To be welcomed or not to be: Errors and correction feedback in the second language classrooms of Arabic colleges in Kerala

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Abstract— *Starting with the traditional audio-lingual method of didactic instruction, teaching methods have changed over time by using different techniques and different teaching and learning tools. Since changes to the input and interactional activities are the core of any learning and teaching process in a classroom, input and output modifications have been the focus of serious experimental research in the field. Even though a lot of studies talk about the role of feedback and correcting mistakes in the teaching process, not many of them actually do an experiment to find out how much feedback and other similar inputs help boost motivation and confidence in the process of learning a second language. This paper is an attempt to discuss the theories and practices of giving feedback and fixing mistakes when teaching a second language (L2), especially in the context of English-language classrooms of Arabic colleges in Kerala, India, which have been growing recently. The study mostly looks at the Hudawi and Wafy courses, which were designed and implemented in the district of Malappuram in Kerala and have a long course duration of 8–12 years at a stretch. These two curricula focus on teaching and preparing students in four or five languages, including their native language, Malayalam. These languages are English, Arabic, Hindi, and Urdu.*

Keyword— *Error Correction, Correction Feedback, Constructive Feedback*

I. INTRODUCTION

Even though the process of teaching and learning a second language has been institutionalized and methodized into a number of different pedagogies, from audio-lingual methodologies to teacher-learner-subject-centered pedagogies to recently codified post-methods to virtual ambiences of teaching and learning, there is still a gap that has not been experimentally filled in terms of error correction and feedback techniques in the teaching process. Errors and error correction feedback play a vital role in designing and shaping a doable, friendly atmosphere in the second language classrooms. Different viewpoints have arisen regarding the role of the teacher or tutor in the classroom, whether it is to deal with facilitating a learning ambience in the classroom or to manage everything from the tutor's end, from preparation to delivery to learning.

The significance of feedback and committing errors

When learning a new skill, especially a language, no one can offer the expertise of a professional without making mistakes and committing flaws. Mistakes and errors are common in the process of teaching and learning, and the success of the process depends on how educators deal with these mistakes. Learning a second language as an adult is more or less like learning our native language as a child, when our whole family is there to correct us when we say something wrong. We need a lot of support and encouragement from the people around us.

During the early stages of teaching method development, errors were counted as equal to sins, as Nelson Brooks wrote in his famous text "Language and Language Learning": "Like sin, error is to be avoided and

its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected" (Hendrickson "Error Correction" 387). James M. Hendrickson has said that, according to a book for elementary school students, one of the teacher's goals should be to keep mistakes from happening. It should be able to accomplish this goal in the early phases, when the students are completely dependent on the teacher for their education ("Error Correction" 388). Again, he highlights a suggestion given for teachers that considers error correction as a responsibility of the teachers: "Whenever a mistake is made, the teacher should correct it at once and then repeat the correct pattern or question for the 'benefit of the entire class" ("Error Correction" 388).

In this case, we should take into account the two schools of thought that S.P. Corder described in his article, "The significance of learner's errors." That is, first, the school that believes that if we could perfect our teaching methods, mistakes would never be made in the first place and that their appearance is only an indication of how inadequate our methods are at the moment. The second school of thought holds that mistakes will always happen since our environment is imperfect and, despite our greatest efforts, mistakes will still happen. Our creativity should be focused on methods for handling mistakes after they have happened (Corder 163). From this point, we should start brooding over a critical question asked by James Hendrickson and try to find out more constructive ways to address the question: "Can error correction benefit language learners?" ("The Treatment" 216).

The concept of giving corrections and feedback itself is contested in the research conducted in the field, as John Truscott has denied the necessity of correction feedback in the learning process, and he reiterated that the correction feedback hinders the learning process and that it demotivates the students to see the red ink spread across the write-up they prepared (354). However, recent researches shows that effective implementation of the right technique for corrections and feedback would definitely help the learning process, and the personal indirect constructive feedback methods would be more effective in the classroom.

Unlike the perspective the teachers and educators had towards error as a 'sin or forbidden mistake', recent research has found out that the errors can be treated as a tool for scaling up the efficacy of the teaching method and as fundamental components of the learning processes, and they also help to measure the intelligence and to what extent the child or L2 learner has adapted to the learning processes. Hanna Y. Touchie has quoted Selinker stating the significance of errors in the language learning process in three aspects as it can indicate the learner's progress in their

understandings, it can also give insightful suggestions on the specific effective ways to learn that particular language, and it ensures the involvement of the students through hypothesis testing (76).

The errors can be seen as important evidence of language acquisition in the child, as S.P. Corder has observed them as "inevitable by-products of the process of learning a language about which the teacher should make as little fuss as possible" (162). That is what Kumaravadivelu has emphasized, as making mistakes during the language learning process is not to be frowned upon (126). And S.P. Corder brought up the idea that even if a child is able to repeat what we said in the last class, that is not proof that he has learned the rules. Instead, it can be seen as "language-like behavior," a term that was made up by Spolsky (168).

Primarily, there are lots of influences from the mother tongue that cause syntactical, grammatical, and accentual errors when dealing with a second language. Errors can be categorized into two categories in relation to competence and performance. S.P. Corder distinguished these as errors that can only be referred to as performance faults, whereas competence faults can only be referred to as mistakes (166–167). Hanna Y. Touchie has described and differentiated between these two in more detail, saying that "performance errors are those errors made by learners when they are tired or hurried. Competence errors, on the other hand, are more serious than performance errors since competence errors reflect inadequate learning" (76).

One can only improve his or her language skills and reach perfection when speaking in a certain language by correcting mistakes and getting feedback. 'Correcting a learner's mistakes helps them figure out how the syntactical and lexical forms of the target language work and what their limits are. Adult second language learners benefit most from error correction because it teaches them the precise context in which to apply rules and the precise semantic range of lexical items' (Hendrickson 389). Several researchers in the field have looked closely at the different ways to correct mistakes. Some of them prefer the direct method, while others prefer the indirect method. Still others say that a combination of the direct and indirect methods is the best way to deal with the mistakes of L2 learners. In a similar way, Wingfield said that teachers "should choose corrective techniques that are most appropriate and most effective for each student" when he listed the pedagogies of error correction by teachers. He then summed up five ways to fix written mistakes: "1. the teacher gives sufficient clues to enable self-correction to be made; 2. the teacher corrects the script; 3. the teacher deals with errors through marginal comments and footnotes; 4. the teacher explains orally to

individual students; and 5. the teacher uses the error as an illustration for a class explanation" (Hendrickson 395).

Recognizing the teachers' responsibilities towards helping the learners, B. Kumaravadivelu has pinpointed some specific areas where the teachers are intended to perfect their skills and expertise. While suggesting some effective ways to ensure meaningful communication in the classroom in order to achieve these responsibilities, he asserted that "tolerating errors as a natural outcome of language development is much more essential than any other methods" (120).

Other than becoming a one-way communicator or a 'ruler-lad' tutor, the L2 teacher has to embellish two roles that will help him transfer the thoughts through the minds before him and spark off a little flame in their wings, as directed by Breen and Candlin. 'The first responsibility is to encourage communication among all students in the classroom, as well as between them and the various activities and texts. The second responsibility is to participate in the learning-teaching group in an interconnected manner' (Kumaravadivelu 120). Here, it is evident that the teacher should adorn the role of an organizer along with the roles of a guide and a resource person for students. As a guide and facilitator, the teacher should be available to talk to students about their problems and confusions whenever they want to, and the teacher should give them useful and constructive feedback on their concerns.

II.   RESEARCH CONTEXT

There have been a lot of changes in how English is taught and learned over time, and the booming Arabic colleges in Kerala have made a name for themselves by ensuring that their students' language skills are fully developed by using a variety of methods and techniques. Sometimes, theoretical practices do not go hand in hand with real-time classroom environments, and teachers will be compelled to improvise their own methods and steps to improve the teaching and learning experience. By the 1980s, innovations on par with technological growth happened in the curriculum of madrasas and other traditional centers of religious learning. Though Arabic was taught as a primary subject and the medium of instruction in the higher levels of education, these curricula ensured to include English language education in the syllabi along with other languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Malayalam. Teaching and learning languages in these institutions have gone through several modes of teaching pedagogies, and recently, these syllabi could innovate effective ways of language teaching through conducting several teacher training programs and activities. Experimentally, there still remains a clear gap for research

on to what extent the methods currently being used in the classrooms of Arabic colleges are effective and what kinds of innovations are needed in order to ensure effective language teaching and learning processes in these institutions.

Two Curricula: Hudawi and Wafy

Though both of these Arabic education curricula primarily focus on the expertise in the performance of Arabic, they also prepare the students in a couple of other languages like English, Hindi, Urdu, and Malayalam. Hudawi curriculum centered at Darul Huda Islamic University started in 1986, while the Arabic colleges in the Wafy stream reorganized and affiliated with a governing body, namely the Coordination of Islamic Colleges (CIC), in 2000.

More than 15,000 students are currently following these two curricula from the primary level to the postgraduate level in more than 120 institutions all over the country. This takes them 8 to 12 years to complete the course. The English language follows Arabic in the curriculum, and it also gains greater importance during instruction. Both of these systematically and scientifically structured syllabi are well known for equipping the students with linguistic and technological skills as well. Its visionaries have planned a curriculum that will definitely meet the needs of the time and, moreover, the needs of society.

English language education is also one of the thrust areas of these two syllabi, and its teaching has been given the highest priority in the curriculum, with 3-6 hours a week set aside from the primary level itself. It also helps students improve their listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills. There are a lot of extracurricular activities and programs, like debate championships, spelling bees, group discussions, etc., that are meant to help students get the most out of their language skills.

Research Questions

How much does the feedback on mistakes change the motivation of students from Arabic colleges in Kerala to learn a second language?

Does the use of the right error correction techniques create a friendly and doable atmosphere in the classrooms?

What kinds of error correction techniques and feedback styles are most effective in second language classrooms?

III.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Primarily, a quantitative method was used to analyze the data collected in this study through the questionnaires prepared and distributed by the researcher

among the students in the Arabic colleges in Kerala. Various tools have been used for conducting this research, including questionnaire surveys, interviews, and personal experiences. Student feedback was collected through the survey. The survey was divided into two sections: the first section comprises questions for demographic analysis of the participants, whereas the second section includes four questions regarding error correction feedback they received from their colleagues and teachers. The random sampling method was used in the study, and the questionnaires were distributed online through emails and WhatsApp messages. 317 students from various institutions participated in the survey and completed the questionnaires. The students were diverse in terms of age, gender, and educational background.

Sample of the Study

More than 300 students, of both genders, who are either still in one of the Arabic colleges or have just graduated from one of them, took part in the survey and answered the questions without being forced or manipulated. Out of the 317 students who took part, 144 are currently in their first year of college using these curriculums. 28.6% of the students, or 86 people, have either finished their post-graduation or are in the process of getting it. Similarly, 27.2% of the participants are currently going through their higher secondary education, and the researcher couldn't easily include the secondary-level students in the survey, probably due to the restrictions on using mobile phones in the colleges. 60% of the participants were boys, while 39% were girls, and almost 1.6% preferred not to disclose their gender identity. Also, it should be noted here that the number of colleges restricted to boys is a bit higher than those restricted to girls, as we can see a ratio of approximately 70:30 regarding its number gender-wise. Hence, boys are more fortunate to get admitted to such institutions than girls.

English is being taught as a language in all of these institutions, and it is vowed to prepare their graduates in almost four languages, English, Arabic, Urdu, and Malayalam. Going through strict assessments and examinations besides periodical term-end assessments, it ensures that each and every student is capable of easily interacting, writing, reading, and comprehending in all four languages. Arts festivals and other extracurricular activities being conducted under the auspices of the student organizations and staff councils also pave the way for gaining enough linguistic expertise from the students. Hence, it can be observed here that the higher education enrollment ratio in the institutes of academic excellence like IITs, IIMs, and central universities from among the students graduated from these Arabic colleges is higher due to this

linguistic excellence, which plays a vital role in easily cracking national level competitive exams.

English classrooms in these colleges usually follow traditional teacher-centered methods, and the students gradually get hold of language abilities, mostly through ways of translating the literary text word for word into their mother tongue. Though there were lots of training sessions for both teachers and students at the beginning of each academic year, more or less the teaching methods in the real classrooms behind the curtain still remained intact. We cannot deny, though, that ICT has had an effect on language classrooms through smart classroom missions in these institutions.

IV.   FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Motivation and confidence of the students play a vital role in acquiring enough knowledge while learning any second language. In dealing with the English language, especially in the traditional classrooms of Arabic colleges in Kerala, teaching and learning processes are going through diverse innovative techniques and methods. However, error correction and feedback methods are more or less the same, and traditional and new advanced methods are yet to be experimented with in this domain.

91.9 percent of the participants in the survey opined that they are motivated enough to learn a second language like English, Arabic, Urdu, or Hindi. Most of the students will find it interesting to learn a new language because it makes them curious about a different culture and way of life. In terms of error correction and feedback methods, the researcher mainly highlighted two modes of correction: teacher correction and peer correction. Most of the students in the survey are interested and motivated to learn any second language when the error correction and feedback happen from the teacher itself, rather than from peers or colleagues. They wish to get their errors corrected from the primary source of knowledge, i.e., the teacher. As a teacher at one of the Arabic colleges, Darul Hidaya Dawa College in Malappuram, I noticed that students are more motivated when praise or feedback comes directly from the teacher rather than from another student. However, it should be done personally when correcting a mistake, and the teacher should prefer to do it publicly when complimenting him or her because students want to get positive feedback right in front of their peers. Another language teacher from the same institution, Mr. Shuaib, also expressed the same suggestion when he was asked in the interview about the teacher feedback in the classrooms.

Taking the teacher correction method into account, only 4.5% of the students have opted for public correction, while the remaining part has preferred for the corrections to

be done personally and confidently. Even though it might reach more people through public feedback and corrections, it definitely hurt the students' motivation and confidence, which made them lose interest in the language they were learning. Hence, giving feedback and making corrections should be done very carefully without even causing a little harm to the pride, confidence, or motivation of the students. Most of the teachers are either correcting the mistakes in front of the class as they happen or making the students demonstrate the mistakes they committed and correct them. Though it may reach a larger audience within seconds, it cannot make a lasting impression, neither on the individual student who made the mistake nor on the audience at all. Instead, it may disrupt that particular student mentally and emotionally, and it may also lead to some kind of mocking torture from the classmates. Therefore, the teachers should be cautious about the consequences their approach may lead to, and they should be well equipped to treat the mistakes of the students personally and psychologically.

In the survey, while 98% of the students expressed that they feel motivated when the error correction feedback comes straight from the teacher itself, only 4.5% have opted for the corrections to be done publicly. It also alludes to the reality that, even if the public correction leads to the error being corrected for a wider audience, it also hurts the mindset of the student who committed the mistake and hence causes them to lose motivation to learn that specific subject or language. Mr. Anas worked as a language teacher in one of the Arabic colleges that followed the Wafy curriculum. He noticed that most of the students came up to him after the lecture and met him in the staff room or library to ask for help finding mistakes in the papers they had written. He has also shared his experience of indirect personal correction, in which the students are convinced of their mistakes and feel motivated when they identify their own mistakes from the written work with just a hint from the teacher. It enhances the viewpoint that indirect feedback is more beneficial for the students, and it draws long-term development in language acquisition (Lee 217).

It also pinpoints the issue that the errors are to be dealt with personally and in secrecy with the specific student, and that the correction feedback is not meant to be done in front of the whole class. Mrs. Mahira, who teaches in the female-only campus under the Wafiyya stream, has also noticed that the students were more or less scared and confused when their mistakes were pointed out in front of the whole class. Some of the students have even asked the teacher to hide their name and identity when she is supposed to point out the mistake in front of the whole class.

When it comes to peer correction, this mode of correction and feedback is meant to be more effective,

especially in second language classrooms. Peer involvement is superior in the learning process in the residential institutions where the students are supposed to stay in hostels after the daytime hours of schooling. Both the Wafy and Hudawi schemes that we discussed are designed and implemented in such a way that the students will be engaged in the curricular and extracurricular activities all the time. The curricula under these two schemes are sketched out, ensuring enough involvement from the students as well, and a language learning atmosphere is built on these campuses through linguistic programs and events conducted by the students' organizations periodically. Hence, it can be easily noticed that the teachers assure the involvement of the students in the extracurricular activities on the campuses, which helps them to a greater extent to learn and practice the second language.

When it comes to peer correction and feedback, even 24% of the participants in the survey disliked getting the feedback publicly, and the majority of the participants felt neutral or somewhat comfortable when it came from classmates. At the same time, only 5% of the students felt comfortable with the same public feedback from the teachers. Also, 83.5% of the participants opted for peer correction feedback as the best method for error correction and grammatical assessment in the second language classrooms, while only 66% of the students are getting motivated from the corrections and feedback happening from the teachers. Hence, the teacher's role as an instructor should be changed to that of a complete facilitator who makes the ambience in the classroom comfortable and easy to learn from peer exchanges and sharings. Mr. Raoof, who has been working as a language teacher in an Arabic college for the last six years, has opined that the results at the implication level show that the students grab and understand their mistakes and even try to figure out how to correct the sentences linguistically when the correction feedback happens from their colleagues themselves. Mrs. Fathima Afeefa, a language teacher at a campus for women, has also noticed that students feel more at ease when their peers comment on any writing they do. And also, she noted that many students have developed a peer relationship by themselves with anyone or a small group of their classmates, which helps them to correct their mistakes and improve their linguistic abilities. Also, this technique ensures a healthy academic atmosphere in the classroom, where the exchange and sharing of knowledge take place very effectively.

V.   CONCLUSION

Since correcting mistakes and getting feedback are so important to creating a good learning environment in second language classrooms, Arabic colleges in Kerala, especially those that follow the Wafy and Hudawi curricula, are going through major changes in both theory and practice. Even though these kinds of theoretical reforms are being put into practice, there is still a gap when it comes to error correction and feedback, which is a very important part of getting students motivated to learn. The researcher carried out this study using quantitative methods, distributing questionnaires and collecting opinions through interviews among the students who studied and graduated from these two educational schemes and also from the teachers who worked as language teachers for a good amount of time.

From the study, it's clear that people who are learning a second language would rather have their peers correct their mistakes and give them feedback than have their teachers do it. A great majority of the learners definitely hope for a peer-helping atmosphere in the classrooms, and they think that it would surely help them to increase their motivation and feedback. Teachers must act as facilitators in the classroom, providing enough support to unmute an exchanging atmosphere among the learners, and the success and efficacy of language learning are obviously dependent on how well the process of facilitating the study has worked out in the classrooms. When ICT technologies are used in modern classrooms, the teacher's role is less important, and the learner takes the lead. Teachers have to internalize this reality and be prepared to accept it.

When it came to how mistakes should be fixed, most of the participants chose personal corrections as the best and most effective way to boost their confidence and motivation. In this case, it's clear that correcting students in public not only hurts their confidence but also makes them lose interest in the language being taught. The teachers should have been aware of the consequences of their public reprimand, and it had no positive effect on the individual student or the entire audience sitting in front, but it did provide something for the classrooms to laugh about at times. A selective approach to error correction would be more beneficial, as the research shows that the comprehensive way of correcting each and every mistake in the written manuscripts of the students disrupts their morale and confidence to learn a second language, and they feel frustrated (Lee 218). And the students cannot learn as "they have developed a less favorable attitude toward learning" (Truscott 355).

So, it's important to stress that it's the teachers' responsibility to handle error corrections and feedback with a little more care and attention. As a result, this study can be summarized as follows: Errors are to be welcomed in the classrooms, and they should be dealt with cleverly and personally by the teachers in order to facilitate learning and develop a happy learning environment in second language classrooms. The future studies should focus on the experimental analysis of the error correction and its influence on the mindset of the learners and on the effectiveness of the pedagogies.

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