

Correcting Students' Pronunciation Errors In Non-Major English Classes

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Abstract

Error correction is an important part of language teaching and learning. This paper reports on the process and results of a four-week classroom action research which focused on reducing types of pronunciation errors Vietnamese students make due to the transfer of the Vietnamese language into English. The research involved me as a teacher – researcher and three classes of ninety-eight first-year students of non-English majors at Dong Nai University. The research was based on error correction techniques to raise students' awareness of correct pronunciation of words in learning English as a foreign language. The action research was well-received by its students and confirmed the teacher's belief in the effectiveness of error correction techniques to help students correct their common pronunciation errors in EFL speaking.

Keywords: pronunciation errors, error correction techniques, non-English majors, awareness, accuracy.

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I. Introduction

Correcting errors is not only for the sake of making them correct but for improving students' language as well. The importance of error correction is obvious in an EFL teaching context where teachers are often confronted with problems of student speaking accuracy. I am a teacher of Dong Nai University in Viet Nam. I am in charge of teaching English to non-majored classes.

The aim of the research

To try new pronunciation techniques aimed at improving students' speaking and listening skills.
To motivate students to learn English, which is not their major subject.

The research question

What techniques can I use to correct students' pronunciation errors?

The rationale for the research

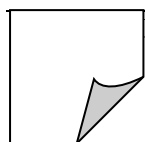
Arousing students' interest in speaking activities will help improve accuracy and fluency.

Making teachers of English, students and others aware of the importance of accuracy in spoken language will help avoid misunderstandings in communication.

Participants

The research was carried out at Dong Nai University. The school is located in Bien Hoa City which is about 30 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City. Dong Nai University is a government school where all subjects in the syllabus directed by the Ministry of Education are taught. The students of the school are trained to be high school teachers in Dong Nai province. Those who study English as one of their obligatory courses are called non-English majors. The content of the curriculum and courses the students must study is decided by the Ministry of Education.

The participants involved in the research were my students as subjects and teacher as researcher. The subjects of this research were ninety-eight students in first-year non-English major classes this year. All of them have had six years of experience in studying English at high school. The students had been trained in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the levels of four skills were not quite the same, especially the speaking skill.



II. Literature Review

Pronunciation improvement aims at getting the learners to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably comprehensible to other speakers. This is the reason why teachers have a responsibility to help students to communicate with a certain degree of linguistic accuracy. In teaching pronunciation, teachers should focus on sounds, sequences of sounds, stress, intonation, liaison, rhythm...

Many authors have the same idea that errors, especially pronunciation errors, are a natural part of the language-learning process. Correction, therefore, is very useful for students not only to clarify their understanding of the meaning and construction of language but to get more accuracy in their use of language as well. Jeremy Harmer (1991) and Jim Scrivener (1994) suggest some effective techniques to correct errors:

Self correction: the teacher repeats a word or a sentence the student has just said with rising intonation up to the point of the error and waits for the student to self-correct.

Peer correction: if a student makes an error, the teacher elicits a correction from other students.

Teacher correction: the teacher indicates error, gives the correct version and asks the students to repeat it.

Paul Davies and Eric Pearse (2000), in their book "Success in English Teaching", mention immediate correction when errors are made, this means immediate correction is useful for accuracy work. Self-correction should be elicited first, and if that fails, peer correction. Teachers should use teacher correction only when self-correction and peer correction are not effective.

Both Penny Ur (1996) and Jeremy Harmer (1998) emphasize the importance of using correction techniques without making students offended when their errors are corrected. In addition, these authors agree that correction should be encouraging and tactful.

In short, correcting students' pronunciation errors is a challenge, but using the techniques to correct their errors is really an art.

III. Problem Diagnosis

I have been teaching English to non-majored students for years. During my last courses, most of the students were enthusiastic and hard-working in their study. During my lessons, they seemed to concentrate and study hard but they found it difficult to make sentences orally. It was very hard for me to correct the errors they were making in speaking. I wondered whether I should correct their pronunciation errors or not. Some of them refused to speak English. They told me they preferred written work to oral work. I sometimes dictated some passages to the students, and they were often startled or felt nervous whenever they heard me say "DICTATION". Therefore, I tried to interview many students after class or during break time in order to clarify the reason why they often refused to speak English in class. They said they were afraid of mispronouncing words and they did not know how to pronounce English words correctly. One reason for this was that when they were at high school, their teachers of English rarely taught them to pronounce words or corrected the errors they made. Written work was done most of the time. One more reason was that they really got confused when their pronunciation was corrected, they wondered why some teachers of English pronounced words in different ways.

IV. Improvement Strategies

When I outlined these problems, I wanted to consider two areas - possible ways of correcting spoken errors in teaching and learning a foreign language, and which of these might be effective in my teaching context.

Upon consideration, I selected a limited range of techniques, adopted them, and tried them in my non-major classes:

- . Self-correction
- . Peer correction
- . Teacher correction

I kept a journal of applying the correction techniques to my non-major classes.

Table 1: Correction techniques applied in non – major classes

Date	Class	Word(s)/Sentence(s) corrected	Techniques used	Notes
4 March 2024	Fine Arts 1A	they- she thank you- fine	Teacher correction	Students found it hard to pronounce /θ/ & /ð/
5 March 2024	Biology 1	Thanks-engineer He's an architect.	Peer correction & Teacher correction	
6 March 2024	Maths 2	because-village- think - thing five - fine	Self-correction & teacher correction	It was difficult for students to pronounce ending sounds. However, pair-word practice was done effectively.

11 March 2024	Fine Arts 1A	They are children. police-women	Peer correction & self-correction	It seemed that peer correction was not convincing to the students who made the errors.
12 March 2024	Biology 1	This is a thick book. These are houses.	Teacher correction	Students made progress in pronouncing /θ/ & /ð/
13 March 2024	Maths 2	thousand-together-postcard mother- other- cathedral	All	
18 March 2024	Fine Arts 1A	thin-thick-young-beautiful This car is expensive.	All	
19 March 2024	Biology 1	This man is thirsty. These three trees are free.	All	Students' pronunciation improved a lot.
20 March 2024	Maths 2	She can speak five languages. cousin-brother-college	Teacher correction	
25 March 2024	Fine Arts 1A	oil-salt-three-thank you How much is that? age-arch	All	It was difficult for students to pronounce ending sound. Pair-word practice was done effectively.
26 March 2024	Biology 1	conversation-half-excellent They like milk very much.	All	
27 March 2024	Maths 2	comfortable-danger-dangerous- driver	Self-correction & teacher correction	Self-correction was effective. Teacher correction was useful.

Additionally, I designed speaking activities and appropriate questions so that the students could have many chances to speak and answer the questions correctly. Besides, I used simple English to speak to the students. When any students' answers were right or they pronounced words correctly, I praised them by saying "Excellent", "Fantastic", "Wonderful", "Great", "Good". I sometimes indicated their spoken errors in a humorous way. With the errors they made during pair work and group work activities, I noted down and made them correct as a class discussion at the end of the activity. Usually, I applied immediate correction when the errors were made.

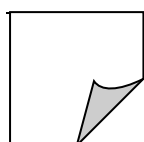
After some lessons in different classes, the students reflected that they felt more confident and encouraged when they were nominated to answer the teacher's questions. They added that they felt happy when their spoken errors were corrected. Some weaker students came to me during break time and asked me to teach them to pronounce difficult words.

After four weeks of applying error correction techniques to non-major classes, I delivered questionnaires to 98 students of three classes (Fine Arts Class 1A, Biology Class 1, and Maths Class 2). The questions were both multiple choice and open-ended. Here are the results:

Table 2: Students' feedback on questionnaires

Questions	Options	No of response	Percentage
1. How did you feel when the teacher asked one of your classmates to correct one of your errors?	confused	24	24%
	annoyed	15	15%
	happy	49	49%
	other	10	10%
2. What do you think about the way the teacher corrected your errors?	appropriate	95	97%
	inappropriate	03	03%
3. Which correction technique(s) do you like best to correct your errors?	Self-correction	45	46%
	Peer correction	11	11%
	Teacher correction	42	43%
4. How much did your pronunciation improve when the teacher corrected it?	not much	09	09%
	much	57	58%
	very much	32	33%
5. Is it important to correct pronunciation errors?	Yes	98	100%
	No	0	00%

The data above showed that 46% of the students agreed that self-correction was very useful for them. In addition, 43% of them strongly believed in teacher correction. On the contrary, peer correction did not seem to be convincing to them very much (11%). 97% of them commented that the way the teacher corrected their errors was appropriate because it made them aware of the necessity of error correction.



Most of the students acknowledged that their pronunciation improved a lot when being corrected by the teacher. Therefore, all of them had the same idea that correcting pronunciation errors was very important and necessary because it helped them not only to avoid misunderstandings in communication but to get more accuracy in their use of language as well.

Apart from the data above, I also got positive comments from my colleagues on the way I corrected oral errors. This was useful for the students to get interest and motivation to learn English.

V. Limitations

At present, owing to reality of working conditions and individual problems of the teachers of English in our university, I cannot get enough help with data collecting from all of them. In fact, quite a few teachers in our department do not understand the techniques used to correct pronunciation errors. In this research, therefore, the data only came from twenty percent of them. Fortunately, I had my colleagues Han and Nhung observe my recent lessons, they were very helpful in giving comments on the techniques I used to correct students' oral errors.

As for the students, I only collected data from three classes of non-majored students of English to whom I have been teaching English this year. If only I could apply this research to majored English classes from the first year to the third year, the outcomes would be more positive for sure.

VI. Conclusions

Error correction techniques do not always lead to immediate improvements for all. We cannot completely eradicate errors, but only hope to minimize their occurrence. From some individual and collective interviews with the students in non-major classes and progress in my journal, together with the above feedback from my colleagues and students, I surely believed that the main aims of my research have basically been achieved.

. The correction techniques applied in the language classroom have been effective. Especially, self-correction and teacher correction have been very useful and constructive. However, peer correction should have been elicited more supportively.

. My own awareness of the place of errors in error correction and the need to correct these in teaching have been clarified.

. Students have made progress when they were made aware of correct pronunciation of words in learning English as a foreign language.

. Students have understood the necessity of error correction.

Reducing errors and improving accuracy and fluency have increased students' motivation and engagement.

My further research would be on using humorous stories about mispronounced words in order to arouse learners' interest in learning English and make them recognize the importance of correct pronunciation in communication.

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