EF   Diploma   in   TESOL

Portfolio Part One

Classroom Observation Instrument

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Introduction

Lewis M. (1993, p164) believes that "a misguided, or more likely unformulated, view of error and correction can undermine everything else." Part of my understanding of "everything else" includes learners' interests and motivation for learning the target language. Due to the uncertainty of a foreign culture and how learners would respond to corrections, a lot of teachers are reluctant to correct learners' errors in case they may discourage the learners. At the other extreme, some jump at every mistake their learners make. Meanwhile they are confused by the repetition of some errors. Understanding the nature of errors will give teachers more confidence when providing feedback. Being aware of the techniques they use and knowing when and what to correct is significant in helping students reflect on how they perform and progress.

Rationale for the Development and Application of the Instrument

The importance of how much and how a teacher should correct learners' mistakes in the classroom, when compared to other areas of teaching such as Teacher Talking Time, Conception Checking, Instruction Giving etc., has been relatively underestimated among teachers at EF. In addition, there wasn't any training for new teachers on techniques for correcting students' errors until half a year ago. However, the most common complaint from students about teachers is the unsatisfactory error correction. It's either about the teacher making the students feel "stupid" or not giving them enough error correction. Some extreme cases have led to distrust and withdrawal from learning. Except the serious consequences mentioned above, my choice to investigate error correction stemmed from classroom observations of my colleagues. It seemed to me that most of teachers were not aware of their approach and the amount of error corrections they did. Some of them responded to errors with abrupt utterance like: 'NO! Wrong!'. Some of them ignored the errors which related to the key language and was critical to the lesson aims. The two main reasons given by the teachers for this were: 1. Students would make the same mistake even if corrected. 2. The teacher couldn't find time. I designed the observation tool in the hope of drawing the teacher's attention to their approaches and finding a good balance between correcting and not correcting.

Errors and Causes

Harmer provides a lot of examples for the two different types of causes for errors: L1 interference and developmental errors. (Harmer 2001, p 99) When the error is caused by L1 interference, it is difficult for the learners to notice and correct it by themselves. For instance, a lot of people from Hunan province, China, cannot distinguish the /n/ and /l/ phonemes. They are thus more likely to confuse 'light' with 'night' etc. For errors caused by L1 interference, students are very likely to make the same mistake after having been

corrected. Some teachers may feel frustrated about the repeated error without knowing the cause of it and may use inappropriate approaches like using abrupt language. While developmental errors are counted as part of the natural language process, a lot of these errors may be fossilized if they are neglected.

Therefore, both kinds of errors should be taken into consideration while planning for how to correct anticipated errors. I hope the observation tool can offer the teachers the opportunity to reflect on the kind of errors and the amount of errors they correct, techniques used and students' response to it. It is hoped that the tool will be used to make the teachers think more about their own teaching.

Stage One

The Observation Tool (First Version)

My initial tool (Figure 1) was adapted from Scrivener's version. It consists of two sections. One is to find out what errors a teacher anticipates and the solutions he/she has prepared before a lesson. The other section is to note down what errors actually occur and how they are dealt with. In the second section, there are two questions in the form of options which would allow me to find out whether the errors are consistent with the teacher's anticipation and three questions in the form of 'notes and comments' which provide space for recoding the actual errors, types of errors and the response. The two sections will thus provide a contrast between a teacher's lesson plan on error correction and his/her actual acts in the classroom as well as the number of errors responded to.

Using the Tool

I observed three classes with the tool: Reading High workshop, Vocabulary Builder workshop and F2F Upper-Intermediate. However, I failed to use the first section. The teacher for Reading High forgot our appointment for the pre-chat and went to have lunch. The second failure was due to an unexpected difficult conversation that I had to have with a new teacher.

January 27th 2011—Lesson 1

Only 5 students turned up for the class which could take a maximum of 25 students. The reason for the low booking was made evident soon after the class started. The material the teacher gave out was far too difficult for the students. There were too many new and big words and there was no warmer, engage or activate stages. The teacher asked students to read one paragraph each. All the mistakes he corrected were pronunciation related.

January 28th 2011—Lesson 2

The teacher was aware of the error types because she was a native speaker of the students' L1. She corrected 5 mistakes using 5 different techniques.

February 2nd 2011—Lesson 3

The teacher did The Trinity Course about two years prior so he was very familiar with the observation tool designing procedure. Before the class, he told me that he would do a lot of error corrections base on the material and his understanding of the two students. In the 50-minute class, he corrected the students 12 times with varied techniques like drawing on the board, using figures to indicate an error in word order, etc.

Figure 1

Pre-observation Chat: Treating Learner Errors

Teacher's name: **Class type:**   **Date:**   **Observer's Name:**

Errors anticipated:

How to treat the errors:

Observation Sheet: Treating Learner Errors

Teacher's name: **Class type:**   **Date:**

Observer's Name: **Number of Students**

Error:
Error anticipated: Yes/No
When the error occurs: Warm-Up / Engage /Study /Activate
Type of error:
Indication/correction:

Stage Two

The data collected from the three lessons indicated some interesting insights into how the teachers treated errors; however, there were some significant problems which necessitated changing the observation tool (Figure 2).

1. I didn't manage to have a pre-observation chat with any of the three teachers. I expect it will be the same situation when I continue with the observations. Though the pre-observation chat may help a teacher to think about what errors to correct and how, it is unrealistic to ask them to spend time preparing techniques to respond to anticipated errors and then have a 15-mintue chat on this subject. Except the teachers' busy schedules, it is difficult to predict exactly which students would make which errors and plan correction techniques since we are unable to know who is attending the class until we are actually in the classroom. Therefore I decided to get rid off the pre-observation chat part completely.

2．During the 3 observations, I felt that I had to write a lot in the **Indication/correction** part, especially in the third class because the teacher did error correction 13 times. At the same time, I might have missed some when I was trying to jot down what and how exactly the teachers responded to errors. Also after each observation, I had to summarize the writing before I could analyze the techniques the teachers used. Interestingly, peer correction happened a few times too. It can be very useful to compare the amounts of peer to peer corrections and teacher to student corrections.   Therefore, I decided to divide the part into two: 1. who corrects whom 2. techniques used.

3. In almost each F2F or workshop lesson, there is a key language study stage as part of the lesson aims. Therefore I feel that it would be useful to find out how much a teacher corrects key language related errors and other errors.

4. The biggest problem I found with the form was that it only focused on the teacher's part. Though it could be possible to gather some information reflecting students' reactions from the data of the Indication/correction part, it couldn't provide a clear and direct picture of how the students reacted to corrections. The new column at the bottom of the form is designed to collect data on the students' opinions.

Figure 2

Observation Sheet: Treating Learner Errors

Teacher's name:	**Class type:**	**Date:**
Observer's Name:	**Number of Students**	

Error:
Error on or related to the key language ☐Yes ☐ No
When the error occurs: Warm-Up / Engage /Study /Activate
Which slide:_____
Type of error: ☐grammar ☐ pronunciation ☐ word choice ☐ discourse
Indication/correction: ☐ T to S ☐ S to S ☐ No Response
Correction technique used:
☐ Repetition ☐ Elicitation through facial expressions ☐ Elicitation through gesture
☐ Clarification requests ☐Recasts ☐Metalinguistic hints ☐Explicit correction
☐ Draw spaces or boxes on the board ☐others_____
Student/s' reaction to the error responding:
☐ Silent ☐ Nodding ☐ Express different opinions ☐ Verbally agree
☐ Others_____

Using the Tool (Stage Two)

February 16th 2011—Lesson 4

I managed to observe the F2F low class in the biggest centre in Shanghai. Only two students turned up for the class and one of them seemed to be fairly new there and was a bit shy. The teacher corrected the students 12 times and peer correction occurred once after the teacher indicated the error.

February 17th 2011—Lesson 5

It was the second class I observed in Shanghai. 19 students showed up for the Pronunciation High workshop. Error correction took place three times.

February 24th 2011—Lesson 6

It was F2F low class taught by an international teacher who had 2 years experience in teaching business English in Poland. He started to teach low level students a year after starting at EF so he was quite aware of the mistakes that beginner students might make. Error correction took place 12 times.

February 25th 2011—Lesson 7

The beginner workshop was taught by the content editor. The reason he was teaching the class was because he wanted to see how the students would react to the new content. He corrected the students 7 times, 5 times at study stages, once at an engage study and once during an activate stage.

Stage Three

The tool seemed to be quite helpful in collecting useful data on the teacher's error correction habits and the students' learning habits without having to be too distracted by writing. It was a lot easier to catch up with the lesson flow and observe the body language and facial expressions of both parties. However the following modifications could be able to make the process more effective (Figure 3):

1. Divide the section into two parts, Students for part one and Teacher for part two. The division will make it easier for the observation and the post-observation analysis.

2. Use simplified language "Uptake" to replace "Student s' reaction to the error correction" and change the choices to just Yes and No with boxes before them. Use "Stage" to replace "When the error occurs" and a key providing further information on the heading. The two wording changes make the form tidier and easier to read.

3. Add one category for the Teacher part: **Correction Occurs**, which is followed by three choices with boxes before them. The category will help to gather data on when the teachers chooses to correct the students.

Using the Tool (Stage Three)

April 7, 2011—Lesson 8

22 students attended the intermediate workshop. With the new tool, I had a plenty of time observing the teacher. However, whenever the teacher wanted to provide feedback, he threw the whole class. To his questions, students shouted out different answers at the same time. Of course the teacher wasn't able to identify the mistakes. The only correction he did was not even an error. It was just a different opinion.

April 10, 2011—Lesson 9

Four students turned up for the intermediate F2F class. Error correction was initiated by the teacher 9 times with diverse techniques. He changed the pairs frequently and got the opportunity to sit close to all of them during different activities.

April 15, 2011—Lesson 10

There were 14 students in the workshop. The two errors occurred and were corrected during a study stage. Both of them were pronunciation problems and related to key language.

Figure 3

Observation Sheet: Treating Learner Errors

Teacher's name   **Class type:**   **Date:**

Observer's Name: **Number of Students:**

Students	**Error:**	**Slide**:_____ **Stage**:_____
	Key language related error: ☐Yes ☐ No	**Uptake**: ☐Yes ☐ No
	Type of error: ☐grammar ☐ pronunciation ☐ lexis ☐ appropriacy ☐ Others	
Teacher	**Indication/correction:** ☐ T to S ☐ S to S ☐ T to Ss ☐ Ss to Ss ☐ No Response	
	Correction occurs: ☐ during the utterance ☐ immediately after the utterance ☐ activity feedback	
	Correction technique used: ☐ Repetition ☐ Recasts ☐ Clarification requests ☐Explicit correction ☐ Elicitation ☐Metalinguistic hints ☐others _____	
Key	Stage: W= warmer E=engage S=study A=activate	

Evaluation

The Observation Tool

Though debate still continues on whether Communicative Language Teaching is a better approach than other approaches because it downplays the element of "study" and focus on fluency, the teacher in a communicative classroom should not neglect the importance of error correction. As pointed out earlier, due to the personal nature of errors the teacher needs to be sensitive to what types of errors are being corrected in order to avoid confusion and frustration from both the student and teacher. The observation tool was able to yield data relevant to the interaction between the teacher and the students when errors occurred.

In the first section, it showed the exact error, its type, its connection with the key language and when it happened. Most importantly, it indicated whether the students realized the error and was able to produce the correct form after the correction. It would be a waste of time if the students didn't understand the inaccuracy after having had the error pointed out.

The second section showed when and how the teacher responded to an error. If the teacher always interrupted a student during his/her utterance, the student is very likely to get frustrated or feel defeated. During the activate stage, fluency is more important than accuracy because "the students should be given a situation or topic to use all and any language as freely and communicatively as possible." (Harmer 2000, p26). The categories used showed how a teacher indicated errors and tried to correct them. The category "others" was designed to show extra work a teacher did like body language and facial express or use abrupt language like "No" "Wrong" etc. which the teacher was unlikely to notice himself/herself.

One of the difficulties I had while using the tool was that sometimes it was difficult to tell whether the students were able to understand errors and correct forms because of the following two situations: 1.The teacher carried on quickly before noticing an obvious response from the corrected student 2. In a workshop, it was difficult to observe all 25 students' facial expressions (which can help to indicate uptake or confusion). The drawback could be improved by asking the teacher to provide students with a couple of seconds to process and respond. Another difficulty was that some teachers were not so familiar with the 6 error correction techniques so they were not sure of the meaning of the terms until I explained the terms one by one. Some teachers felt a bit nervous because they didn't have the knowledge of the techniques. Some of the post-observation chats were much longer than expected.

Implications

For the teachers I observed: The data collected with the observation tool indicated the most significant issue was that most of the teachers tended to do corrective feedback by throwing questions to the whole class. Various answers came from different directions at the same time. The data collected from the two workshops observed during the third stage showed that it was extremely difficult for the teachers to identify errors in big classes, not to mention correcting errors.

Some teachers might feel more secure to correct errors without putting individual students on the spot. Shy students might also feel safer to answer questions in this way. However, if the teachers could indicate errors with a helpful attitude and use the right techniques, the students would be less likely to feel "losing face". Therefore, the teachers should get training on different approaches to get and provide feedback.

Second, in many of the classes, error corrections occurred more at the beginning during warmers or engaging stages than during the study stages. A warmer or an activity to engage students is not to improve learners' accuracy use of the target language. Frequent interruptions or corrections in this case may create barriers rather than interest (Scrivener J.2000, p110). During study stages, students learn the key language, grammar points or sentence structures which can get them ready for the later activation tasks. Accuracy should be the aim in this case. If error corrections are absent, students may not be able to perform successfully during activate tasks. Therefore, training on when to correct is also necessary in my centre.

Third, student-student correction was not encouraged and was only attempted in two of the ten classes. Some teachers might feel it was their responsibility rather than that of the learners' to provide corrections. This attitude overlooks the importance of cooperation and team work between learners. The "chain" error correction technique (Scrivener J. 2000, p112) shows the effect of involving many students in thinking about and coming up with solutions for problems. At the same time, it will encourage learner autonomy for self-study outside the classroom. As a result, the teachers should be more aware of the importance of scaffolding among learners in the classroom and encourage them to do so whenever it is appropriate.

If the focus of a lesson is on correcting learners' errors, it will lead to too much teacher input and too little student output. In addition, it is quite difficult to provide sufficient time for students to use the key language in authentic situations if they are always interrupted. Two of the f2f classes I observed seemed to be focusing too much on accuracy throughout both classes. Teacher talking time was higher than 60 percent in both classes. Though the teachers might feel that they had done a lot for the students, the teacher's efforts were very unlikely to yield successful language production.

For teachers: The observation tool could be a good instrument for peer observation. It yields more quantitative data than qualitative data so teachers may find it easier to show the findings to their peers rather than giving their personal opinions. It will help to raise

teachers' awareness of the different error correction techniques which may lead to different reactions from students as well as help them identify a good balance between correcting and not correcting at different stages in a class. It can also be used by individual teachers to predict errors and solutions then reflect on their performance in the classroom afterwards.

For my own teaching: Before working on this paper, I was quite conscious of my approaches in responding to learners' errors and confident I had a good understanding of the errors Chinese learners usually make however I was definitely unaware of the better results that could be reached by using different correction techniques according to the students, the stages of a class etc. The designing of the tool and the observations I conducted in the last 3 months have generated more interest in me to carry out more research in this area. At the same time, the process has motivated me to reflect on my own teaching and compare my experiences with what I saw in other teachers' classes. I will continue trying the various techniques in the hope of finding out which ones would work best with Chinese learners regarding the errors Chinese learners usually make and their opinions about being corrected.

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