

“It Might Have Been a Slip of Tongue”: Iranian EFL Teachers’ Reaction to their Colleagues’ Linguistic Goofs

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Abstract: This research sought to investigate Iranian EFL teachers’ reaction to their colleagues’ mistakes and the probable factors influencing their response. Moreover, it was momentous to the researchers to figure out whether teaching experience and gender play any significant role in the way the participants respond or not. Therefore, 144 teachers were selected with different teaching experiences. The participants were provided with a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) in which they were asked to imagine themselves in a situation where a colleague makes a mistake, and to respond how they would react with the aid of 7 options and a blank space to write a comment or an answer, which was not included. At the end, their responses were first transformed into tables and bar graphs illustrating the frequency and percentage of each option, and then were deeply analyzed. It was concluded that gender and teaching experience do not have a profound effect on the applied correction method and teachers’ speech act of correction and the way they react to their colleagues’ mistakes is more culture-bound than being related to experience and gender. [Reza Pishghadam, Paria Norouz Kermanshahi. “It Might Have Been a Slip of Tongue”: Iranian EFL Teachers’ Reaction to their Colleagues’ Linguistic Goofs. Life Sci J 2012;9(3):215-220] (ISSN:1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 32

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1. Introduction

Granted the fact that students’ mistakes or errors are integral parts of each language learning class (Brown, 2007), it seems that correcting any linguistic misbehavior of students is a crucial issue, which should be done carefully. Moreover, correcting mistakes or errors seems to be a cross-cultural notion, which is handled differently in different cultures (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993). Corrective behavior and power relations are evidently intertwined, in a way that different people from different power status group provide a wide range of feedback.

Generally research has focused on the way teachers correct students’ errors, or students correct their teachers, disregarding other types of error-correction. In fact, numerous studies have been conducted to examine teachers’ corrective behavior towards learners or vice versa (e.g. Pishghadam & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2011; Takahashi & Beebe, 1993).

However, to the knowledge of the researchers, no studies are available shedding light on teachers’ corrective behavior towards other teachers, i.e. the same power status group. In the current research, it is hypothesized that factors such as gender and teaching experience might affect the way teachers react to their colleagues’ mistakes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Corrective behavior

Before dealing with the issue of correction, it is quite necessary to clarify the significant difference

between an *error* and a *mistake*. According to Brown (2007, p. 257), while errors are manifestations of learners’ competence, mistakes are “performance lapses” as a result of a “failure to utilize a known system correctly”. Errors and mistakes also differ with regard to the issue of correction. As Brown (2001) contends, *mistakes* rarely call for treatment, while *errors* demand teacher response.

There are two different outlooks to learners’ errors (Scrivener, 1994, p. 109):

- a) They prove that students are not learning.
- b) They prove that learning is in progress.

Nowadays, there is a tendency to the second outlook, believing that when learners make an error, they are in fact “experimenting with the language, trying out ideas, attempting to communicate and making progress”. According to Long (1983), in learning a first language error correction may be of no use; on the contrary, it is beneficial to second language learners, both adults and children (as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001).

There is compelling evidence that error correction is quite a critical issue to which teachers need to be sensitive; since an “insensitive correction” may lead to sapping of learners’ confidence (Harmer, 1998). In a similar vein, Chastain (1988, p. 290) argues that second language learners desire to speak the language, but the fear of “public failure” and “groping for words” may act as an obstacle which hinders the efforts. Therefore, scholars put forward some hints to make the best out of correction:

- a) Teachers had better start with what learners “can do right” rather than what they “can do incorrectly” (Chastain, 1988, p. 290).
- b) Teachers must not single out a particular learner for criticism; rather mention errors without saying who made them (Harmer, 1998, p. 94).
- c) Regular correction may lead to the “inhibition of the already taciturn” students; hence, teachers had better not interrupt learners continuously unless they signal for help (McDonough & Shaw, 2003, p. 152).
- d) Teachers should make an effort to resist the tendency to correct every single error. They must bear in mind that their purpose is neither to show off their knowledge nor to make an error-free speech; they are there to create a positive climate which encourages learners to talk (Chastain, 1988).
- e) Praising students for their success is just as important as correcting them after failure. So error correction can be accompanied by some expressions and encouraging words such as good, well-done, etc. (Harmer, 1998).
- f) Chastain (1988) believes that teachers can react to learners’ errors in the same way that native speakers do to nonnative speakers. Based on research (Chun, A. E., Chenoweth, N. A., Day, R. R., & Luppescue, S., 1982, as cited in Chastain, 1988), native speakers correct merely 8.9% of nonnative speakers’ errors since the focus is on communication rather than language.

To know how teachers treat learners’ errors is of paramount importance. Piles of studies are available which investigate teachers’ corrective feedback either to find a relationship between learners’ errors and teachers’ response or to pinpoint a correlation between error correction and accuracy, motivation or acquisition. For instance, observing patterns of error treatment in ESL classrooms, Panova and Lyster (2002) tried to find a relationship between feedback type and learners’ response. Many researchers highlighted the type of correction favored by teachers and learners and concluded that teachers prefer indirect correction (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001). Some other researchers examined correction in writing such as Vickers and Ene (2006) who concluded that self-correction is the best in writing since it leads to greater grammatical accuracy.

In nearly all studies done on correction or corrective feedback, it is brought into focus that error correction has a social dimension, which means any criticism or praise will be public (Allwright, 2005).

Thus according to Szesztay (2004, p. 133), teachers need to think deeply when they correct a learner in order not to make them feel “absolutely stupid” and to “maintain rapport”.

Among the few studies on correction, we can refer to Takahashi and Beebe (1993) who examined American and Japanese performance of the speech act of correction with unequal power status. They studied the use of positive remarks and softeners to make each speech act less face-threatening and to make communication smoother. In fact, they were about to observe the effect of power and distance of addresses on subjects’ choice of expression, and to compare them in two different languages. They carried the research in two different power statuses 1) higher to lower, and 2) lower to higher; that is, 1) teachers correcting learners, and 2) learners correcting teachers. They concluded that: first, Japanese who use English transfer some style shifting patterns from their L1. Second, using a positive remark when correcting someone of lower status is an American pattern and Japanese rarely use it, so it is clear that their acquisition is not complete.

Gao and LIU Shao-zhong (2009) conducted a similar study on Chinese individuals. What they concluded for the first situation was that “providing no correction was a frequently employed pattern in higher to lower status” by Chinese participants (p. 34) which was not the same as what Takahashi and Beebe concluded about Americans and Japanese. For the second situation, Gao and LIU shao-zhong (2009, p. 34) claimed that Chinese EFL learners preferred to “take typical linguistic formula ‘it seems...’ or ‘as if...’ before correction and they preferred to use softeners, mitigation devices and questions, etc. to save the higher-status people’s face” and to show their uncertainty.

To our knowledge, there are merely three studies on the speech act of correction in Iran (Pishghadam & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2011(a) & 2011(b); Pishghadam, Hashemi & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2011) focusing on how learners correct teachers, peers and themselves and one study on how teachers correct learners (Pishghadam & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2011), this research seems to be quite significant with the chief purpose of finding out about the corrective behavior that EFL teachers adopt towards other teachers, considering factors such as teaching experience and gender.

3. Methodology

3.1. Setting and participants

This study was carried out in language institutes of Mashhad, Iran, and two groups of participants took part who were all EFL teachers. The first group consisted of 144 individuals with different teaching

experiences ranging from 0-5 years (N=48), 5-10 years (N=48) and above 10 years (N=48). The second group contained 180 EFL teachers of both genders, male (N=90) and female (N=90).

3.2. Instrument

In order to gather large amount of data at full pelt and include more participants in the research, Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was selected to be the instrument for data collection. A questionnaire was devised based on the guidelines laid down by Takahashi and Beebe (1993) that put forward an imaginary situation and teachers should respond how they would react. The content validity of the questionnaire was substantiated through a pilot study in which 60 EFL teachers took part. On the recommendations of an expert in this field and based on the feedback received from participants, questions were revised and ambiguities were removed. Seven options were available in the DCT for the respondents to check off plus one space to add any comments or response (see the Appendix)

3.3. Procedure

The process of data collection took about three months, starting in January 2011 and ending in March. The devised questionnaire was distributed among EFL teachers randomly selected, and took about 5 minute. The participants of the first group were divided into three categories based on their teaching experience and the second group according to their gender. The participants' responses were initially transformed into tables and graphs displaying the frequency of each answer to each option and were later analyzed.

4. Results

The proposed situation deals with **teacher correcting teacher** and 7 choices are available plus one to pen down what they would say if it were not included in the previous eight options. The number of responses to each option and the group to which the respondent belongs are delineated below:

Situation- You are an English teacher. During a workshop, one colleague is explaining how to teach a point, but he/she makes a mistake in his/her speech. Instead of 'adopt a child' he/she has said 'adapt a child'. What would you say/how would you react?

4.1. Teachers' responses considering gender

Option A- I would probably say nothing.

Ignoring the mistake made by another colleague is the most favored reaction based on the frequencies displayed in Table 1. More than half of the teachers preferred to keep silent. From the explanations that

they provided, it could be inferred that remaining silent in this situation was due to being at the same level with the addressee or considering it just as a slip of tongue not actually an error. As the results demonstrate, it is obvious that in this situation there is not much difference between males and females.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of teachers' answers to each option considering gender

Variable / Options	A		B		C		D		E		F		G	
Male	58	32 2%	4	2.2 %	0	0 %	1	0.5 %	1	10 8%	9	5%	1	0.5 %
Female	62	34 4%	6	3.3 %	0	0 %	2	1.1 %	2	11 6%	2	1.1 %	4	2.2 %
Total	12	66 0%	1	5.5 %	0	0 %	3	1.6 %	3	21 9%	1	6.1 %	5	2.7 %

Option B- I would wait for other colleagues to correct, and if they didn't, I'd correct.

According to table 4.12., 5.5% of teachers opted for correcting their colleague but that depended on the reaction of others; that is, if other teachers did not correct the person he/she would do that. According to Table 1 more females (3.3%) tended to be tolerant of the mistakes.

Option C- I'm sorry...?

Interestingly, no single teacher preferred to stop his/her colleague to ask for clarification or repetition.

Option D- Adapt a child?!

Repeating the erroneous sentence with a questioning intonation might have two different purposes; it may simply serve as a question for clarification or might sarcastically tease the teacher. Males and females differ slightly in this regard, as 0.5% of males and 1.1% of females have opted for this option.

Option E- You mean 'adopt'?

Among the teachers, 21.6% preferred to correct their colleagues by providing the correct form in a question. This may also function as an aid to the addressee or in some contexts a method for teasing. More females (11.6%) tended to select this option than males (10%).

Option F- Your speech was perfect, but you made a small mistake, you should say 'adopt a child' not 'adapt a child'.

According to Table 1, 5% of males prefer to praise the addressee before correcting him/her which is more than females (1.1%).

Option G- Thank you, but you should say 'adopt'.

Whether or not to praise the person before correcting him/her has long been a controversial issue and greatly depends on the power status of the interlocutors. In this situation, both the speaker and

the hearer are teachers and therefore of the same power status; it might be considered inappropriate in some cultures to thank the person before correction. Comparing males and females, females tend to go for this option more than males. Figure 1 displays all details about gender differences in a graphic way.

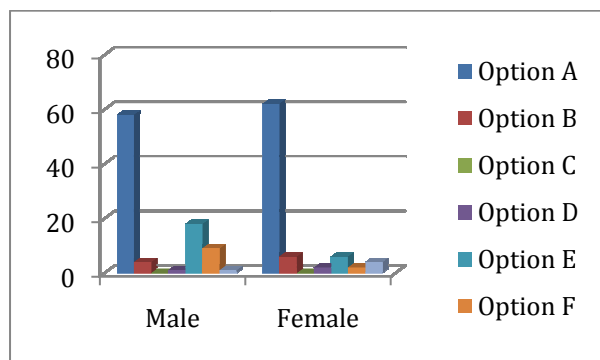


Figure 1. Teachers' responses considering gender

4.2. Teachers' responses considering experience

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of teachers' answers to each option considering teaching experience

Variable / Options	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
0-5 years	3 1	21 55%	2 1.3%	0 0%	1 0.6%	1 6.9%	3 2.0%	1 0.6%
5-10 years	3 2	22 29%	2 2.7%	0 0%	1 1.3%	1 1.3%	2 2.7%	1 1.3%
Above 10 years	3 4	23 66%	3 8.5%	0 0%	1 2.7%	1 2.7%	4 11.1%	1 2.7%
Total	9 7	67 35%	7 4.8%	0 0%	3 2.0%	3 2.0%	11 6.2%	3 2.0%

Table 2 displays the differences of error correction with respect to experience.

Option A- I would probably say nothing. Whether or not to correct a colleague who is of the same power status with the other teachers who aim to correct is a controversial issue. The most favored option among all is option A and the frequency of responses to that is considerably greater than the other ones (67.3%). Though not notably different, teachers of Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3 react differently; that is, as the amount of teaching experience increases the ignorance of the mistake becomes more probable.

Option B- I would wait for other colleagues to correct, and if they didn't, I'd correct.

Respondents to this option were the ones who did not prefer to keep silent and did not act immediately either. They seem to have been more tolerant as they

waited for other colleagues to take action first. According to Table 2, more experienced teachers (Group C = 2.08%) tend to be error-tolerant.

Option C- I'm sorry...?

Asking for clarification seems not to be considered as an appropriate method of correction in the current situation since it is not selected even by one teacher.

Option D- Adapt a child?!

As mentioned in the previous section, repeating the ill-formed utterance in a question form might serve the purpose of asking for clarification or taunting the teacher. In each group of teachers with different experiences, merely 1 respondent selected this option.

Option E- You mean 'adopt'?

Teaching experience does not seem to have a profound effect on the use of this specific speech act of correction due to the fact that almost the same number of respondents went for this option (about 7%).

Option F- Your speech was perfect but you made a small mistake, you should say 'adopt a child' not 'adapt a child'.

Among three groups of teachers with different experiences, the third group –experienced ones– opted for this option more than the others (2.7%), but still not a considerable percentage in comparison with option 1.

Option G- Thank you, but you should say 'adopt'.

It might be due to the fact that thanking a person of equal status before correcting him/her is considered inappropriate in some cultures to that very few teachers opted for this option- 0.6% of each group and 2.08% in total.

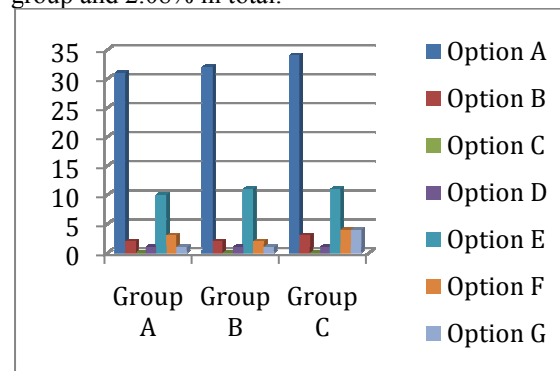


Figure 2. Teachers' responses considering teaching experience

5. Discussion

This study was conducted to examine teachers' corrective behavior towards their colleague's mistakes; that is, to find out whether in the context of Iran, teachers would correct someone of the same power status and what strategies they might adopt to carry out the speech act of correction. Moreover, it attempted to investigate whether or not teaching experience and gender would play any role in teachers' corrective behavior.

As the outcomes of this study revealed, less than half of the teachers tended to correct their colleagues when making a mistake. And among the ones who preferred to correct, a few ones preferred to wait for other colleagues to take action and if not they would do that, especially females and experienced teachers. In the part, which was left blank for the participants to write their comments almost all the ones who had opted for option 'A' claimed that it is due to the fact that they consider it just as 'a slip of tongue' and not actually a mistake.

What is of paramount importance is that in Iran, a hierarchical system is dominant in which group harmony is highlighted and social order is quite significant; however, some other cultures opt for assertiveness and egalitarianism (Shang-chao, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Moreover, as opposed to American culture where equal social status is presiding and individuals have equal rights, in Iranian culture, people accept themselves as being in different social positions and therefore are expected to know where to 'speak up' and where to 'speak down', considering the concept of 'ehteram' (respecting others). Considering all these, it seems that Iranian teachers prefer not to correct each other as to show respect and to preserve equal power status.

Except for the second and last option, gender and teaching experience did not seem to have a profound effect on the applied correction method and teachers' speech act of correction. Thus it can be inferred that this is more culture-bound rather than being related to experience and gender.

According to Hofstede (1980, 1991 as cited in Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2011), there are some value dimensions in each culture, which greatly influence the way people behave, one of which is 'individualism-collectivism'. In collective societies, such as Iran, the concept of 'we' is brought to focus which influences the way people communicate. As the teachers in Iran, regardless of their gender and experience, prefer not to threaten their colleagues' face, it can be concluded that due to being in a collective society and to show 'ehteram' (respect), teachers remain silent in encountering a colleague's

mistake and even if it is an error, they consider it to be a mistake.

Whether or not to praise the addressee before correcting him/her was a question previously raised by Takahashi and Beebe (1993); they claimed that when the person who corrects is of a higher power status, he/she mostly adds a positive remark; nevertheless, when the corrector is of a lower power status, it is totally inappropriate to praise the addressee. The latter situation seems to be more similar to the current situation where teachers are of approximately same power status. However, among those who preferred to correct their colleague, about 6% tended to praise their coworker before correcting him/her.

Moreover, according to the obtained results, more males and experienced teachers preferred the speech act through which they directly mention that someone has made a mistake and provided the correct form, though not a considerable percentage.

The results obtained from this research can be discussed in terms of two important implications. First, it will be of great importance to cross-cultural studies which aim to compare different cultures and figure out the sources of cross-cultural miscommunication or failure. Moreover, the results will pave the way for those who essay to design materials containing speech acts and in ELT classrooms.

Thus far, studies have been carried out to examine learners' corrective behavior in different situations and teachers' corrective behavior towards learners and colleagues. It is also of interest to explore how teachers react to their own mistakes, whether or not they accept their mistakes and confess to that, so further research is called for to fill this gap. Moreover, another study can be carried out to examine the psychological effects of error correction on individuals.

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Appendix

Situation: You are an English teacher. During a workshop, one colleague is explaining how to teach a point, but he/she makes a mistake in his/her speech. Instead of 'adopt a child' he/she has said 'adapt a child'. What would you say/how would you react?

- A) I would probably say nothing.
- B) I would wait for other colleagues to correct, and if they didn't, I'd correct.
- C) I'm sorry...?
- D) Adapt a child?!
- E) You mean 'adopt'?
- F) Your speech was perfect but you made a small mistake, you should say 'adopt a child' not 'adapt a child'.
- G) Thank you, but you should say 'adopt'.
- Something else

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