Teachers' Error Treatment Practices and Perceptions in Teaching English to Adult EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia: A Gender-Based Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This paper explores error treatment practices in teaching English to Saudi adult English Language learners. In this gender-based qualitative study, thirty-six male and twenty-four female teachers were interviewed, using Hendrickson's (1978) theoretical framework to analyze learners' error treatment practices by EFL teachers. No significant difference in the male and female teachers was found in their perception of the students' errors, reasons and ways to correct students' errors and their perceptions of the backwash effect of the error correction. However, female teachers find a lack of student motivation as a major cause of errors. The study has also explored some unreflective and unprofessional error treatment practices that urge the need for regular training for the teachers to make them aware of the psychological dimensions of error treatment practices. The study recommends the transformation of the traditional style of teaching into coaching to give professional, reflective, and effective treatment to adult EFL/ESL learners' errors.

Key Words: Gender-Based Qualitative Study, Error Treatment, Psychological Dimensions, Adult EFL/ESL Learners.

Introduction

Error treatment in teaching to adult English language learners has recently gained major focus. There have been two major schools of thought: one who consider errors to be the indication of the learners' incompetence and thus, believe in correcting every error to make the learners aware of grammar rules (Borg, 1999); and the other who consider errors to be an important sign of learning and believe that error analysis and correction should be carried out fairly and systematically. The traditional view— the hallmark of the most traditional Grammar Teaching Method, denunciates the occurrence of errors in learners' performance and emphasizes on the correction of every error. However, a lot of later researches paved the way towards the modern school of thought. The communicative approach almost abandoned error correction in language teaching and emphasized on meaning instead of the form (Harmer, 2001). Error correction was opposed because of its negative effects on the learners and the learning process (Truscott, 1996). Nevertheless, a lot of researches still found the error correction an important step towards improvement in learner's performance and proved that feedback on errors facilitated the development of L2 grammatical knowledge (Ferris, 2002; Lyster & Saito, 2010). Therefore, the EFL/ESL practitioners are also divided in their approach towards error correction.

Another interesting dichotomy found in the area of English language teaching is gender-based: the influence of socially constructed identities on the English language teaching on learning. Researchers have studied this dichotomy in the context of the use of language in communication, learning strategies, learners' perceptions about English language learning, etc. Since the teachers play an important role in the whole teaching-learning process including error analysis and correction, their perceptions may be influenced by their socially constructed identities— gender. Saudi Arabia is unique in EFL teaching/learning in that there are separate institutions for

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male and females EFL learners, and even the teachers teaching these students to belong to their gender. In other words, there is a chance that the gender differences affect the teaching practices including error correction.

The present study is an attempt to explore any gender-based differences in the practices of error-correction among English language teachers teaching in Saudi universities. The study is based on the error-correction model presented by Hendrickson (1978). Hendrickson focused on five aspects of error treatment, which are based on five questions:

i.   Should the learner's errors be corrected?
ii.   When should the learner's errors be corrected?
iii. Which errors of the learner should be corrected?
iv.   How should the learner's errors be corrected?
v.   Who should correct the learner's errors?

This paper aims to study the male and female EFL teachers' perceptions about these five aspects of error treatment. The study has used the qualitative tool of a structured interview. The in-depth content and thematic analysis of the answers to these questions lead to reflective and informed language teaching practices. The study uses the following research question:

What are the error Treatment Perceptions of Male and Female English Language Teachers in Teaching Adult Learners?

Review of Literature

Language learning is never error-free. Errors in English Language learners' linguistic outputs are important since they are not only the indicators of learners' performance but also reflect upon the teachers' teaching. The identification and treatment of errors are closely guided by the teaching dogmas: how a teacher perceives the errors and how s/he treats them by taking into consideration either the learners' psychological and emotional selves or only the intellectual selves. There is a research need to find out whether gender plays its part in differentiating the English Language learners psychologically, emotionally and intellectually and whether male and female English Language teachers carry out error treatment practices differently.

Several researches find no significant gender-based difference in teachers' perceptions of English Language teaching activities (Ahmad & Radzuan, 2016; Moini, 2009). The uniformity in the perception of both females and males is found to be the result of a centralized system of education where administrative policies, syllabus, and other aspects are decided by a single decision-making body (Ahmad & Radzuan, 2016). Studies like these find out that "gender does not help differentiate learners' learning preferences" (Shuib & Azizan, 2015 p-104). However, it does influence the teachers' perceptions of everything related to class and classroom including the learners' errors and their treatment (Estalkhi, Mohammadi, Bakshiri & Kamali, 2011; Ogden, Chapman & Linward, 1994). The gender-based differences in perception of teachers are due to the differences in their lives and professional experiences, educational backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and personality traits.

Many researchers have studied that male and female teachers perceive the presence of an effective teacher in the English Language class differently. Ogden, Chapman, and Linward (1994) find out that for females, a teacher is effective if s/he is organized, enthusiastic, creative, and understanding; however, for males, a responsible, fair, and humorous teacher who can communicate well with the learners is effective. The personal, psychological, and social differences lead the female teachers to worry more about their learners' progress in terms of accuracy and accent development; thus, they tend to be more critical towards the learners' errors and their correction. Thus the females emphasize more on learners' accuracy, whereas the males are more emphatic about the fluency. In short, the males are less critical about the learners' errors (Estalkhi, Mohammadi, Bakshiri & Kamali, 2011). There is further evidence that the female teachers use the extrovert type of activities like discussions, information gap exercises, and group-based tasks, unlike the males who incline more towards the introvert type of activities (Rahimi & Asadollahi, 2012). It will be interesting to further investigate the gender-based differences in the perception of the teachers about their learners' error identification and treatment in a qualitative way.

In error treatment, the first step is the identification and consideration of genuine errors: the distinction between a *mistake* and an *error*. A *mistake* is a performance error: it is a failure to use a known system correctly in context (Brown, 2000). An *error* is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner (Selinker, 1972). Interlanguage competence is mainly the second language learners' system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and the target language. Accordingly, the teachers should not look at the learner as a producer of imperfect language, but as intelligent and creative being who follows logical steps of acquisition and creatively acts upon the linguistic environment. The learner is seen striving to produce order and structure to the linguistic stimuli. This helps teachers understand the psychological process of foreign/second language learning. The beginning stages of learning a second language are characterized by a good deal of interlingual transfer. In the early stages, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which the learner relies (Xie & Jing, 2007) and this leads him/her to commit the errors which are called interlingual. The other important causes of errors are intralingual transfer, cultural interference, and insufficient linguistic knowledge. However, in some cases, the errors may occur due to the use of communicative strategies like avoidance, language switch, and prefabricated patterns. The teacher must take into consideration all these factors before starting the treatment process. S/he should consider the logic of error correction by analyzing the errors systematically to achieve the teaching targets.

As to what kind of errors should be corrected, it needs teachers' intuition and understanding of errors. Regarding the timing of error correction, there are two options, viz., do it immediately or delay it (Quinn, 2014). Both feedback options should provide learners with accurate models to help them change their incorrect language features. As little time as possible should be allowed between the commission of errors and the provision of the correct model. *What* and *when* part of the error correction has to be judged and executed by the teacher himself. Thus, the teacher decides about the time of correction, the type of correction, and whether to correct or not to correct. Hendrickson (1978) distinguishes between global and systematic errors. Global errors need not be corrected immediately but the systematic errors affecting the communication system must be corrected instantly.

Unlike some teachers and researchers who do not favor a long delay between the commission of errors and the correction, many others believe in the benefits of the delay in a correction. The biggest benefit of the delayed correction is that it saves the learners from the inhibiting effects (Long, 1977). Similarly, a delayed correction may allow the learners to self-correct on receiving comprehensible input. It can also lead them to the unconscious acquisition of the patterns of children acquiring their L1. If the objective is fluency development, delayed correction is the right approach. However, the new trend in reflective teaching is not to focus on when the errors are corrected but how well they are corrected.

Some studies focus on the type of feedback instead of the timing of the feedback. They concern more with how the effectiveness of feedback varies depending on the degree of implicitness or explicitness or the function of the types of feedback (Quinn, 2014). There is a clear distinction between the two kinds of feedback (Tootkaboni & Khatib, 2014). Explicit/direct feedback requires the grammatical explanation of the error, and implicit/indirect feedback makes use of repetition, recasts, clarification requests, facial expressions, and confirmation checks. The teacher may provide unfocused feedback/extensive correction or focused feedback/intensive correction depending on his/her teaching creed and approach.

The role of the teacher has changed dramatically in recent times. Now, before being an instructor, he is a role model, service provider, neutral agent, friend, facilitator, leader, motivator, mentor, educator, and a colleague (Hussain, M.S., et al, 2012) However, the most vital role of a teacher, which covers all these roles, is that of the feedback provider. Teacher as a corrector has been an important role almost in all teaching methods with varying degrees. In GTM, error correction is the job of the teacher— the only source of knowledge. S/he is expected not to tolerate any error and correct it immediately and explicitly ensuring that the learners get the correct language input (Richard, 2001). The later approaches changed the teacher's role as a feedback provider, emphasizing on cooperative learning in learner-centered classes. The teacher's task is to ensure learners' autonomy by applying techniques like peer correction, group correction, and self-correction (Lin and Chien, 2009). Teachers need to be aware and alert about their active role in the class.

The language teacher needs to be very vigilant in grasping the contextual complexities to correct work more meaningful, purposeful, and effective (Hussain, et al., 2012). Many researchers favor the shift from teacher autonomy to learners' autonomy in error-correction (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Learner-learner feedback is important as it makes the learners comfortable and reduces the teacher's dominance. Another benefit of peer correction and self-correction is that the learners become more responsible for their learning which in turn makes them more involved (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). However, peer correction may have some problems. It may snatch learners' motivation for learning by making them feel inferior to the others who correct them (Harmer, 2004). Another side effect of peer correction maybe its opposite: the bright learners may start looking down upon the dull ones and the teacher may have to face the unwanted situation. The teacher must monitor the peer correction process cautiously to prevent such side effects.

Though many researchers focused on the error treatment, there are many areas yet to be researched. Hyland and Anan (2006) point out that error treatment is a threefold process of identification, evaluation, and correction, but most of the studies have addressed only the latter two. Many studies have investigated strategies teachers use for the provision of feedback, but how teachers recognize learners' errors have not been focused much. Similarly, Asassfeh (2013) makes the observation that i) there are no conclusive results about the usefulness or otherwise of error correction, ii) it is not clear whether direct feedback is a more effective or indirect one, and iii) whether teachers should be selective in the provision of feedback or address all the errors. Some researches focused on the learners' attitudes towards error correction practices (Mustafa, 2012). However, no research has focused on gender-based teachers' perceptions of error correction in grammar teaching.

The present study intends to address some glaring research gaps. It investigates the differences between male and female teachers' perceptions about error correction: teachers' perceptions about the learners' errors and the correction work, whether they should correct all oral and written errors or be selective in their feedback. It also tends to find out if there is any gender-based difference in the teachers' teaching creeds about error treatment: they believe in the traditional or innovative approach to error treatment; in being implicit or explicit, in correcting immediately or delaying it, and using comments or no comments.

Methodology

Research interests have many levels, and as a result, multiple methods may be appropriate. If the interest is in what Schutz (1967) calls the target population's subjective understanding, interviewing may be the best avenue of inquiry (Seidman, 2013). To find answers to the research question, data were collected from 36 male and 24 female English Language teachers of various nationalities.

Participants' Demographic Description

100 ESL teachers belonging to different nationalities, but all teaching English in higher education in Saudi Arabia were invited to participate in this research study. 60 of them responded and were interviewed. Following is the demographic description of the participants:

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Description

Nationality	Males	Females
Pakistanis	15	09
Indians	02	01
Americans	09	04
British	03	02
South Africans	03	03
Arabs	4	5
Total	36	24

Data Analysis

Errors as Signs of Learning

Error treatment largely depends on the teacher's approach towards errors. A teacher may view the learners' errors as a reflection of their psycho-lingual development or failure. S/he also may take them as a reflection upon his/her teaching practices and as a guide to what next to focus.

All teachers in this study consider errors to be instrumental. Errors reflect the learner's pace of progress and are "stepping stones" in the learning process. Errors are natural to occur and are signs of development and should be treated naturally. Considering the nature and causes of errors leads the teacher to the right plans to treat them. The teachers point out many possible causes of their Saudi English language learners.

Many male and a few female teachers think L1 interference is a major cause. Ms. A. shares her observation that "Learners always try to translate from L1 to English using L1 rules." Ms. LP thinks that learners' errors are "structured by their languages, especially their native language". Mr. MO considers errors to be characteristic of "learners' interlanguage" competence: their effort to shift from one language to another. Therefore, the contrastive analysis of English and L1 may help the teacher to better treat the errors. Because of the differences in L1 and L2, learners make grammar errors. Mr. SH shares his observation that "the sentence structure of English is rigid while most of the others' are (quite) flexible." Mr. MG gets more specific and opines that "capitalization, articles and some other items are missing in the L1 of many (Saudi) learners". The contrastive analysis may not help deal with errors that are not the result of first language interference.

Another cause of the learners' errors pointed out by both the male and female teachers is the difficulty within the English language. Mr. AL opines that "most errors made by my learners would be greatly reduced if they knew better how the English language worked." He also suggests a way out, "this could be solved by the learners reading more". Some female teachers point out another cause that some of these learners do not give due importance to English, and therefore, are not motivated enough to learn it. Ms. AF comments, "lack of motivation… results in a lack of focus and attention. Thus they (learners) take longer than usual to understand a grammatical concept, retain it, and use it effectively." Due to a lack of motivation, they do not try to understand grammar concepts and fail to produce correct utterances or written passages.

Errors are a part of the learning process. They should be welcomed with a positive frame of mind and must be treated with proper planning. Teachers must be prepared to anticipate these errors. Their preparation should include a list of possible errors as well as their causes to deal with them appropriately. All male teachers agree that there are two major causes of adult English language learners' errors: L1 interference and difficulty within the English language. However, females find another cause i.e. lack of motivation to learn English.

Error Treatment Practices

Error treatment is an essential aspect of an English language class. Since the way the errors are treated can have a great influence on learners' psychological selves and may motivate or de-motivate them, it is teachers' prime responsibility to take great care in treating (pointing out, analyzing, explaining, and correcting) them.

All teachers in the study agree that error treatment is an unavoidable sensitive issue. This can boost or break the learners' confidence. Mr. KN says, "I take into consideration that the learners must get feedback on their errors from time to time". Most of the teachers especially males agree that to identify learners' learning problems, the teachers need to analyze the learners' errors and this should be done without hurting the learners' self-esteem. Mr. AW shares his views, "I…treat errors without hurting learners' ego and self-esteem". Mr. SH comments, "…I rarely correct individual errors on the spot as correcting them all the time may make the learners disheartened". All teachers in the study are quite conscious of the sensitivity related to error treatment.

The study finds out that teachers treat errors with great care. All agree that they must gloss over the errors, if it is a speaking activity and the purpose is fluency development; if the error does not impede the communication, and if the error is not very serious. However, it is essential to correct an error if it is repeated by various learners (a global error); if it relates to the structure being focused in the class, and if it occurs in a writing activity. Mr. AS shares his views, "…in writing skills sometimes error correction becomes inevitable because the sentences either become meaningless or convey a different meaning". Teachers tend to correct all

errors in learners' writing tasks because of the exam pattern which requires the learners to produce an error-free draft. Therefore, the teachers feel bound to point out and correct all errors in their learners' writing assignments.

Teachers adopt various ways of correcting their learners' errors. These are self-correction, peer correction, teacher correcting without mentioning the name of the one who made those errors, followed by a general discussion about their explanation; teacher himself/herself modeling or repeating the erroneous sentences with correction; teacher correcting written drafts of the learners and explaining the errors to the individual learners; teacher selecting a few errors that are relevant to the lesson and class, teacher giving a list of possible errors to the learners before they write, to make them aware of these errors and to encourage them to avoid these in their writing. All error correction strategies are followed by reinforcement activities.

Teacher Correction vs. Peer Correction

English language teachers correct their learners' errors in numerous ways. However, the two most common ways of correction are peer correction and teacher correction. All the teachers agree that both have their pedagogical values. Mr. ACD is of the view that the purpose of both is "to help learners direct themselves, at times, to knowledge, fostering a need in learners to become self-directed lifelong learners". Bringing variety in the methods of correction is important to address different learning styles. Mr. AW opines that it is important to use both methods because "some learners feel more relaxed in peer correction". However, several learners do not rely on their peers and respond better to the teachers' correction.

Most teachers from both groups show their preference for teacher correction. Teacher correction is more traditional but is considered more reliable, appropriate, accurate, and comprehensive. This method of correction is found more satisfying in the class. Mr. KN is of the view that the teachers feel satisfied with their correction work instead of relying on peer correction because it allows them to address "all the areas concerned". The learners also feel satisfied that the correction comes from an authority. It is only the teacher who can explain the background and reason for the errors and give authentic correction. Teacher correction must be done carefully in a friendly, constructive, and positive manner to avoid any such embarrassing situation which may discourage the learners. Ms. SJ shares her opinion "…teacher correction is more effective and encouraging if that is done in a kind and caring way". There are numerous ways of teacher correction: echoing, hinting, repetition, prompting, making a note of common errors, nonverbal ways/gestures, reformulation, and explanation.

On the other hand, some teachers find peer correction helpful. Peer correction boosts the learners' motivation and saves them from embarrassment which could result from teacher correction. Moreover, it promotes cooperative learning and engages all the learners in the correction activity. It also gives a chance to have a lot of learners' interaction and autonomy. It also makes the learners take responsibility for their learning and gain confidence. Ms. LP shares her view about peer correction, "it is meant to de-center power in the classroom and makes learners act and sees each other as contributors to the learning experience". Moreover, peer correction has less harmful psychological effects. Mr. AA is of the view that "…getting corrected by their friends evokes less anxiety". However, peer correction is found to have some flaws. Ms. SJ opines that peer correction may put a learner under pressure or cause a lack of self-trust. Some learners might start devaluing themselves for knowing less than the others. Therefore, some teachers in the male group consider teacher correction necessary, but it may follow self-correction and peer correction, so that the learners who rely more on their teacher may be satisfied. Moreover, the explanation and correction of an error coming from a teacher, the authority, may satisfy all the learners. Mr. DS is of the view that learners should be made aware that self-correction and peer correction are for their encouragement and teacher correction is for reinforcement and double-checking to have precisely similar correct answers.

Frequency of Error Correction

Error correction is essential but whether every error is to be corrected is also an important consideration. There is a clear division among teachers in both groups on how frequently a teacher must correct learners' errors. A few male and female teachers believe that error must be corrected because this is the natural way of learning. If learners' errors are not pointed out and corrected, they would repeat them and take them as correct. These teachers also comment that it is a normal process of teaching to review errors. These teachers seem to be shaped

up by the short-term goals of the learners i.e. passing the exams or getting good grades. At the same time, they seem to believe in conditioning, an important principle of Grammar Translation Method and Behaviorism. They tend to ignore the ultimate goal of education— to develop independent learners. Mr. M.Y says that "it is important to correct the errors so that they (learners) do not develop bad habits". However, teachers must take care while correcting learners' errors so that the practice may not de-motivate them.

There is a large group among both male and female teachers who believe that correcting errors depends on the purpose of the activity. If it is a speaking activity and the purpose is fluency development, most of the errors must be ignored. However, if it is grammar activity or a writing class, and there is a fear that errors may seriously distort the meaning to be conveyed, the errors must be pointed out and corrected. If an error impedes communication, it must be corrected. In other words, the context in which the errors occur is very important in deciding whether errors should be corrected or not. Moreover, all errors should not be corrected because too much correction has negative effects on the learners. Mr. SH says, "…it may dishearten them (learners) which can result in de-motivation". Mr. MO points out, "errors should not always be corrected because there are some errors that the learner will fix himself/herself if we provide a proper volume of comprehensible input". Mr. AW concludes, "The teacher's knowledge of the learners' linguistic stage of development will help him decide how to treat an error". Thus different errors are treated differently.

Psychological Impact of Error Treatment

Error correction may have a strong backwash effect, which is necessary to predict and there should be proper planning to avoid it. Almost all teachers in both groups show their concerns about this: if error correction is not done sensibly, it may have more harms than benefits. This may harm the learners' confidence, test their patience, and affect their self-esteem if done directly and explicitly. Some learners may get thwarted by too much red ink on their work. The teachers need to be mindful of these effects of error correction and plan properly. Some of the sensitive learners may be guided privately so that they may not feel insulted in front of the class. One male teacher comment, "Learners should not be made to feel stupid because of an interlanguage error. Learners' efforts must be praised in any case." In conclusion, the key factors that can make the process of correction positive or negative are the amount of correction, time of correction, and manner of correction. If a teacher handles the learners' errors correction strategically, keeping these factors in view, he/she would be able to save learners from the negative effects of the correction process.

Need and Impact of Teacher's Comments in Error Treatment

Most teachers in both groups believe that it is essential to use comments on the learners' performance. They always want some kind of explanation for their errors, and if a teacher does not provide them with a clear explanation of their correction, they may get disillusioned and may not take interest in that language skill anymore. Sometimes comments are necessary to boost the confidence level of the learners. Ms. LP opines, "Comments allow the teachers to set up a dialogue with the learner. They can help to offset the teachers' mechanical edits and help learners focus on global issues in their work". However, the comments should always be brief, clear, and positive. The majority of the participant teachers in this study believe that a language teacher must not only correct the errors but also give an explanation of the rules and the reason for the correction. Only then a teacher can expect his/her learners to avoid the same errors in their future tasks. The teacher should be prudent, wise, unprejudiced, patient, and kind in their comments for error correction.

Conclusion and Research Implications

The present study has investigated the differences between male and female teachers' perceptions of error correction practices in grammar teaching. Some Important findings are:

English language teachers have a combination of traditional and modern teaching creeds about error correction.

There is no significant difference in the opinions of male and female teachers about their perception of their learners' errors, their reasons, and ways to correct their learners' errors and their perceptions of the backwash effect of the error correction in the class.

Adult English language learners whether male or female respond positively to all corrections made by their teachers if their self-esteem is kept intact. They make errors mainly due to the influence of their mother tongue. Another cause of errors is the lack of motivation in learners to study the English language.

Mere peer correction is not considered a good solution to address the psychological problems associated with error correction since the teachers do not find cooperative or competitive sense in the learners, and thus, recommend teacher correction to follow if peer correction is practiced.

All errors committed by their learners do not need to be corrected. However, many teachers think that the learners come to the class for learning and that is possible only if they are made to realize the mistakes; therefore, all significant errors must be corrected.

It is essential to give some kind of comments for learners' error correction. These comments may be the explanation of the rules, the reason for the correction, or some words of praise and encouragement.

Adult English language learners whether males or females are quite sensitive about their errors and respond positively to all corrections made by their teachers if done sensibly. Error correction depends on the nature of the error itself, the context of the error, the purpose of the activity in which the error is committed, and the teacher's knowledge of the learners' linguistic stage of development. In case of errors resulting from the influence of the mother tongue, the learners must be made conscious of the differences between English and L1 which will lead to self-correction. If the errors are due to lack of motivation in learners, the teachers need to constantly counsel their learners about the importance of learning English not only for the higher studies but also as an important life coping skill. While correcting learners' errors, the teacher must ensure that their psychological selves are not hurt.

The key factors that can make the process of correction positive or negative are the amount of correction, time of correction, and manner of correction. All error correction strategies must be followed by reinforcement activities. Error correction along with some kind of comments by the teacher (that may be the explanation of the rules, the reason for correction or some words of praise and encouragement) help the adult learners learn from their errors. However, the comments should always be brief, clear, and positive, and the teacher should be prudent, wise, unprejudiced, patient, and kind while commenting.

The study recommends that teachers should be given in-service training to get advanced knowledge of the variety of ways of treating errors to make the process safe and productive. It is also suggested that to deal with the psychological aspects of the error correction process, learners' beliefs and perceptions regarding the process may also be taken into account in the future research, and the results be shared with the teachers so that they may rectify their perceptions and practices accordingly for the optimum results. In short, there is room for further research to find ways of transforming the traditional style of teaching into coaching on the principles of Neurolinguistics to give professional, reflective and effective treatment to adult English language learners' errors.

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