with bilinguals. It is a fact that learners are used to making comparisons between the
languages they know. It has been clearly demonstrated (Lasagabaster, 1998; Sanz, 2000) that balanced bilinguals have a more developed metalinguistic awareness, which facilitates the learning of a foreign language. Consequently, it can also be expected that, when it comes to correcting errors, learners are also accustomed to making use of strategies that help them progress in their learning. Nevertheless, in many cases teachers neither exploit nor foster adequately the strategies that students already possess, thus missing the opportunity to benefit from their previous linguistic knowledge.

We agree with Schultz (1996) when he remarks that if we are to establish some sort of pedagogical credibility and increase students’ participation, teachers must make an effort to explore what students think to be the best way to learn a language (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002, 2003). This should lead us to find some common ground with space for both teachers’ and students’ expectations. With this in mind, we want to discover whether students make any effective use of the strategies they already possess and, also, whether they find teachers’ corrections in the classroom efficient. This study is based on the work of James and Acton (2002), whose participants were four Socrates/Erasmus students at the University of Wales, Bangor. These authors conclude that even students with limited linguistic competence are capable of developing their linguistic awareness by analysing the Error Correction Moves (ECM henceforth) carried out by the teacher.

Method

Our sample consisted of 21 participants: 11 undergraduates enrolled in English Studies at the University of the Basque Country and 10 teachers of English as a foreign language. The students were in their third or fourth year and were taking the subject English Syllabus Design. As for the teachers, their teaching experience ranged from three to 13 years at different educational levels; nine of them in primary and secondary education, and one in private language schools. Nine of them were Basque and one was a native speaker of English. As for gender, 18 were females and three were males (two students and one teacher), which, owing to the very limited number of male participants, hinders the possibility of a relevant examination of the data from a gender-difference perspective.

To avoid terminological confusion surrounding the terms learner and teacher, the participants in the experiment will be called students and teachers, while those who appear in the video excerpt will be referred to as instructor and pupils.

The participants watched a 15-minute excerpt from a commercially produced teaching video (Lubelska & Matthews, 1997), in which an instructor of English teaches her secondary pupils. This particular excerpt is rich in ECMs and, moreover, there is a substantial lapse of time between one ECM and the next, which could facilitate students’ noticing. These pupils are enrolled in model D, that is to say, a linguistic programme in which Basque is the vehicle language for all subjects except Spanish language and literature. Thus, they are bilingual in Basque-Spanish, English being their L3.

The excerpt works on the description of illnesses, their symptoms and their treatment, with a view to carrying out a role-play in which a pupil will be the
doctor and the partner the patient. The class that participants observed is divided into three parts: (i) introduction and revision of relevant vocabulary (there are several ECMs during this first stage); (ii) before doing an oral comprehension activity, in which they listen to a conversation between doctor and patient, pupils are asked to work in pairs and fill in the missing words in the dialogue; (iii) they listen to the dialogue to correct and complete the gaps. In this final stage there are also some ECMs.

After watching the video twice, students and teachers were invited to detect the error correction moves made by the instructor, classify them and judge their efficiency on a three-point scale: very efficient, efficient or not efficient. Afterwards, they had to explain why they considered the correction to be efficient or not. Thus, they were asked to justify their choice stating what type of error it was: pronunciation error, grammatical error, vocabulary error, pragmatic error or those errors that took place during the listening comprehension exercise.

The students and teachers were not provided with a working definition of efficiency, as we wanted them to rely on their own understanding of the term. As a matter of fact, an analysis of the comments they made provides the components of their definitions: use of the blackboard, speed of correction, time devoted to the ECM, contrasting of their different languages, repetition, individualisation, use of the blackboard and body language, or importance given to the affective factor. Therefore, efficiency is understood as the ability to correct errors appropriately and produce the results intended by using the available means in the most effective way.

After completing this task individually in writing, they were given a transcript of the excerpt including all the ECMs carried out by the instructor. The participants were split into six groups (three teacher groups and three student groups) and asked to exchange opinions about the efficiency of the correction. Students and teachers had to give their opinion in their groups even in those cases in which the ECMs went unnoticed while watching the video. Their conversations were recorded for later analysis.

Results

In this section we will firstly present the transcript of each of the ECMs that took place in the video, and then the comments made by the participants both in writing and speaking will be analysed.

Error 1

Instructor: Why did you go to the doctor’s?
Pupil: Er... the last time because... I have... hurt in my leg.
Instructor: You had a pain in your leg? How did it happen?

Table 1 ECM 1

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 1 (hurt/had a pain)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eight students and all the teachers detected this error. As regards the perceived efficiency of the correction, just one of the students thought it efficient, whereas it was not efficient for the rest. Both in writing and in groups they agreed on the need for a more extended explanation. Four teachers found the correction very efficient and three efficient, claiming that the timing was adequate, while three of them did not think much of its effectiveness. The latter considered this ECM too fast and criticised the instructor for not using the blackboard. The most striking result is that students’ opinions are much more homogeneous than those of the teachers.

Error 2

Pupil: Because I had a flu.
Instructor: Flu. You had the flu.

Table 2 ECM 2

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<th>Students</th>
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<th>Teachers</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 2 (the/a flu)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of the students and just one of the teachers spotted this ECM, a fact which speaks for itself about its efficiency. When discussing in groups, students emphasised that the pupil in the video excerpt did not notice the correction either and elaborated on the fact that if they, whose command of English was better, did not spot it, nor would a pre-university student with a lower proficiency. The teachers suggested the lack of explanation and use of the blackboard on the part of the instructor to explain the ECM going unnoticed. Even the native speaker was not aware of it. However, most of them approved of the instructor’s reluctance to spend much time on this ECM: ‘The teacher (instructor) cannot stop after every single error’; ‘At this point it is not relevant to correct it.’

Error 3

Pupil: Because I had a stains in my . . . skin.
Instructor: You like like spots? Or . . . OK. A stain, you have a stain on your shirt, like ketchup falls on your shirt, you try to wash it, you get a stain. But on your skin you have spots.

Table 3 ECM 3

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 3 (spots-stains)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All students praised the instructor’s skill in showing clearly by means of meaningful examples the difference between stains and spots. In the group discussion this was revealed by the following comment. ‘This is the only error that the teacher (instructor) explains well’, which clearly depicts the fact that the
instructor dedicated more time to the explanation and supported it with a greater number of clarifying examples.

Nine out of the 10 teachers detected this error (three thought it was very efficient and six efficient). The reasons adduced coincided with those of the students, but they commended the way she involved the students and also applauded the instructor’s body language when explaining the lexical differences: the instructor touches her shirt, mimics ketchup falling on the sleeve and washing the stain; she also touches her face repeatedly and draws imaginary spots on her face.

Error 4

Pupil: Headaches [ich].
Instructor: Headaches [eiks]. OK Headaches [eiks].

Table 4 ECM 4

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<thead>
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<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECM 4 (headaches)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one student noticed this pronunciation ECM. When students discussed it in groups a great discrepancy surfaced. On the one hand, there were those who praised the use of the blackboard by the instructor to facilitate the noticing: she writes headaches on the blackboard while repeating the word twice. On the other hand, some students argued in favour of using phonetic symbols: ‘the teacher (instructor) should have used phonetic symbols on the blackboard’, although their group mates reminded them that at this level phonetics is not usually taught.

50% of the teachers noticed this ECM. The four teachers who found it very efficient based their opinion on the adequacy of pupils’ chorus repetition as a useful technique when correcting pronunciation errors. The group discussion bore the same fruit. The only one who regarded the ECM as not efficient said that mere repetition was not enough and, furthermore, when pupils filled in the blanks wrongly, the instructor did not correct them.

Error 5

Instructor: Stomach ache.
Class: Stomach ache [ich] (some students seemed to pronounce this word following the pronunciation pattern followed in Error 4).
Instructor: Stomach ache [keik].

Table 5 ECM 5

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<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECM 5 (stomach ache)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
In this case only two students spotted the mispronunciation of the last syllable of the words *stomachache*. They regarded this ECM as not efficient, a clear sign of how difficult it is for students in general to detect pronunciation corrections. They stated that ‘group correction is not sufficient. Individualisation is needed’. They also stressed the cons of group repetition: ‘Students (pupils) repeat, but as this repetition is not done on an individual basis, we just don’t know if everybody pronounced the word correctly’; ‘Moreover, some try to duck out of it’. The use of the blackboard was again commended by the students: the instructor writes *stomach ache* after saying the word, then underlines –*ache* and writes the phonetic symbol [k] below while eliciting group repetition of the word.

Just one teacher saw this ECM and considered it not to be efficient, which seems to be confirmed by his colleagues, none of whom noticed it. It is worth pointing out that the teachers discussed these two pronunciation ECMs in depth, which clearly shows their concern about pronunciation aspects. In fact, they exchanged opinions as both teachers and learners of other foreign languages, reflecting on the most suitable techniques for the teaching of pronunciation. They commented on the benefits of chorus repetition (‘the student notices his error anonymously within the group without suffering any pressure’), as well as those of individualisation and the effect of the written code on pronunciation (‘the student – pupil – reads *stomachache* and pronounces it following the Spanish pattern of pronunciation’).

**Error 6**

**Pupil 1:** . . . a really bad pain, doctor. Down here.

**Pupil 2:** Mmm, OK.

**Instructor:** Er . . . It’s not exactly OK.

**Class:** All right.

**Instructor:** All right. All right. You got the idea.

### Table 6 ECM 6

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Students</th>
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<th>Teachers</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 6 (OK/All right)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>90%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This ECM takes place after pupils have completed a fill-in-the-gap exercise in pairs in their books. The instructor tells them to imagine they are at the doctor’s listening to a conversation between doctor and patient. The pupils have to predict what the doctor and patient say. Most of the conversation is already in their textbooks and they just have to fill in some words. In pairs they compare their answers before listening to the tape, and once they have listened to it, some pupils role-play the situation reading the conversations aloud. It is at this point that the ECM takes place.

Pupils should have filled in the gap with the expression *All right*, but they write down *OK*. The instructor is looking for accuracy, as she wants them to write the exact word. All the students but one seemed to have identified this ECM, although it has to be said that seven of them did not detect its exact nature, as
shown in their written explanations. They place it in the vocabulary category, when it is in fact a question of accuracy. According to the students, this ECM did not need any correction: ‘I don’t think it is important to correct it.’ However, they expressed their concern about how the correction was made: ‘The student (pupil) may feel embarrassed, especially if he is shy. One must be careful about how corrections are made.’

All but one of the teachers grasped this ECM, although there was disagreement about its efficacy (three thought it very efficient, three efficient and three not efficient). Those who valued it favourably maintained that the instructor’s correction involved all the pupils (the one who is corrected and his classmates), which would force them to reflect on it. The main reason put forward by those who labelled it as not efficient was that this correction was not essential and the instructor should have waited until the end of the activity to make it. Their opinions can be summarised in one of the teachers’ remarks: ‘She does not explain the difference; she just corrects and asks them: You got the idea. What idea does she refer to if she has not explained anything?’ When working in groups, the teachers agreed with the students and estimated that correcting the difference between OK and All right was not relevant. What is more, they did not endorse the instructor’s interrupting the dialogue simply to introduce the precise word. They also criticised her for butting in (‘She cuts in; she should have made the correction later on’). One of the groups also shared the students’ opinion and stressed that the correction was abrupt, whereas other colleagues disagreed and stated it had not been brusque.

Error 7

Pupil: Now.. just lay down . . . here.
Instructor: How do you spell that?
Pupil: < L . . . A >?
Instructor: No. The other . . . it’s the other verb.
Pupil: < I >
Instructor: < L . . . I . . . E > . . .

Table 7 ECM 7

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<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 7 (lay/lie)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In this ECM the instructor suggests the verb lie instead of lay, two irregular verbs that students in general habitually find confusing. Although the instructor asked the pupil to spell the word and she wrote the three tenses of the verb lie on the blackboard while repeating them, four students did not notice it. Analysing their written opinions, we observed that four viewed it as efficient and three as not efficient. When in groups, what they had justified in writing appeared again, that is to say, those who thought it not efficient stressed the instructor’s fast correction and lack of a more detailed explanation of a grammatical issue which happens to be very difficult for pupils: ‘She explains very little and very fast something
which needs more explanation. Students (pupils) don’t notice it; ‘She just
does not explain why this verb is like that, whether it is regular or irregular . . .’
Some others defended her: ‘If the teacher (instructor) corrected everything, it
would be torture. She has to correct, but not everything.’

Eight out of 10 teachers detected this ECM and all of them except one consid-
ered this correction very efficient or efficient. As for the efficiency of this strategy,
the teachers put forward two main reasons: the use of the blackboard and the fact
that she asks the pupils to remember and spell the verb (‘She involves the
students – pupils – in the correction’). All of them agree on the difficulty these
two verbs entail: ‘It is easy to be mistaken with these verbs’, and even the native
speaker teacher joined in and said: ‘It is short but efficient. Who can remember
the different tenses of lie and lay?’ This complexity was also dealt with by the
teachers when they were working in groups.

Error 8

Pupil: OK. How long have you had it?
Instructor: Oh dear. Oh dear, How long have you had it? <D . . E . . A . . R>

Table 8 ECM 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 8 (Ok/Oh dear)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This ECM falls within the listening comprehension task mentioned above
(ECM 6). The instructor wants the pupil to provide the exact words on the tape,
that is to say, Oh dear instead of OK. Although seven out of 11 students realised
there was some sort of ECM going on, just one was capable of pinpointing its
exact nature, whereas the rest thought it had to do with intonation and pronunci-
ation, or simply had no clear idea about what the error was. We can therefore
conclude that students did not fully understand the ECM, as was clearly
reflected in both the individual written and the group oral discussions.

As for the teachers, only one of them spotted the exact nature of the ECM and
judged it as efficient because of the use of repetition and the strategy of spelling.
However, the difficulty of perceiving this ECM is clear, as, although six teachers
were aware of some kind of correction, they were not capable of categorising it
adequately. Once again, this error is seen as a pronunciation or intonation prob-
lem: ‘The accent and the intonation the student (pupil) uses are not adequate, and
that’s why the teacher (instructor) corrects him’; another teacher commented:
‘The teacher (instructor) provides the pronunciation model of the sentence.’ The
following remark, focused on the grammatical aspect of the sentence, is a really
conspicuous example of the confusion surrounding this ECM: ‘The past partic-
iple must be used in the formation of the present perfect.’

Group interaction allowed that two of the three groups of teachers were
finally aware, once they saw the written version of the ECM, that what the
instructor intended was to retrieve the words used in the tape. The third group
did not realise it even having the written version.
Error 9

Pupil: Appendicitis [-i’sitis]
Instructor: Appendicitis [-is’aitis] OK. Very good. Appendicitis. This’-itis’ [-itis], Spanish [-itis], in English is [-aitis] OK say appendicitis.

Pupil: Appendicitis
Instructor: Double < p > Appendicitis.

Table 9 ECM 9

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<th>Students</th>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 9 (appendicitis)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this ECM the instructor corrects the hispanicised pronunciation of ‘appendicitis’. Seven students identified it and the majority (five) valued it as very efficient. They particularly liked the comparison strategy the instructor used, distinguishing and comparing the English and Spanish pronunciations of this word (which has the same spelling in both languages). Their opinions are clearly depicted in the following statement: ‘She contrasts both languages, which is very useful.’

For six of the teachers it was clear that she was correcting the pronunciation of appendicitis, and asserted that it was a very efficient ECM. The two main reasons were: (i) the provision of the right model and its repetition, and (ii) the comparison of the pronunciation of the suffix -itis in Spanish and English. The following citation neatly summarises the feelings of the six teachers: ‘She uses repetition to correct the pronunciation, which I think is the best way; she also writes on the blackboard and compares it with Spanish.’

In groups they confirmed this positive judgement, adding that it was a necessary ECM taking into account the lexical content of the lessons. They also applauded the use of the blackboard.

Error 10

Pupil: Take an aspirin . . . Drink more . . . er . . . more water.
Instructor: Drink a lot of liquids . . .

Table 10 ECM 10

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<th>Students</th>
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<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 10 (water/lot of liquids)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</table>

This is one of the pragmatic ECMs, where the instructor drew the pupils’ attention to the limitation of the word water, i.e. for explaining the doctor’s advice properly. The recommended intake of liquids should not be restricted to water. The most striking result is that none of the students captured this semantic subtlety, either individually or even during the group discussion, when they had the written version of the ECM.
Perceptions of Error Correction

As regards the teachers, only two of them perceived the instructor’s correction, reasoning that it was a very efficient one, approving of the way their colleague elaborated on the pupil’s initial output, and suggesting *more liquids* in general. Nonetheless, it is striking that only two of 21 participants noticed this particular ECM.

This ECM, together with ECM 11, was the one in which more heed was paid by both groups. Most informants said that it was not an ECM, but rather ‘a different way of stating the same, she is just paraphrasing and providing them with linguistic resources’. Just one of the teachers considered that her colleague intended to make pupils aware of the need to qualify the doctor’s recommendation: ‘I like it. She widens, elaborates on what the student (pupil) says, because it is not just water.’ Two other issues arose during the teachers’ discussion: (i) The affective aspect of the correction: ‘It is risky because it can make students (pupils) think that what the student (pupil) says is wrong, it can prevent him from participating.’ (ii) They also admitted their own guilt on the hot issue of turn-taking, as they accepted that ‘sometimes teachers don’t allow students to start or continue the interaction by interpreting what they say or even finishing their sentences without allowing them to express themselves’.

Error 11

Pupil: Don’t speak.
Instructor: Don’t speak *so much*. Good.

Table 11 ECM 11

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<th>Students</th>
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<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM 11 (don’t speak so much)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

As happened in the previous ECM, this pragmatic error was not detected by any of the students, either when analysing it individually or, more surprisingly, when working in groups and with the written version in front of them. Moreover, no discussion emerged in any of the three groups. In this case the instructor tries to make the pupil aware of the importance of speaking properly, since *don’t speak* implies prohibition, whereas *don’t speak so much* involves moderation.

None of the teachers spotted it either. However, unlike with the students, this ECM triggered abundant comments from the teachers after seeing the written version. Two of the three groups stressed the efficiency of the instructor’s correction (curiously enough, they did not spot it after watching the video twice), as they thought that a more detailed explanation of the doctor’s advice was needed. Furthermore, it is also contradictory that the very same participants did not consider that ECM 10 (also a pragmatic one) needed further explanation, whereas they say just the opposite with respect to ECM 11. One of the teachers becomes the spokesman of their colleagues when she says: ‘These things need to be corrected and the pupil has to be aware that they need to express themselves more precisely.’ One of the teachers went further through a humorous remark,
which would surely have improved the pupils’ noticing as well as the efficiency of the instructor’s correction: ‘She should have told them: And so what? Don’t speak till you are discharged in 15 days’ time?’

Error 12

Pupil: Since when does it hurt?
Instructor: OK. Wha-how long has it... been happening to him? When did it start?

Table 12 ECM 12

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<th>Students</th>
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<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECM 12 (since when does it hurt?)</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
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</table>

This time the pupil translates literally from Spanish desde cuándo, which makes him use the simple present tense, not correct in English in this context. None of the students observed the instructor’s correction. In the recordings they admitted that this error went unnoticed (‘I did not realise it was a mistake, I needed to see it again’) and at the same time they remarked the need for the instructor to dedicate more time and give a more lengthy explanation. In this way this ECM would have been more effective in their opinion. Consequently, it was regarded as not efficient.

Although six of the teachers detected it, they agreed with the students and termed the instructor’s move as not efficient: ‘It was too quick, I don’t think the pupil notices it.’ During their group discussion, they elaborated on this idea, but also pointed out that the instructor should have explained tense usage: ‘Without going too deep, at this point she should have reminded him of the use of the right verb tense, because at this level pupils should have a good command of the tenses.’ Similarly, they are of the opinion that interference should have been dealt with: ‘It would have been a good idea to make them aware of the interference from Spanish, since the problem is that the pupil is translating literally from Spanish. She could have explained the use of how long.’

Conclusions

We agree with Lapkin and Swain (1990) when they affirm that it is striking, given the high frequency of errors that are made when learning languages and the amount of time devoted to their correction, that we know so little about the effects of this correction. There is a quite general lack of knowledge of the results obtained through the different approaches and strategies. Bearing this in mind, we endeavoured to tackle this issue by gathering both teachers’ and students’ opinions, which would ideally allow us to compare the different perceptions of these two groups. As Kern (1995: 71) points out, the beliefs of teachers and students are important for understanding the process of learning, because they can help us to prevent those conflicts that may augment frustration, anxiety and lack of motivation on the part of the student, or even their giving up the learning of the foreign language.
Perceptions of Error Correction

First of all, out of a total 132 potential occasions for error detection (the result of multiplying the 12 ECMs by the eleven students), fewer than a third (28%) were actually realised: i.e. 37 ECMs. This was despite their command of English being higher than that of the pupils they observed on the videotaped excerpt. In the case of the teachers, the number realised was greater – 58 (48.3%) out of 120 ECMs (12 ECMS multiplied by 10 teachers). Therefore, it can be concluded that there was a clear difference in the perception of ECMs in favour of the teachers. Nevertheless, the overall figures clearly demonstrate that most went unnoticed, which should make us reflect in order to improve this particular area of our teaching.

To sum up, Table 13 shows the error detection mean for each of the two groups:

**Table 13 Mean of detected ECMs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detected</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 14 Strategies recommended by teachers and students to correct errors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation errors</td>
<td>Individualisation</td>
<td>Individualisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMs 4, 5 &amp; 9</td>
<td>L1-L2/L3 contrast</td>
<td>L1-L2/L3 contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of the blackboard</td>
<td>Chorus repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening comprehension errors</td>
<td>Affective factor (attention to <em>how</em> and <em>when</em>)</td>
<td>Affective factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMs 6 &amp; 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar errors</td>
<td>Explain <em>why</em> it is an error</td>
<td>More detailed explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMs 2, 7 &amp; 12</td>
<td>More detailed explanation (devote more time)</td>
<td>More detailed explanation (devote more time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of the blackboard</td>
<td>Use of the blackboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of L1-L2/L3 contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary errors</td>
<td>More detailed explanation (devote more time)</td>
<td>More time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMs 1 &amp; 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of the blackboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of body language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Try to involve students more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic errors</td>
<td>No strategies suggested</td>
<td>No strategies suggested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMs 10 &amp; 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five types of error can be distinguished (Table 14). Concerning pronunciation errors, except for ECM 4, there are no differences between groups in the number of detected errors. Both groups go for individualisation and the use of comparative strategies between languages. The latter was highly regarded, which clearly stresses the perceived importance of fostering students’ language awareness. Students stress that simply providing the correct pronunciation is not enough. Students also favour the visual support of the blackboard, whereas teachers suggest chorus repetition, a strategy that the students in our sample are not very fond of.

The second category embraces errors that occurred during the correction of
the listening activity. This is a clear example of how students sometimes simply do not understand corrections that we take for granted. ECM 6 triggered among the students a vivid debate on the affective factor of the correction, a fact which draws our attention to the need to be careful when correcting students in front of the whole class. The teachers, on the other hand, concentrated on the bright side of the affective variable: ‘She doesn’t make her pupils feel uncomfortable. Corrections are short and carried out tactfully; there is no pressure.’

Both groups agree on the grammar errors, our third category, and remark on the need for more time and more elaborate explanations. Students include the necessity for providing the reasons for the correction. This preference of both groups seems to be borne out by a study conducted by Lyster (1998) in a Canadian immersion setting, the results of which indicated that explicit correction of grammatical errors is not as efficient as negotiation of form. In short, simply providing the correction of the error is not enough to make the student repair their error.

In the case of vocabulary errors (fourth category), there are no differences between the six groups, except for the importance given by teachers to the use of body language. Although traditionally this strategy is more widely used by primary education teachers, according to the teachers in our sample it is also very fruitful when teaching teenagers with an intermediate command of the foreign language.

Finally, our results indicate that pragmatic errors are the least detected ones (0% among the students and 4.7% among teachers). This fact undoubtedly reveals the need to enhance reflection on this particular aspect of the communicative competence. After many years of implementing the so-called communicative approach, the development of pragmatic aspects is still an untrodden path. This is a question that worries both Basque and Spanish language teachers alike in the Basque Country, and therefore it is not limited to the foreign language. On the contrary, it might well be a consequence of the poor utilisation by the students of the discursive aspects even in the two co-official languages in our community.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The students in our sample state their preference for not being corrected constantly, as they feel inhibited. They prefer to communicate more freely rather than being continuously corrected. However, this does not mean (as their comments in group clarified) that they do not wish to be corrected. What they prefer is a more selective correction in which two aspects should be fundamental: a) more time should be devoted to each ECM; and b) a wider use of resources and strategies to improve the efficiency of the correction. The teachers share the students’ opinion, as summarised in the following reflection: ‘Learners grasped what the instructor wrote on the blackboard, because it makes them reflect. Quick corrections are not useful, unless they are about something repeatedly worked on in class.’ Perhaps the students mean they require *quick* correction of mistakes (caused by fatigue, anxiety, lack of attention or some other aspect of performance), but *extended* correction of errors (showing faulty or incomplete knowledge). Bearing in mind that the error/mistake distinction is a problematic
one, we consider that James’s (1998: 78) definition can be helpful. This author defines error ‘as being an instance of language that is unintentionally deviant and is not self-corrigible by its author’, whereas a mistake ‘is either intentionally or unintentionally deviant and self-corrigible’. However, on many occasions the main stumbling block is to determine whether a mistake is a slip or a genuine error. A follow-up study could take into account the distinction between error and mistake and analyse this issue.

The awareness of constraints on error correction is also relevant, as both the students and the teachers in our sample attribute value to it: for example, the effect of embarrassment/anxiety, the question of teacher-talk time versus learner-talk time, the impossibility of stopping after every error, the inefficacy of quick corrections, etc. Therefore, the quest for an optimum balance between priority of correction based on gravity and learner-talk time seems to be of paramount importance and could be negotiated between students and teachers taking into account the degree of language proficiency of the learners. Although there are signs in our data that show the preoccupation of the students about selective correction, this was not the focus of the present research study. This issue needs further research.

The idea of selective correction is supported by the large proportion of ECMs that were not noticed. Mantello’s (1997) results confirm this tendency, as students who had experienced the correction of a written exercise were also in favour of being less corrected and preferred their teacher to devote more time to a smaller number of errors.

Although the students’ different proficiency levels had an effect on the number of ECMs detected (the least proficient students detected fewer ECMs), they all had very clear ideas about what strategies are the best when it comes to correcting their errors. As stated in the introduction, we believe that the exploration of students’ opinions constitutes an essential source of information to improve the process of learning in general and correction strategies in particular.

Nevertheless, we should not assume that learners’ preferences for error correction must always be reliable. We should entertain the idea that learners may err in their judgements as much as they err in their production of the target language. Nevertheless, and curiously enough, the results in this study (see Table 14) demonstrate that the students and teachers in our sample coincide in the selection of the most effective strategies recommended to correct different kinds of errors. Moreover, we agree with Garrett and Shortall (2002: 48) when they state that those teachers who listen to their students’ voices ‘are more likely to foster and protect the enthusiasm, vitality and sustained commitment that their learners need in their efforts to learn a second language well’. Learners’ views ‘are useful for teachers, of course’.

Schmidt (1990) maintains that conscious perception is the necessary and sufficient condition to turn input into intake. Drawing from this tenet, Roberts (1995) concludes that efficacy in error correction stems from two factors. Firstly, the learner has to be aware of being corrected, and secondly, he must understand the nature of the correction. His study suggests that learners are only aware of ECMs momentarily, and even when they are, it is more than likely in many situations that they do not understand the nature of their error, which corroborates our
results. Lee (1997) and Plumb et al. (1994), among others, affirm that one of the main stumbling blocks for students is the mere detection of errors, a detection which on many occasions is not hindered by lack of linguistic knowledge. Many teachers are aware that a high proportion of our students do not notice errors, their nature or the teachers’ ECMs until it is made explicit in a direct way by the teachers themselves. The challenge for teachers then is to provide the learner with corrections that they both notice and understand. Although this seems obvious, Roberts’ (1995) and our results reveal that this is not always the case. Thus, teachers should always make sure that their ECMs are understood.

Last but not least, different learners learn and respond to ECMs in different ways. Some learners need visual aids, others respond to audio signals, still others require a kinetic input. In a one-to-one class, or perhaps with a small group, the teacher may be able to respond to these differing needs and the learning preferences of the students. With a class of 20 students this is far more difficult, if not impossible. However, we, as foreign language teachers, should try to look for a minimum common denominator which may help us be more effective when correcting errors. This article is a first step in this direction.

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