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## THE ROLE OF LEARNER SELF-CORRECTION IN COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE

### Summary

The main objective of the paper is to discuss the role of self-corrections in learner communicative performance. The paper consists of two parts. In the first one learning strategies, which include self-correction, are shown as cognitive processes. Several sub-chapters are devoted to different aspects of the strategy of self-correction. Different forms of self-correction are presented as psycholinguistic processes. Besides the attempt to characterize the good language learner and the role of the strategy of monitoring is analyzed within this context. The emphasis is put on the role of self-correction in second language learning. Another part of the paper is devoted to analyzing the research aiming at determining whether the strategy is actually employed by second language learners. Different forms of self-correction in learner communicative performance are distinguished and comparison of the strategy use between efficient and inefficient students is made. Finally, one of the possible ways of teaching second language students to become more aware of their language production is investigated and some pedagogical implications are presented.

**Keywords:** self-correction, learner training, learning strategies, cognitive processes, second language learning, learner communicative performance, the good language learner.

In recent years methodologists have turned their attention towards learner training with the assumption that if learners are encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning they are more likely to be successful in learning languages. Several researchers imply that some learners employ some special techniques that help them learn a language successfully. These techniques are referred to as learning strategies<sup>1</sup>. One such technique is the strategy of monitoring or self-correction of one's

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<sup>1</sup> The term refers to some special processes or language learning behaviors that individuals demonstrate to comprehend, learn or regulate the learning process of a second language – A. Wenden, J. Rubin, *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*, Englewood Cliffs. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey 1987.

performance. With regard to self-correction, one should answer the question who should correct learner errors: the teacher, the learner making the error or other learners. Although teacher correction of learners' errors seems helpful, it may not be an effective strategy for every student. Thus, self-correction could be recognized as an alternative way of treating errors.

### Self-correction as a learning strategy

The question of how a second language is learned in a school context and what mental processes are involved has given rise to an interest in the study of learning strategies. They are supposed to lead to the development of the language system since learners are believed to use them to facilitate the process of language acquisition. A number of cognitive studies have been designed to define and classify them. For instance, the study conducted by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) resulted in the identification of twenty three learning strategies. In that classification self-monitoring was recognized as one of the strategies employed by a successful learner who may also be described as the good language learner<sup>2</sup>.

There are several factors influencing good language learning. Among them are aptitude, motivation, opportunity, personality, learning style and strategies of learning (Rubin 1975). Within these main categories certain characteristics of the good language learner have been identified<sup>3</sup>. Several of them refer directly to the strategy of self-correction described as „self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use” (Stern 1983: 414). The learner who uses the strategy is likely to produce the correct form in future, which often leads to “true correction”<sup>4</sup>.

Another important feature of the strategy is the fact that learners of a second language also frequently correct themselves when using their native language. Thus, self-correction could be also treated as a psycholinguistic phenomenon. According to Morrison and Low (1984), it derives from two basic faculties-the creative and the critical<sup>5</sup>. They claim that “when these two faculties, creative and critical act in harmony then one can say what they wish but when one faculty is weakened learners become afraid of saying something wrong or speak too loosely” (Morrison and Low

<sup>2</sup> The term used with reference to successful second language learning – J. Rubin, *What the Good Language Learner can teach us*, TESOL Quarterly, 9/1, [b.m.w.] 1975. P. 41–51.

<sup>3</sup> The good learner, among others, is willing to attend to form, monitors his/her speech and compares it to the native standard – H. Stern, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Learning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983. P. 414.

<sup>4</sup> The term used with reference to the fact that the error is eliminated from further production – C. Chaudron, *Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988.

<sup>5</sup> The term refers to the awareness of the language- D.Morrison, M. Low, *Monitoring and the second language learner*, [in:] J.C Richards, R.W Smidt (eds), *Language and Communication*, Longman, London 1984. Pp. 228–250.

1984: 247). In comparison, most native speakers of any language can distinguish correct forms from incorrect ones but they may find it difficult to explain some grammatical rules even though they are self-evident for them. Their knowledge of the language is global and intuitive. In other words, most native speakers seem to take the form for granted and focus attention rather on expressing the intended meaning. If one considers various uses of the language in everyday conversation such as exchanging greetings, expressing thanks or making an apology, it is obvious that even native speakers tend to be imperfect at times. However, as soon as the attention is focused on the proper form, they usually become quite aware of most linguistic forms which have been used incorrectly.

Self-corrections occurring both in the mother tongue and the second language have a number of similar characteristics. Green and Hecht (1993) state that they usually occur in certain linguistic areas such as lexis, syntax, morphology, phonetics, discourse. The researchers also claimed that they could occur after an unfilled pause or after a filled pause. Besides, the second language learner performance is characterized by variability within even a relatively short discourse. It is the case when a learner at one point uses the correct form but tends to omit it during the same utterance. Some researchers claim that this may suggest that learners act according to the principle of “communicative efficiency”.<sup>6</sup> The common example of this phenomenon is the variability in use of past tense forms. Another example could be inconsistent uses of such phrases as driving a bike instead of riding a bike.

### The monitor as an acquisition device

The term monitoring has often been used in a quite specialized sense. The theory of monitoring in language learning was presented by Krashen (1977) who restricts monitoring to the conscious application of rules in language production. He postulated that a hypothetical device, “the Monitor”<sup>7</sup> is used by learners who develop two independent linguistic systems for second language production. The learned one is developed as a result of formal instruction and it helps learners consciously pay attention to the structure of the language due to their knowledge of rules while the acquired system is created unconsciously through the creative construction process which means that acquirers are rarely aware of the rules they possess and self-correct intuitively (Krashen, 1979).

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<sup>6</sup> The terms means that learners try to balance the grammatical accuracy and a desire to communicate in an efficient way – D. Richards, *On the contributions of formal and informal environments to the adult second language learning*, [b.m.w.] 1979.

<sup>7</sup> The term used with reference to the fact that successful second language learners apply formal rules – S.D. Krashen, *The monitor model for adult second language performance*, [in:] M. Burt, H. Dulay and M. Finocchiaro (eds), *Viewpoints on English as a Second Language*, Regents, New York 1977.

Besides, the researcher also concluded that „self-correction functions mainly in straightforward cases of morphological rules and it is less effective in violations of complex grammar” (Krashen, 1982: 112). Moreover, he claimed that self-correction occurs only for a small percentage of errors and the learners who make frequent use of the strategy are not very successful as they are too much preoccupied with correctness which might result in a lack of fluency in their performance (Krashen, 1982). In comparison, the researcher notices that some learners could be classified as optimal monitor users since they apply conscious learning to their performance when it is needed, for example, when the goal of the performance is to focus on proper form. In the theory, monitoring is believed to have a limited function in language performance since it is used under the following conditions: „there must be sufficient time, the focus must be on form and not meaning, the user must know the rule” (Ellis, 1986: 262).

To sum up, self-correction can be viewed as a process of comparison between a desired form and what has been actually produced.<sup>8</sup> It seems that in the mother tongue it is a natural control process but it may also stimulate the learning process of a second language provided that a second language learner has been exposed to “comprehensible input”<sup>9</sup> which he may take advantage of.

## Practical research

The major objectives of the study were as follows:

- to determine whether the strategy of self-correction is used by second language learners,
- to determine if self-correction is a strategy leading to success in a second language,
- to distinguish different forms of self-correction in learner communicative performance,
- to determine whether the level of language proficiency correlates with the frequency of strategy use in communicative performance,
- to investigate the differences in frequency of self-correction usage between effective and ineffective language learners,

<sup>8</sup> If the learner realizes that the produced form is different from what they have planned then an alarm signal is sent to working memory which is to give the instruction on how the correction is to be carried out- P. Greek and K. Hecht, *Pupil self-correction in oral communication*, In system, Vol.21, [b.m.w.] 1993. P. 152.

<sup>9</sup> The term refers to the fact that second language learners are capable of using the language correctly provided that they have already learned particular language structures which only slightly exceed their language competence — M. Pawlak, *Rola nauczyciela w kształtowaniu procesów interakcyjnych podczas lekcji języka obcego* [in:] M. Pawlak, A. Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A. Pietrzykowska, *Nauczyciel języków obcych dzisiaj i jutro*, Wydział Pedagogiczno-Artystyczny UAM w Kaliszu, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2009. P. 332.

- to determine the frequency of appearance of self-corrections in certain linguistic areas such as: lexis, syntax, morphology and phonetics,
- to investigate one of the possible ways of teaching students how to use the strategy in an effective way<sup>10</sup>.

## Subjects

Two classes of Polish high school-age students served as participants in the study which took place in the II Secondary School of Romuald Traugutt in Częstochowa in 2010. The first class consisted of twenty-six students aged 17. All of them had been learning English for 3–7 years before. They had three 45-minute English classes per week in the first year of a three-year course. The other class consisted of twenty-eight students aged 17. They had been learning English for 3–5 years. The study took place in the final week of their first year of the course. All the students had taken the placement test based on Matura Solutions courses for secondary schools at the beginning of the school year. The result of the test confirmed that most of the students from both classes could be referred to as pre-intermediate learners of English. The study included effective and ineffective second language learners. The criteria for being both an effective and ineffective second language learner were determined by the teacher on the basis of notes which should reflect students' general ability to comprehend and produce the target language in oral and written forms. The notes also reflected students' attentiveness and activity in the class. The students whose final winter-semester report in English was either excellent or very good were referred to as successful language learners while the students with satisfactory or weak reports were rendered as inefficient ones.

The study consisted of two parts: the interviews and the language game. Seven students from each of the classes were chosen to take part in the first part of the study. From the first class, which was believed to be a better one, there were two students with excellent reports and five with very good ones. From the other class five students with satisfactory reports and two with weak ones participated in the study. The students from the first class were regarded as efficient and the ones from the other class as inefficient second language learners. The students volunteered to take part in the experiment.

## Procedures

Data elicitation techniques were determined by the objectives. The first part of the investigation were the interviews with fourteen students chosen from the two clas-

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<sup>10</sup> A similar set of objectives were used by P. Greek and K. Hecht (1993) and T. Muskala (1999).

ses. The students' task was to describe a series of pictures and to talk about one of the topics:

*describe your dream holidays or talk about the most dangerous experience of your life.*

The aim was to direct students' attention towards the context rather than the language form. Thus, they were not informed about the real purpose of the research. The interviews were followed by the game called: *The Auction*<sup>11</sup>.

The purpose of the research was to experiment with one of the possible ways of teaching students to pay more attention to proper language form. The students were paired off and each pair was given an auction sheet with both correct and incorrect sentences. Several words connected with the auction were introduced. All the students were told to read through and decide whether the sentences were correct or incorrect. They were also informed that during the auction they were going to bid for sentences. The aim was to buy only the correct ones. Each pair had virtual 5000 \$ to buy sentences. Besides, the students were asked to note down in the budget column of the auction sheets how much they intended to bid for a given sentence. The bids of less than 200 \$ were not accepted. The winner of the auction would be the pair with most correct sentences and money left. The main prize for the winners and runners-up were very good notes.

At the beginning of the auction the first sentences were read slowly. After a few bids the tempo of the auction increased. The idea was to keep the bidding moving fast in order to convey the excitement of an auction room. The sentences were auctioned in random order so as to heighten the feeling of expectancy. After each sentence had been auctioned off the students were asked to make sure that they kept a note of the amount of the money left in their bought columns. Also after each sale the group was informed whether the sentence was correct or not and incorrect sentences were corrected. However, all the explanations concerning the grammar involved were postponed until after the game. The students were presented with the following list of sentences including both correct and incorrect ones. The "Auction sheet" was partially based on the sentences produced by the students taking part in the first part of the experiment.

### **Auction sheet**

*These women are wearing on different dresses.*

*I'd like to live in a big city but it depends in which.*

*In Disneyland you can see many famous people from the movies.*

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from M. Rinvolucri, *Grammar Games*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984. Pp. 18–21.

*He looks as if rather glad.*

*I think he is relax.*

*It is fun to live there especially in the summer.*

*I want meet this man because he is now a head of the biggest country.*

*He is probably in his house or something else.*

*He have a paper in his hand.*

*He looks like weak.*

*I would be happy if I were in his place.*

*I'd like to stay there as long as I can.*

*I think that he has come to some village.*

*It must raining.*

*There is a newspaper in front of him.*

*There are many places which we can visit.*

*He's wearing blue shirt.*

*There're many ladies behind him.*

*He is going on the carpet.*

*I see people in distance.*

*There are traffic jam and terrible air condition in towns.*

*He is sitting in his armchair and he's drinking coffee.*

*So, it is very crowded there.*

*He's getting flowers from some women.*

*On the picture he is putting paper in box.*

## **The analysis of the results**

The interviews proved that most students self-correct their performance. Although there were some differences in the numbers of self-corrections among individual students. Twelve students out of fourteen made use of the monitoring strategy and made various self-corrections which occurred at different linguistic levels (lexis, syntax, morphology, phonetics, discourse). The students regarded as efficient se-

cond language learners produced more self-corrections when compared with inefficient ones. Majority of the self-corrections were within the field of morphology (22) and lexis (14). The successful self-corrections made by the efficient second language learners were as follows:

(all self-corrected forms are highlighted).

Lexis: sitting-**standing**, going-**walking**, three-**third**, pepper-**newspaper**, blouse-**shirt**, chair-**armchair**, elephant-**camel**, breath-**breathe**

Morphology: get-**getting**, put-**putting** (twice), pictures-**picture**, have-**having** (three times), smells-**smelling**, give-**gave**, walk-**walking**, wearings-**wearing**, welcome-**welcomed**, relax-**relaxed**, forgot-**forget**

Syntax: must raining- **must be raining**, he might come- **he has come**, a piece of is- **there's a piece of**, we drifting- **our boat was drifted**

Phonetics: closes-**clothes**, cof-**coffee**, woma-**women**

Discourse: they are wearing heads on they head- (once again...**there are hats on their heads**)

Inefficient learners' successful self-corrections were as follows:

Lexis: breath-**breathe**, unfortunate-**uncomfortable**, air conditioning-air **pollution**, taking-**talking**, page-**picture**, camping-**campaign**

Morphology: take-**taking**, have-**having**, rain-**raining**, get-**getting**, keep-**keeping**, he have-**he has**, gives-**give**, sail-**sailing**

Syntax: there is- there **are**, is joking-**he** is joking, we see-we **can** see

Phonetics: suite-**suit**, carpe-**carpet**, flowe-**flowers**

Discourse: his.how is it...**elbow**

The second part of the research, *The Auction*, produced the following results: There were two winners and one runner-up in the auction. Three pairs managed to buy three correct sentences but two pairs saved 700 \$, while the third one saved only 200 \$. All three pairs were rewarded with very good marks. After the end of the auction all grammar points were explained. The students auctioned 20 sentences: all possible 12 correct ones and 8 incorrect ones. They ignored 5 incorrect sentences. The highest bid (2500 \$) was given for the correct sentence:

*It's fun to live there especially in the summer.*

The other correct sentences bought by the students were:

*I'd like to stay there as long as I can.*

*I'd like to live in a big city but it depends in which.*

*In Disneyland you can see many famous people from the movies.*

*I would be happy if I were in his place.*



*I think that he has come to some village.*

*There is a newspaper in front of him.*

*There are many places which we can visit.*

*There're many ladies behind him.*

*He is sitting in his armchair and he's drinking coffee.*

*So, it is very crowded there.*

*He's getting flowers from some women.*

There were also eight incorrect sentences bought by students:

*I see people in distance.*

*He is probably in his house or something else.*

*These women are wearing on different dresses.*

*It must raining.*

*He is wearing blue shirt.*

*He is going on the carpet.*

*On the picture he is putting paper in box.*

*He looks like weak.*

The sentences after necessary corrections should be like that:

*I can see (some) people in the distance.*

*He is probably in his house or somewhere else.*

*These women are wearing different dresses.*

*It must be raining. (I think it is raining).*

*He is wearing a blue shirt.*

*He is walking on the carpet.*

*In the picture he is putting some (a piece of) paper into the (some) box.*

*He looks weak.*

## **Conclusions**

The research provided the following results and conclusions:

- a) Self-correction occurs in students' speech. In the first part of the research there were on average 3,8 self-corrections per one student.
- b) Learners self-corrected their oral performance despite the restrictions suggested in Krashen's Monitor Theory (Krashen, 1977), that is despite the fact that they had limited time for reflection and their attention was directed mainly towards the meaning rather than linguistic form.
- c) Most self-corrections produced by learners were successful (68%). They generally improved the learners' oral performance.
- d) At times the attempts to self-correct led to further error and worsened the overall impression of the performance. It was especially the case with learners whose language competence was rather low and incorrect forms were rarely replaced by correct ones.
- e) On the basis of the investigation it is difficult to prove whether there is any evident correlation between the level of language proficiency and the frequency of occurrence of self-correction. It is due to the restricted number of the learners taking part in that research.
- f) The research showed that the frequency of occurrence of self-corrections in certain linguistic areas (morphology and lexis) was higher than in other ones.

### **Pedagogical implications**

The research shows that generally learners engage in modification of their oral performance. It confirms the opinion expressed by many researchers, for example, Green and Hecht (1993) who suggest that generally learners may be encouraged to make use of the strategy of self-correction as it is possible to practice it in the classroom environment. They claim that from a pedagogical point of view, self-correction could be perceived as „part of an education for autonomous learning” (Green, Hecht, 1993: 161). Consequently, using the strategy of self-correction frequently leads second language learners towards taking more responsibility for their learning.

However, it is also true that the inconsistency with which some learners use the strategy will not improve their overall oral performance. Therefore, the effectiveness of learner self-correction is open to question. Frequent self-correcting of one's oral performance might be at the expense of fluency, however, communication should not only be concerned with transmission of meaning but also with the way that meaning is conveyed. A vital reason for that could be the fact that „linguistic correctness can be an important factor in social acceptance by many native speakers” (Green, Hecht, 1993: 161).

Thus, there is still some role for language teachers who could take on a facilitating role (Petty, 2004). For instance, by analyzing the kind of errors their learners make, teachers should think about some possible tasks that could help learners

work on some specific areas of grammar that are simply overlooked when learners' attention is not focused on language forms which often happens when students perform various communicative tasks. Teachers could engage learners in self-correction by giving them some examples of the good use of a language which students could possibly analyze. That could give learners some guidance as to the location and nature of their errors. Besides, one of the obvious ways that a teacher may help learners self-correct in the classroom environment is using facial expression to indicate that there is a problem when a learner makes an error. This simple step could be an effective technique in itself provided the learner is given enough time to self-correct.

Nevertheless, as most language courses are of a limited scope and duration, eventually the time comes when the teacher should attempt at avoiding any kind of control over the student since no more help could be offered. Thus, development of self-awareness on the part of the learner should be one of the major objectives of any course. Such language courses should develop in the student the ability to take charge of their own learning. It seems that if learners know how to assess and monitor their own progress, they are likely to succeed in learning a second language. In the long run, using this learning strategy may help learners develop "self-directed learning"<sup>12</sup> which, for instance, by Petty is regarded as "real-life learning and so is the prime goal of education, consequently we must coax and coach our student towards it" (Petty 2004: 351).

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<sup>12</sup> The term means giving control and responsibility for learning to the learner who, however, must want, or at least be prepared to accept the degree of autonomy, have, or be quickly developing the skills and attitudes required to manage their autonomy, be able to learn reasonably effectively with the degree of autonomy given them – G. Petty, *Teaching today. A practical guide (third edition)*, Nelson Thornes Limited, Cheltenham 2004. Pp. 351.

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