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How Indonesian EFL learners perceive error corrections

¹Suatmo Pantja Putra, ²Hairus Salikin

¹D3 English Program, Faculty of Social and Politics Science, Universitas Merdeka Malang, Jl. Terusan Raya Dieng No. 62-64, 65149, Malang, Indonesia

²English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Jember University, Jl. Kalimantan No.37, 68121, Jember, Indonesia

Corresponding author: suatmo.panca@unmer.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of error corrections in speaking from learners' perspectives due to the fact that error corrections are often provided without considering the learners' point of view. Although the results of the research discussing effectiveness of error corrections in speaking remain unclear, especially in an English as Foreign Language (EFL) setting, they naturally exist particularly in the process of learning and teaching EFL. To examine the EFL learners' perceptions on corrections in speaking, nine EFL students were interviewed the effect of applying snowball sampling technique. The study meets the characteristics of qualitative research. The focus of the study is spoken error corrections, which naturally exist in an instructed Foreign Language learning situation and the researcher is the key instrument in that the researcher asks questions and interacts with the research subjects. The results of the interviews, which are audio recorded and transcribed, are analyzed to develop a descriptive model that encompasses all cases of the phenomena. The findings reveal that mispronunciation, grammatical errors, and lexical errors are important to be taken into account.

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1. Introduction

Error correction has been one of the core areas in the field of English language teaching. It is “seen as a form of feedback given to learners on their language use” (Amara, 2015). As an essential part of Foreign Language (FL) learning and teaching, it has been an issue for quite some time. However, that corrections actually work is still open to discussion. This means that opinions vary as to whether corrections are effective or not (Horner, 1988; Mings, 1993; Woods, 1989). In countries where English is taught as a foreign language, the problem of error correction, especially on speaking, is challenging since in this instructional setting, error correction is mostly provided by teachers who are not native speakers of the target language

(TL). As non-native speakers, they have to be careful about saying that (Amara, 2015) a particular form is wrong. This is because a certain expression might be wrong in speech but perfectly acceptable in a society.

Looking at the fact that defining errors in FL learning is perplexing (Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1998; Lennon 1991), this study needs to provide a working definition to avoid a misleading discussion. The practice of using a native speaker norm to define errors is not used in this study since most of the English teachers in Indonesia are not native speakers. It goes without saying their own utterances might be different from native speaker norms. Allwright, Allwright & Bailey (1991) explain that the teacher's response to the student's utterances could be considered the most important criterion for judging errors in formal classroom instruction of second or foreign languages. From these perspectives it might be beneficial to define errors in this study as: student's utterances that need to be improved by teachers because teachers usually do most of the corrections in instructed foreign language learning. This definition might be more practical for the students as well as for the researcher as a non-native speaker.

Nowadays, errors are viewed as integral parts of a language learning process and they are very significant. Some educators (Fauziati, 2003; Harsono, 2003) believe that making errors is part of learning and it cannot be avoided since it is natural. The changes in pedagogy have also influenced people's attitude towards errors and error corrections in FL learning. The recent approaches of FL learning and teaching are less emphasis on formal accuracy. Besides, those approaches are focused on fluency, especially in speaking classes (Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1991). In additions, learners' errors are considered important because they shed light on learners' learning process, that is why people should take more positive attitude towards them. Making errors is natural and this happens in native or non-native speakers of a certain language. When the learners are making errors, they might try their hypotheses about their beliefs of the language being learnt. This is one of the characteristics of good language learners (Harmer, 2002).

Since making errors is natural, this also occurs in the speech of adult when they are communicate with others in their mother tongue and "it is interesting to note that these errors are often ignored unless they cause some sort of breakdown in communication" (Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1991:88). As far as language is concerned, children also make errors when they are talking in their mother tongue but corrections are very rare and when corrections occur they tend to focus on meaning rather than form (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). It is very common that English native speakers children would say *Daddy goed* and *they comed* instead of *Daddy went* and *they came* (Harmer, 2002). This also might happen to adult FL learners indicating that all learners of a language, whether it is a first language (L1) or a foreign language, they all make errors (Bartram and Walton, 1999).

Talking about the importance of errors in FL learning and teaching, James (2013) cited Corder's ideas that errors are significant in three respects. Errors tell the teacher what needs to be taught; they tell the researchers how learning proceeds and they are a means whereby learners try their hypotheses about the TL. It is worth noting that making errors is an inescapable fact and it is an integral part of language learning and language use.

Although spoken error corrections can be very helpful during the oral work, teachers should be very careful when dealing with those errors due to the fact that speaking in a foreign language is particularly anxiety-provoking (Harmer, 2002). This could be because learners are often expected to perform beyond their acquired competence. Consequently, they might not be able to perform what the teachers ask them to do. That is why dealing with errors when the learners are speaking should be taken carefully. When it is not carefully taken care, corrections might not work, or even they might destroy the learners' efforts in trying to learn the TL.

As far as the research on the teachers' response on learners' spoken errors is concerned, the results of the study show that teachers do not correct all errors that do occur. The findings also reveal that teachers react to the learners' spoken errors in a wide variety of techniques. The important issue that should be taken into account when learners are making errors in speaking

is whether teachers are going to correct the errors or let them pass without any comment. This is so essential to consider since as non-native speakers of the TL, teachers may have rather a special problem in terms of their abilities even to notice learners' errors. Non-native teachers cannot be expected to correct errors that they cannot detect because their own target language grammar may not include all the phonological, lexical, syntactic or discourse rules needed to recognize and correct all the errors in the learners' output. They may ask what their own place is on the interlanguage continuum (Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1991).

The next issue related to error corrections in speaking classes is that the time of corrections. The teachers may deal with learners' errors immediately, or delay corrections somewhat, for example, until the learners finish with the message they were trying to convey. The problem with immediate corrections is that these practices might interrupt the learners in their mid-sentence. This could be disruptive and eventually inhibit the learners' willingness to speak in the TL. Inhibition, according to Lightbown & Spada (2001:55) in language learning could "discourage risk-taking which is necessary for progress in language learning".

Alternately, teachers may postpone their corrections until they finish talking. Unfortunately the psychology research literature shows that this kind of corrections become less effective (Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1991) since it is easy for the teachers to forget what the learners said (Harmer, 2002). In addition this practise might result in the confusion of other learners because they might realise that errors have been made but the teachers do not correct them. Though there is no single theory describing the whole story of when to correct the learners' spoken errors, it is still possible to find out some situations where teachers might prefer not to correct learners' spoken errors. On the contrary, there are other situations when correcting learners' spoken errors is likely to be helpful e.g. when the errors the learners made destroy or breakdown communication (Ur, 1996).

The general purpose of this research is to elaborate the spoken error corrections which exist in speaking classes as perceived by the EFL learners. In line with this purpose, the study intends to find out: (1) the appropriate time of spoken error corrections, (2) types of learner spoken errors to be prioritized for corrections, (3) the method of spoken error corrections, (4) the appropriate persons to correct learner spoken errors, (5) the effect of spoken error corrections on EFL learning.

2. Method

The study meets the characteristics of qualitative research intended to obtain in-depth understanding of error corrections from the students' perspectives. The respondents of the study are nine Indonesian students studying at tertiary level majoring in English (learner one to learner nine or L1 to L9). The reason of taking nine respondents is that the study applied snow ball sampling technique in collecting the data. The data were considered sufficient on the ninth respondents. This means that there were no more new information found related to the study. The data of the study were obtained by interviewing the research respondents to investigate their experiences about spoken error corrections. To avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations, the semi-structured interview which was audio-recorded, was conducted in Indonesian. The results of the interviews were analyzed to develop a descriptive model that encompasses all cases of the phenomena (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

Applying Seidman's (1991) model, the interview consists of three series which have different focus. Each series last about 20 to 90 minutes and it is conducted on different days. The study applies a semi-structured interview in that the researcher has a general idea of where he wants the interview to go but he does not construct a rigid list of questions. Interviewing the subjects in this study is aiming at understanding the experiences of the FL learners and the meaning they make of those experiences about oral error corrections.

After the first interview is conducted, the second one is organised in week two. Then the third interview is arranged to be done in week three. Each subject has to do the same series of interviews, that is three series of in depth interview. The data of the study are analysed on

the basis of the procedures suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The analysis consists of the concurrent flows of activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Applying the snow ball sampling technique the data are collected by interviewing the subjects. The learners' statements are categorised into five points based on the statement of the problems e.g. time of the corrections, errors that should be corrected, the way of correcting errors, persons to correct, and the effects of corrections on FL learning as a part of data reduction. Starting from data collection, the researcher is beginning to decide what the data mean. This process results in a tentative conclusion leading to a final one since analysis in a qualitative research is a continuous interactive flows of activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Result

Based on the results of the interviews, all subjects (L1 to L9) do not want their communication to be interrupted while they are talking. This means that they do not like spoken error corrections to be provided in mid talking.

By and large, the findings of the study show that there are three areas of errors which need to be considered in ELT, especially in speaking. These three areas of errors are mispronunciation, grammatical errors, and errors in vocabulary (L2, L3, L4, L6, L8, L9). It is worth noting that though the learners need corrections, it is not advisable to correct every error the learners made. This is because, as FL learners, they have their own priorities about which errors should be prioritized to be corrected and which ones should not.

Method of spoken error corrections is essential to be taken into account since learners might prefer a certain method compared to the others (L1, L2, L4, L5, L7, L8 and L9). The findings of the study indicate that the subjects of the study want their teacher and their friends to provide the right answers when correcting their spoken errors (L1 to L9). For example, when mispronunciation occurs in speaking classes, the teachers or other learners should provide the right pronunciation. This finding is in line with what was found by Akemi Katayana (2007). She found in her study that the most popular error correction method is providing the right answer. The results of the study also reveal that lecturers and classmates are appropriate persons for correcting learner spoken errors. The findings suggest that lecturers are more popular compared to the learners (L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9).

Some respondents (L1, L3, L4, L5, L7, L8, L9) are convinced that spoken error corrections will affect learning. They could improve their TL by learning error corrections they have received. The findings also show that there are two effects of corrections on learning i.e. negative and positive (L1 to L9). The positive effect of error corrections, is that the learners could be more enthusiastic about learning the TL. However, if error corrections are provided wrongly, this practice could make the learners unmotivated (that is a negative effect).

Based on those findings there are five substantive propositions that can be generated. They are: 1) Error corrections should be provided at the appropriate time, since mis-timed corrections could be harmful not helpful, 2) If error corrections are provided without considering learner preferences on types of errors to be corrected, the learners might not benefit from error corrections, 3) Providing the appropriate methods for correcting errors is worth considering due to the fact that inappropriate methods could result in negative effect to the learners being corrected, 4) The learners have their own preferences on the appropriate persons for providing error corrections in order to promote learning, 5) The learners will not improve their proficiency in English, if they are not corrected when they are making errors.

3.2. Discussion

Error Corrections in Speaking

As part of teaching, error corrections always exist in the learning and teaching process (Harmer, 2002). This means that it is difficult to avoid error corrections in the classroom. Error

corrections in the present study refer to the teachers' reactions to the learners' errors in the ELT, particularly in speaking classes. The results of the current study suggest that teachers often spontaneously correct learner errors in instructed settings. This means that error corrections, as part of the learning and teaching process, are mostly provided by teachers. However, it is important to create a situation that do not trigger anxiety, thus students are able to talk comfortably in a class (Salikin, 2011).

The findings suggest that the EFL learners like error corrections which are provided by their teachers. The learner strongly favorable attitude toward receiving error corrections in the present study is consistent with the results of previous studies. Katayama (2007), for example, who investigated Japanese and Korean EFL learners' preferences toward corrections of classroom oral errors, found that error corrections cannot be avoided in the process of EFL learning and teaching and corrections are usually provided by the EFL teachers. The results of her study also reveal that the EFL learners with different cultural background such as Japanese and Korean had positive attitude toward error corrections. This means that the EFL learners tend to like error corrections that provided in the process of learning and teaching. This is in line with one of the functions of the teachers in the process of learning and teaching, that is to correct learner errors (Ur, 1996; Gebhard, 2006).

The results of the current study suggest that the learners need error corrections and they believe that the corrections are very useful to improve their proficiency of the TL. The findings of this study confirm those of the previous studies which are focused on the same topic. Jeon & Kang (2005) investigated error corrections as perceived by the learners of Korean as a foreign language in the University of Pennsylvania. The subjects of their study are 55 students enrolled in the Korean language courses of that university. The focus of the study is to find out the learner preferences of error corrections in spoken Korean. The results of their study reveal that teacher's frequency of error corrections are below what the learners expected. This means that the learners need more error corrections when they are learning the Korean language.

The Appropriate Time of Spoken Error Corrections

The results of the current study show that the learners are convinced that corrections must be provided after the learners have talked in the TL. This means that they do not want their communication to be interrupted while they are speaking. There are some reasons why they object to be interrupted in the mid talking. The practice of interrupting the learners while they are talking destroys the flow of communication. Moreover, this practice discourages the learners of using the TL. When the learners are corrected in mid talking, they cannot focus on what they are going to express. In addition, the learners cannot concentrate on what they are going to say when they are interrupted in mid communication. This is in line with what is argued by Hammerly (1991), who claims that the only restriction of immediate corrections is that it should not interrupt learners in mid-sentence. This is due to the fact that this practice often creates lack of confidence in speaking English. It is argued by Bartram and Walton (1999), that confidence is a key word for FL learners to speak in the TL. It should be noted that speaking in a FL is anxiety provoking, let alone speaking in front of the classmates. In EFL settings, anxiety can create so much apprehension that the learners cannot function normally and most of us have experienced this type of anxiety.

Another bad effect of mistimed corrections is that the learners might feel offended because they are interrupted while they are talking in the TL. Harmer (2002) reminds FL teachers not to interrupt the learners in mid-flow to point out a grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation error, because to do so destroys communication. Further consequence, FL learners could be unmotivated and they will not benefit from the corrections provided. Once the learners are unmotivated because the corrections provided offend their feeling, the learners might stop learning. That is why when spoken error corrections should be provided, they should be given in such a way so that the learners are happy with the method applied for correcting learner errors.

The next effect of interrupting the learners in mid talking is that the learners will feel embarrassed. If this is the case, the learners might not speak in speaking classes because they lose their confidence of using the TL. It should be considered that speaking in front of the class is a source of anxiety (Young, 1990), let alone speaking in a FL (Jeon & Kang, 2005)). That is why, spoken error corrections should be provided carefully so that the learners could accept them. Error corrections must be given at the appropriate time as perceived by the learners of the TL. Based on the discussion, the results of the present study reveal that the most favorable time to provide spoken error corrections, as perceived by the EFL learners, is after the learners have completed what they are going to say.

Learner Spoken Errors to be Prioritized for Corrections

The findings of the current study reveal that there are three areas of errors the learners like best to be corrected in speaking classes: (1) mispronunciation, (2) grammatical errors, and (3) errors in vocabulary. If the learners are making errors in these three areas when they are talking in the TL, their errors should be considered for corrections. The findings also reveal that among the three, the subjects assert that mispronunciation should be prioritized.

They believed that if people produce mispronunciations when speaking, there will be misunderstanding of what they are talking about. This is because mispronunciations will create misinterpretation and eventually communication does not work well. The second reason is that when the learners can speak with good and clear pronunciation, they might feel confident about using the TL. Eventually, they will speak freely and fluently. It should be noted that though they have their own reasons why they believe that mispronunciation should be considered important to be corrected in speaking classes, the subjects in general suggest that corrections must not be given in mid-talking since this practice destroy communication.

In addition to pronunciation, grammatical errors and wrong vocabulary are also considered important to be corrected in speaking classes. However it is believed that grammar is not as important as pronunciation. This is in line with what is argued by Huang (2006) who found in his study that the learners who value the communication of meaning over grammatical accuracy may bristle when their utterances are corrected constantly. For Edge (1989:5) "it is more important to correct mistakes which affect the meaning of several sentences than to correct small grammatical points inside one sentence". This is due to the fact that people could understand the message though the speakers produce sentences or utterances which consist of some small grammatical errors. In speaking classes, using the appropriate vocabulary is a must since if the learners cannot use the vocabulary appropriately the sentence they use could be clumsy or ridiculous. That is why errors in this area also need some considerations.

Method of Spoken Error Corrections

The third issue which is discussed in the current study is how to correct the learner spoken errors. Providing the appropriate methods for correcting errors in speaking classes is so important due to the fact that inappropriate methods result in negative effect to the learners being corrected. That is why, teachers or classmates should be careful when correcting the learner spoken errors. The findings of the current study reveal that providing the right answers is the most popular method the learners like in speaking classes. This method is considered appropriate for correcting learner spoken errors since this way does not confuse the learners. In this case the teachers should provide the right answers directly when correcting learner spoken errors because this method will not offend the learner feeling. Similar findings were found by Katayama (2007) in her study focused on Japanese EFL students' preferences toward corrections of oral errors. The results of her study revealed that the correction method the learners like best is the EFL teachers present the correct form when correcting the learner utterances which are considered wrong. For Bartram and Walton (1999), providing the right answers is called reformulation.

Another method which is not popular among the subjects of the current study is that the lecturer hands around small pieces of paper to the learners in the classroom. In this case, the teachers and learners have a chance to provide error corrections by making notes on these pieces of paper and the learners making errors bring the notes home and they study the corrections at home. By this way, it is expected that the learners are not embarrassed and offended about error corrections provided and it is believed that applying this method could make the learners more relaxed. It seems that this way is good but it is not easy for teachers to know that the learners really correct other learners making errors.

There is another unpopular method which seems good but difficult to do in EFL speaking classes particularly. The method is by providing tape which is recorded from native-speakers of the TL. This tape is used as an example for the learners in speaking classes. However it is also realized that to do so is not an easy task for the teachers. This is due to the fact that in FL settings most of the learning teaching process is conducted by non-native speakers of English who might produce utterances and sentences which are different from the native speaker norms. That is why, the findings of the study suggest that though there could be other methods of correcting learner spoken errors, the most appropriate method in speaking classes is providing the right answers.

The Appropriate Persons to Correct Learner Spoken Errors

The fourth consideration to be taken into account is who should correct learner spoken errors in speaking classes. Though this question sounds easy to answer, it should be taken carefully in speaking classes. This is because if the persons providing corrections are those the learners do not like, the effect could be more complicated. That is why considering the learner preferences of who should correct their spoken errors in speaking classes is of paramount importance. Thus far, the most common source of feedback to language learners in the classroom is corrections provided by teachers (Gebhard, 2000; Allwright, Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Ur, 1996).

On the basis of the results of the three series of interview, it is found that lecturers and classmates are considered to be appropriate persons for correcting learner spoken errors. By and large, the subjects of the current study agree that lecturers are the most appropriate persons for correcting learner spoken errors and peer-corrections could also be useful. There are some reasons proposed why lecturers are more popular than classmates. They argue that lecturers are more proficient in the TL, so that they are more appropriate for correcting learner spoken errors.

It is worth considering, the learners are more nervous if their teachers provide corrections compared to corrections provided by their classmates. This is because FL teachers are considered superior compared to FL learners and this superiority is usually manifested by providing error corrections (Bartarm and Walton, 1999). Conversely if the learners receive corrections provided by other learners they are more relaxed since they can discuss the corrections provided. When talking about the usefulness of the corrections provided, it is found that teacher corrections are more useful than classmate corrections. This is because other classmates might have the same errors since they are the same level. That is why corrections provided by classmates could be acceptable if the classmates providing corrections are more proficient in English compared to the learners making errors.

The Effect of Spoken Error Corrections on Learning

Error corrections are provided for the sake of the learner improvement of the TL. This is of paramount importance to be taken into account since if the learners do not benefit from error corrections, corrections provided are useless. In general, the subjects claim that error corrections are very useful for their learning process. The learners could improve their TL

proficiency after they have received error corrections provided by both their teachers and classmates. If they do not receive error corrections they will never realize that they have made errors and errors will exist continuously. Eventually they will become fossilized, thus they are permanent in the learner TL.

It is worth noting, though it is stated previously that learners might benefit from error corrections, they should be provided in an appropriate way. This is because the effect of error corrections could be positive or negative. It will be positive if the learners could receive corrections happily. In this case the learners do not feel embarrassed and offended when they are being corrected. If they feel embarrassed or offended, corrections provided might not work. Even they might make FL learners stop talking because they lose their willingness to speak in the TL. However, most of the subjects agree that the learners still benefit from corrections provided. They could improve their TL knowledge by receiving error corrections. This means that there are more advantages rather than disadvantages of error corrections in speaking classes.

In addition, it is essential to note that error corrections, as part of FL learning and teaching, will be useful for the learners if they are provided in such a way that they do not make the learners feel embarrassed and offended. Wrong techniques of error corrections might be disruptive for the learners and they might not learn further because they might not feel like to be involved in the learning and teaching process.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The conclusion is made as the results of the data analysis of the study with reference to the research problems. The findings show that giving a chance to the FL learners to try to speak in the TL is a must due to the fact that the goal of FL learning and teaching is to use the TL for communication. It should be considered that FL learners do not want their communication to be interrupted in mid-talking. However, if error corrections must be provided when the learners are talking, they should be provided in a gentle way so that the learners will not feel offended or embarrassed. It should be remembered that mis-timed corrections could result in negative effects for them; the learners are offended or they do not want to try to speak in the TL.

In speaking classes, FL learners have their own priorities about which errors should be considered essential for corrections. The results show that mispronunciation, grammatical errors, and errors in vocabulary are errors that should be taken into account.

Providing the right answers is the method of correcting spoken errors that the learners like best. They believe that this method is appropriate for speaking classes since this does not make the learners confused when they are corrected.

The results of the study also suggest that spoken error corrections in speaking classes could be provided by teachers and other learners. Nevertheless, FL teachers are more appropriate for providing corrections compared to FL learners.

Spoken error corrections which are provided in speaking classes are important for the learners. The results of the study show that the learners really benefit from error corrections provided. They argue that they improve their TL proficiency if they are corrected when they commit errors. In other words, error corrections which are provided in speaking classes are useful for their learning process. If their errors are not corrected they will become fossilized; permanent errors which are difficult, if not impossible, to be corrected.

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