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Error correction techniques in the context of teaching an esp course at a technical university.

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Abstract. The article studies the practice of applying various correction methods in the process of teaching English to future specialists in the field of information technology at a technological university. The study, conducted in the form of a questionnaire survey of students' opinions concerning their attitude to error correction is aimed at drawing attention to this issue; increasing participants' awareness of the existing correction methods; identifying the differences in teachers' approach to correcting students' oral mistakes and finding the most "working" methods in a particular learning context. The target competence of future IT specialists is the ability to communicate in oral and written forms in a foreign language, to solve problems of interpersonal and intercultural interaction, speak a foreign language at the level of social and professional communication, to be able to use special vocabulary and professional terminology. In the authors' teaching context the individualized approach is of particular importance. It means varying the level of complexity of materials and evaluation criteria and approaches to correcting errors. Based on the results of the study and the teaching situation we focus on the following methods to correct mistakes in the students' speech: immediate correction; self-evaluation or self-correction; the task repetition method and the teacher's positive feedback.

Key words: criteria, evaluation, individualized approach, survey, university

Introduction

The attitude to the correction of mistakes that students make in the process of mastering a foreign language can, without exaggeration, be called one of the most important decisions that every foreign language teacher takes in his practice (Scrivener, 2005). Over a long period, various methods and approaches to the study of a foreign language, for example, audio-verbal or grammar-translation, focused on literacy and sought to achieve an "unmistakable" level of proficiency (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

We are living in the 21st century and several generations of students have grown up who have been learning the language not from books, but in the process of performing applied tasks: travelling, playing computer games, watching movies, talking with friends from other countries, etc. However, finding ourselves in class, we seem to be returning to the times of behaviorism, when learners' mistakes were unacceptable and had to be corrected immediately.

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We still come across situations where teachers find it necessary to correct all the mistakes that the students make when they speak, which often has more negative consequences, in the light of the considerations that will be expressed in this work. We think, that the habit of total error correction still influences the practice of teaching, despite the widespread use of the communicative approach, and this habit has a negative effect on the formation of a foreign language communicative competence. Getting rid of an obsession with 100% error correction, competent application of various methods of correcting students' mistakes in the process of learning a foreign language, taking into account the context of teaching, and a number of other factors, which will be discussed in this article, will have the most important advantages.

Having considered the reflections mentioned above, we decided to conduct a study of teachers' and students' opinions concerning their attitude to error correction in the form of a questionnaire survey. The role of correcting mistakes in learning a foreign language has well been studied and a more positive approach to error correction has been developing lately (Bartram & Walton, 2002), but the aim of the authors' work was to study the practice of applying various correction methods in the process of teaching English to specialists in the field of information technology at a technical university.

The study was aimed at, among other things, drawing attention to this issue; increasing participants' awareness of the existing correction methods; identifying the differences in teachers' approach to correcting students' oral mistakes and the expectations of students and identifying the most "working" methods in a in the context of teaching English for specific purposes, namely, for future specialists in the field of computer technology at a technical university. According to the program, the target competence is the ability to communicate in oral and written forms in a foreign language, to solve problems of interpersonal and intercultural interaction, speak a foreign language at the level of social and professional communication, to be able to use special vocabulary and professional terminology of the language. We deal with students of quite different levels of training after school, ranging from the elementary to the advanced level.

Under these conditions, an individualized approach is of particular importance, which is expressed in choosing accents for different tasks depending on the level of students and the stage of the course, ranging from the development of skills for processing professional information and presenting the results of this work, for example, in the form of translation or writing essays or professional presentations for higher levels. By the individualized approach we also mean varying the level of complexity of materials and evaluation criteria and approaches to correcting errors.

Methods

The study was conducted by collecting information through a survey of a group of students from various courses at the Technical University of Moscow State Technical University. Named after Bauman, in the process of which students were required to compile a rating of the most popular error correction methods from the proposed list and answer a number of free-form questionnaires, including the role of error correction in the learning process, students' readiness for independent work with errors, satisfaction with those error correction methods that teachers use. Below is a list of the methods included in the questionnaire compiled on the bases of the methods suggested by J. Wingate (Wingate, 1998).

- 1.Immediate correction e.g.: Student: I leaved my flat- Teacher: I left
- 2.On the spot reformulation or self-correction elicited by the teacher: e.g. I gone home- you went home? OR Can you say that again? OR the teacher uses a gesture to signal a mistake
- 3.Peer-correction when learners correct each other

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Delayed correction:

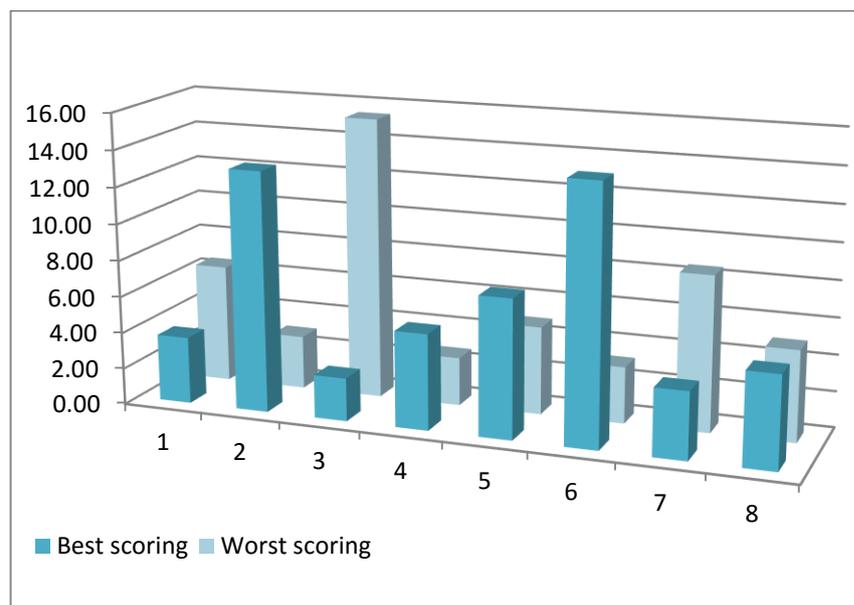
- 4.The teacher writes down your mistakes on a card and lets you correct them after the activity
- 5.The teacher doesn't correct all the mistakes, only the ones which are really "bad" and does correction as a whole class activity: e.g. writes out the sentences to correct on the board and invites the students to correct them.
- 6.The teacher creates extra activities on the basis of some mistakes the students make in class
- 7.Students keep a diary of mistakes and go through them regularly
- 8.After the activity (e.g. retelling the text) the student fills in a self-evaluation reflection form and/or the teacher gives some feedback, including error correction, and the student repeats the task.

150 participants` answers to the questions of the survey were analyzed and according to the obtained results a score value was computed for each method from the questionnaire. The score value was computed by using a weighted addition of the best scores and the worst scores given by the participants to each method. Thus, the rating of different methods of correction was provided.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in the table and the diagram below.

Number	Best scoring	Worst scoring
1	3,68	6,50
2	13,17	2,93
3	2,38	15,40
4	5,26	2,66
5	7,60	4,83
6	14,00	3,12
7	3,71	8,50
8	5,08	5,00



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The most popular methods according to the results of the survey are: on the spot reformulation or self-correction elicited by the teacher (2); delayed whole group correction of some serious mistakes (5); further work on problem areas revealed through mistakes, using extra tasks prepared by the teacher for the purpose (6,); task repetition after self-evaluation or teacher`s feedback (8). The least popular are peer-correction (3) and keeping diaries of mistakes (7). Comparing the results obtained in the process of the research with the methods most frequently used by the teachers, which were established as a result of the teachers` answers to the question about their most common methods of oral mistakes correction, on the spot teacher`s correction (1) and teacher`s writing down the students` mistakes on a card for delayed self-correction (4), the following points can be made:

- ✓ Certain differences in the choice of the most popular methods of error correction by the students and the teachers
- ✓ The overuse of the “traditional” method of direct immediate correction at the expense of a variety of other methods in class.
- ✓ Underestimation on the part of the teachers of different methods of self-evaluation and self-correction.
- ✓ The students` need for more diverse, humanistic correction methods applied on a regular basis, including self-correction.

The authors agree that the choice of a method of correction depends on many factors (McPherson, 1995), including the level of students, the type of task they perform, the amount of time that the teacher can afford for this type of work, etc. Based on the information gathered, the analysis of existing theoretical works on the topic of the role of error correction in the process of learning a foreign language (Mackay, 2016), and the experience of the authors, we suggest focusing on the following methods to correct mistakes in the speech of students in the course of professional English at a technical university.

1. Immediate correction still remains a widely used correction technique as it takes place when a student`s motivation to obtain the correct version is the highest – “the precious moment” (Murray, 1999). However, according to the results of the survey, most of the respondents would prefer to try to self-correct their errors, rather than to be given the right answer by the teacher. One of the limitations of this technique is that it is applicable only to correcting obvious mistakes, for example, in grammar or pronunciation, and in case of a large number of mistakes may stop the process of communication and turn into the process of mistakes` correction, so should not be used during fluency focused activities.

2. According to the model of the structure of language competence suggested in the frameworks of the educational project OxBridge by the publishing company Relod in Russia, one of the components of language competence in teaching a foreign language is developing the ability for self-evaluation and reflection (Model of a Foreign Language Competence, 2003). So, self-correction and individual work with mistakes are of primary importance.

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According to the results of the questionnaire the following methods were recognized as the most effective methods of self-correction: indicating an error or recording errors by the teacher with their further correction by the students themselves; the students` filling out self-assessment forms after performing some tasks (e.g. delivering a presentation) allowing the students to reflect on the pluses and minuses of their performance; keeping a diary of errors.

3. Since our course is mostly task oriented, i.e. the students are supposed to perform certain tasks at the end of each module, such as delivering a presentation or writing a summary, the method of task repetition suggested by M. Bygate (Bygate, 2001), is of particular importance. After filling a self-assessment form or getting feedback from the teacher, the students get the chance to repeat the task after correcting their mistakes (the task repetition method). Task repetition might be preferable for our teaching context also because the main purpose of teaching a foreign language at a technical university is the formation of language professional competence preparing students for performing professional tasks in a foreign language, and the success criteria can be determined by how the student can cope with the task, for example whether the message (presentation) was understood by the listeners, rather than the number of mistakes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us summarize all the arguments we consider important for identifying the most effective techniques for mistakes correction based on the results of the research described in this paper.

In the context of our teaching situation with a limited amount of classroom time, it is logical to focus on motivating students to be more thoughtful about their mistakes, increasing their personal responsibility for the quality of task preparation, developing students' autonomy in dealing with mistakes. When we prepare them for future professional situations where they will supposedly be using their knowledge of English, the skills of self-evaluation and self-correction should be focused on (Harris, 1997).

According to S. Krashen`s theory of Second Language acquisition (Krashen, 1998) learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. The psychological barrier and negative emotions are reduced due to the absence of fear of making a mistake which has a positive effect on the process of language learning. So, we need to communicate to our students that making mistakes while learning a language, is an integral part of learning, their mistakes will identify their weaknesses and give signals to the teacher and students what else they should be working on to improve their results. Thus, students have the opportunity to explore their capabilities and experiment with the language, without which it is impossible to become an independent learner and apply knowledge in practice. Fear of making a mistake may result in an unwillingness to leave the comfort zone and slow down progress. The suggested methods reduce this negative factor since they treat mistakes as a natural part of learning and let students self-correct their mistakes and improve their performance. Having made a mistake and corrected it, a person gains valuable experience, better memorizes new material and improves the result of activity: we learn from mistakes.

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With immediate correction, only the correction of obvious, e.g. grammatical or lexical mistakes, is effective, while syntax and style errors or poor vocabulary, can be addressed only in more complex approaches to correction, such as feedback and task repetition. These approaches also have the advantage that they ensure the students` thinking through the mistakes and focusing on the right version. When the mistake is corrected on the spot, they sometimes repeat the correct version without noticing and can make the same mistake in the next sentence. And if too many mistakes are corrected on the spot, the students may end up either ignoring correction or losing track of thought and failing to finish their task.

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