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"To err is human....." Revisiting Oral Error Correction in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The widely accepted “Input Theory” of language acquisition proposes that language is basically acquired unconsciously through extensive exposure to all kinds of natural oral and written sources, especially those where the level of the input is slightly above the learner’s competence. As such, it implies that oral error correction by teachers in a classroom is unnecessary, a waste of time, and maybe even counterproductive. Perhaps now is the time to revisit oral error correction in the classroom and consider the results of research carried out long ago by the present speaker. By means of taped oral presentations in the first part of an adult Spoken English class at Ben-Gurion University, the teacher-researcher identified a recurrent oral error of each student. Oral correction procedures were then employed to improve these recurrent errors. In addition, a “secret recurrent error” for each student was identified which corresponded to a “public recurrent error” of a different student, in order to discover whether correction strategies directed toward a particular student in a classroom setting could benefit a student not specifically treated for that error. Follow-up spontaneous taped presentations revealed that some students indeed corrected their recurrent oral error, as well as one student whose “secret recurrent error” was also statistically significantly improved. Thus, it was concluded that oral error correction in class may be beneficial to many students.

Keywords: correction procedures; recurrent error; secret error; spoken English; unconscious acquisition