

Reflecting on error treatment in speaking among EFL Moroccan learners

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Abstract: During speech production, intervening psychological, sociolinguistic and pedagogical factors interfere in the process and cause the EFL teaching/learning process of speaking to be a highly demanding undertaking for both teachers and learners. Previous research has investigated some of these factors and pointed out agents that may affect students' oral performance such as automaticity and feedback. Correspondingly and basing on empirical research, the present article reflects on teachers' feedback on errors during the speaking phase particularly. It advances evidence of how in addition to other factors previously identified like vocabulary deficiency¹ and error anxiety, one important factor is a perceptible delay in error repair in teachers' feedback on the speaking skill among EFL Moroccan learners during the speaking phase particularly.

Key words: reflections on speech production, teachers' feedback, error-repair, learners and teachers perceptions.

I. Introduction

Relying on previous research, evidence has been brought forward as to the complexity of the speaking process if gauged basing on a pluri-disciplinary exploration. From a psychological viewpoint (Levelt, 1989, 1994; Vecera & O'Reilly, 1998; Goolkasian, 2000), it is a process entailing simultaneously the functioning of many other speech processes while from a sociolinguistic perspective, it is a discursively constructed phenomenon dependent on the functions of the language it serves in a social group (Austin, 1961,1962; Searle, 1969, 1979; Cameron, 2001) and on cultural and conversational strategies (Mauranen, 2006; Markee, 2008; McKay,2008) that tailor most interactional or transactional situations. Pedagogically speaking however, the classroom entity constitutes a plausible field for the treatment, implementation and interaction of several of these dimensions in addition to the teaching methodology that incorporates *how* or *in what way* to tackle this complicated skill (Brown & Yule, 1983; McCarthy, 1998; Folse, 2006; Bygate, 1991, 1998, 2001, 2009).

Therefore, and for the importance it holds during the EFL teaching/learning process of this controversial skill, feedback is found to be one among other important factors that influence the process and cause its alteration (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ayoun, 2001; Swain, 2000, 2008; Savignon, 2008). Accordingly, the focus of the present article will be on empirically demonstrating how this important factor shows highly determinant for the speaking skill in the Moroccan classes particularly. Henceforth, the article will attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of teachers' feedback in Moroccan EFL classes?
2. How do teachers attend to learners errors² in Moroccan secondary classes?
3. Is there any effect of teaching experience on error correction?

II. Method

Design

The present article adheres to a mixed design *modus operandi*, it is both a qualitative and a descriptive one. A descriptive study may be used to elaborate on a theory, affiliate problems to current practice, gauge current practice or associate what others in similar situations are doing with corresponding practices while a qualitative one is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, concerns, and in this instance teaching styles and methods of instruction. It is agreed upon that it involves focus groups, in-depth interviews, content analysis, ethnography of communication (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:116), as well as evaluation and analysis of any unstructured interviews or checklists.

¹ Reference to previous article: Sakale, S & Seffar, S. 2012. **The role of lexis in developing EFL learners speaking skill.** *Sino- US English Teaching*, 9(9)

² For practical reasons, error and mistake have been used interchangeably to allude to a wrong speech act, wrong pronunciation or use of grammatical structure (verb tense for instance)attributable to bad judgment, or ignorance, or inattention

Therefore, the study attempts to explore teachers' perceptions and the characteristics of their feedback, the way teachers attend to learners' errors, and whether there is any effect of teaching experience on error correction (independent variables) and the speaking skill as a dependant variable. It examines whether and to what extent modifications in the independent variables cause or are linked to any observed differences in the dependent variable.

Population Vs Sample

The term population in a research context refers to all the members or objects of any defined group which might be taken or about which information might be given. A research population refers to the entire group to which the research results might apply. On the other hand, the term sample refers to the members of that population selected to take part in the investigation since it is impossible to include the entire target population. The population sample included in the study will be described in detail below.

EFL teachers

Forty EFL English teachers have contributed to this investigation. The teachers' population has been subdivided into four different categories ranging from those who have less than ten years to those who have more than twenty years using a scale of ten years difference for each category.

Table (1): Teaching Experience

| Years of experience | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|
| less than ten years | 21 | 52,5 |
| more than ten years | 7 | 17,5 |
| more than fifteen years | 2 | 5,0 |
| more than twenty years | 10 | 25,0 |
| Total | 40 | 100,0 |

Half of the teachers' population have an experience of at least ten years with a corresponding percentage of 47.5% including a significant proportion of teachers (25%) who have a considerably long experience as EFL teachers (more than 20 years) while 52.5% have an experience of less than ten years.

III. Results

Table (2): Teachers' reactions to learners' mistakes

| How do you treat grammatical mistakes in your students' speaking? | A | U | S | R | N | M | T | q* | p* |
|---|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|-----|------|
| 1-You correct them as soon as they arise | 1 2.5% | 7 17.5% | 3 7.5% | 10 25% | 14 35% | 5 12.5% | 40 100% | 108 | .000 |

*p<.05 ; * q= 108 [A= always; U= usually; S= sometimes; R= rarely; N= never; M= missing; T= total; q= chi-squared value; p= probability]

Table (2) describes teachers' reactions to learners' grammatical mistakes and how a good proportion of teachers is recorded not to correct them. Highly significant corresponding q level and p value capture this tendency. Proportions related to never and rarely reach a percentage of (60%) adding rarely (25%) and never (35%). A more detailed crosstab with teaching experience shows the effect of teaching experience on mistake correction.

Table (3): Crosstab on the effect of teaching experience on mistake correction

| | | You correct them as soon as they arise | | | | | Total |
|---|-------------------------|--|---|---|----|----|-------|
| | | A | U | S | R | N | |
| How long have you been teaching English? | less than ten years | 0 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 6 | 19 |
| | more than ten years | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 6 |
| | more than fifteen years | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | more than twenty years | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 8 |
| Total | | 1 | 7 | 3 | 10 | 14 | 35 |

The above crosstab shows the general tendency of teachers' responses regarding error correction during speaking activities and the corresponding juxtaposition of these with teaching experience. The estimation shows a confirmation to what table 2 registers: a noticeable delay in error correction for all teaching experience categories.

These quantitative results are very indicative of the treatment of error correction, but more evidence will be brought with the qualitative results below:

Table (4): results of interviews with teachers on their feedback on learners' errors

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Teachers' Instructions and Feedback | <i>Treatment of grammatical mistakes in Ss speaking</i> | 1. Ignoring/ not correcting: 49% 2. Waiting & pointing: 46% 3. Peer correction: 5% T= 100% |
|--|---|--|

Qualitative findings as above table show capture a tendency of recurrence to same results as quantitative results above. Therefore, regarding error treatment for instance, qualitative findings show that nearly 50% ignore errors, 46% delay correction, and only 5% resort to peer correction and these include all teaching experience categories.

Two resulting arguments could be held: first that teaching experience has no effect on error correction, and second that a change in teachers' feedback (providing learners with a negative evidence) can result in improving learners speaking.

IV. Discussion

Both qualitative and quantitative current findings retain that Moroccan teachers do not provide learners with a negative evidence when the learners commit mistakes/errors in form and do not negotiate the errors with them including different teaching experience categories investigated. Though meaning negotiation is done, form negotiation is either discarded or delayed. However, research done in this area shows that form negotiation serves the meaning too and helps learners establish the link between the form and the meaning of the utterances (Swain, 1985, 2000, 2008; Lycaster, 1998; Williams, 2008). More clearly, results related to teachers' feedback on errors in the present investigation reveal that teachers do not interrupt students to correct and/or negotiate the errors, and instead encourage them to talk even when they commit errors in message form (tables 2 & 3 above). The values registered, the chi-squared tests and the crosstabs capture the general tendency of teachers' responses regarding error correction and how a noticeable overlook or delay in error correction is witnessed during the speaking production phase particularly.

Accordingly, significant records regarding error treatment show that nearly 50% of teachers ignore errors, 46% delay correction, and only 5% resort to peer correction (table 4 above). This is indicative of a deficiency at the level of negotiation and repair of the form of learners' utterances in Moroccan secondary EFL classes. Therefore, the chi-squared tests related to students' perceptions have diagnosed teachers' feedback as a highly significant variable during the teaching/learning process of the speaking skill, more particularly at the level of *form negotiation and more precisely for repair* including all teaching experience categories. Similar empirical results on this issue have been reached by Kouichi Ano (2002) when dealing with fluency and accuracy in the spoken English of Japanese high school learners. In addition, and quite interestingly, these findings have also shed light on the fact that repetitions and repairs can indeed be the cause of producing a larger number of words in class.

Pedagogical implications

The problematic query the current article raises concerns the extent to which a change in teachers' type of feedback such as providing learners with a corrective negative evidence when their answers are not accurate and encouraging them to do the repair can result in improving learners' speaking. In answer to this question, the findings of the present study provide evidence that it is indeed at the level of repair that Moroccan learners have the problem for all teaching experience categories. This leads to the tentative conclusion that repair can indeed be a factor in promoting accuracy while speaking in the target language which corroborates findings revealed by other studies such as those conducted by Ano (1998, 1998, 2002). However, there remains the intertwined controversy concerning how many of the errors rectified by teachers will be recognized as such by learners and what techniques should be employed by teachers to enable learners to modify and ultimately repair their miscommunications.

Since in the present study results have shown that what is more problematic is rather 'form-negotiation', a suitable technique can be proposed which, as Williams explains, helps increase accuracy. This technique has been introduced by Muranoi (2000) and is described as a "*pedagogical technique that interconnects input and output enhancement*". Williams explains it as follows:

... in response to TL (teacher language) use, the teacher repeated learners' output, helping to confirm learners' hypotheses. In response to non-target like output, the teacher requested repetition, and if necessary, recast learner output. Muranoi found this technique effective in increasing accuracy... (p. 685)

The highly significant results related to pronunciation for instance urge for the necessity of repeating and recasting learners' output in Moroccan EFL secondary classes and negotiating the form of the utterances in an attempt to establish the link with meaning. Students' perceptions have revealed the need for this particular aspect of negotiation. This might serve as a technique to relate meaning to form and enhance learners' output. At the level of pronunciation, it should be noted that teachers' repetitions can be effective in stressing what to keep and follow and what to avoid or repair (Kenworthy, 1994; Florez, 1999; Hall, 1997).

A similar view is shared by Swain (2000) who holds that "modifications of learner output toward the target language by the intervention of an interlocutor/teacher" are effective as a method of providing concentrated *feedback on form*. Swain also calls them 'recasts' and qualifies them as 'a subset of feedback'. According to Williams (2008: 685), this is applicable either in experimental studies (Braid, 2002; Mackey & Philip, 1998; Long, 1998, Ortega, 1998), or in classroom studies (Ayoum, 2001; Doughty & Varela, 1998). All such empirical studies evoked show the efficiency of *recasts and interaction enhancement* used by teachers who did not just reformulate the utterance but mainly used "emphatic and rising intonation in their repetition of the learner error" (Williams, 2008: 685), highlighting thus the learners' error before providing the accurate forms, which made their feedback less ambiguous for the learners. Applicability of such feedback on form can improve Moroccan learners' speaking.

V. Conclusion

Correspondingly, the values recorded for both the qualitative and quantitative results highlight the pivotal *teachers' role* in the whole process. Findings show that teachers from all teaching experience categories studied do not provide learners with negative evidence when learners commit errors in form and do not negotiate the errors with them. In parallel, a noticeable anxiety towards errors has been retained among learners and which may also be linked to the above signaled *lack of form negotiation*. Finally, *some detectable interfering variables during the teaching/learning process of the speaking skill may be summed up as follows:*

Table (5): some detectable interfering variables during the teaching/learning process of the speaking skill, potential areas of remedial interference and short-term and long-term effects on learners' speaking:

| <i>Empirically detectable interfering variables in order of importance</i> | <i>Areas of remedial interference</i> | <i>Short-term effects on learners' speaking</i> | <i>Long term effects on learners' speaking</i> |
|--|--|--|--|
| Teachers' role | Teachers are invited to address speaking on its own and avoid any confusion while dealing with it. Teachers are invited to develop their instructional methodologies while teaching speaking | Learners will not withdraw in predictable speaking situations since they are comfortable and familiar with them. | Learners will identify what they want to say in this specific situation and choose the best strategy to say it. |
| Teachers' feedback | Teachers are invited to push learners up towards speech production and encourage them in different ways | Learners will be more motivated to engage in speaking | Learners in later stages can be more confident and autonomous |
| Form negotiation/ accuracy | Negative evidence of the non accuracy should be made clear to the learners and negotiation of errors should be made | Learners can start to establish the link between the form of an utterance and its meaning | Learners can develop awareness and recognition of the form and meaning and acquire the linguistic competence needed to link them |
| Error- Repair | Recasting errors and prompting learners to bring modifications in their speaking | Modifications on learners' speaking can start to take place | Less repetitions and shorter pauses in learners' speaking will be witnessed (both fluency and accuracy) |

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