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TURNING ERRORS INTO A LEARNING RESOURCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN ERROR-BASED ADAPTIVE APPROACH

From Error Correction to Error-Based Adaptive Learning in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: This article examines how learner errors in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms can be interpreted not merely as incorrect answers but as diagnostic evidence of individual learning needs. Drawing on scholarship on error analysis, corrective feedback, and formative assessment, the article proposes a five-stage adaptive methodological model: identification, classification, explanation, adaptation, and reassessment. The model involves recording grammatical, lexical, phonological, and pragmatic errors, evaluating their recurrence and communicative impact, and then selecting targeted exercises. Its practical contribution lies in linking error analysis systematically to subsequent pedagogical decisions and proposing a mechanism for engaging learners in independent error correction. The paper is conceptual and methodological in nature; it does not report results from an experiment that has not been conducted.

Keywords: English language teaching, error analysis, corrective feedback, adaptive teaching, formative assessment, self-regulated learning.

1. Introduction

Making errors is a natural part of foreign language learning. When learners attempt to use a new grammatical form, phrase, or pronunciation pattern, they make predictions based on their existing knowledge, test them in speech, and refine their understanding of the language through feedback. Therefore, treating an error solely as evidence of insufficient knowledge limits its diagnostic value. Corder (1967) interprets learner errors as evidence that provides information about the developing language system of the learner. The pedagogical task, then, is not simply to mark an error, but to identify its possible cause and turn it into a next step in learning.

In traditional classroom practice, errors are often addressed by providing the correct answer or lowering a grade. Although this kind of correction may be useful in some situations, it may not be sufficient to help learners understand why they made the error and apply the relevant knowledge in a new situation. Interrupting a free-flowing conversation to correct every error may also negatively affect fluency. Ellis (2009) notes that decisions about which errors to correct, who should correct them, which method to use, and when to provide correction depend on the teaching context.

The aim of this article is to develop a methodological model that adapts lesson content, feedback type, and subsequent exercises through the systematic analysis of learner errors. The object of the study is the process of working with errors found in the written and spoken English of learners at A2–B1 level. The subject of the study is the methods used to identify and classify errors and make instructional decisions on their basis.

The methodological contribution of this approach lies not only in correcting errors individually, but also in turning them into systematic information for lesson planning. Teachers should not draw general conclusions immediately from a single error; instead, they should observe whether it recurs, consider the task conditions, and take the learner's explanation into account. This helps distinguish an occasional slip from a persistent pattern of incorrect use. The model may be particularly useful for selecting targeted support in vocational education, where learners in the same group may have different levels of preparedness and lesson time is limited.

2. Theoretical Framework

Error Analysis helps teachers understand how a learner's language system is developing. An error may be associated with first-language influence, overgeneralisation of target-language rules, misunderstanding of a task, or knowledge that has not yet become stable. Teachers should therefore avoid attributing an error to a particular cause without evidence and should examine it in context.

Ellis (2009) indicates that the form and timing of correction should be related to learning objectives. In a meta-analysis covering 15 classroom studies and 827 participants, Lyster and Saito (2010) found that oral corrective feedback had a positive and lasting effect on language development; in some findings, prompts encouraging learners to self-correct were more effective than recasts. This does not mean that one technique is superior in every situation; rather, the type of feedback should be selected according to learners' needs.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise that the impact of feedback depends on its content and delivery. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that formative assessment should develop learners' capacity to regulate their own learning. Together, these perspectives indicate the need for a system that goes beyond identifying errors and helps learners understand and correct them, then apply the relevant learning in new situations.

3. The Error-Based Adaptive Methodological Model

The proposed model consists of five interrelated stages: (1) identify, (2) classify, (3) explain, (4) adapt, and (5) reassess. These stages form a recurring cycle: needs identified during reassessment inform the plan for the next lesson.

3.1. Identification and Classification

Teachers identify errors not only through tests but also through short written texts, pair conversations, question-and-answer activities, listening-response tasks, and dialogues based on vocational situations. Errors are divided into four main categories: grammatical ("She go to work"), lexical-collocational ("do a mistake" instead of "make a mistake"), phonological (sounds, stress, or intonation), and pragmatic (an address or expression inappropriate to the situation). The task context and recurrence of each error are recorded.

Not all errors are equally important. Three criteria are recommended for prioritising them: frequency of recurrence, impact on meaning or communication, and relevance to the current lesson objective. An error that occurs frequently and distorts meaning is considered a high priority, whereas an infrequent error with little effect on communication may be addressed later. These criteria constitute a practical rubric proposed by the author; they should not be interpreted as a validated standardised test.

3.2. Explanation and Adaptation

Before immediately supplying the correct answer, it is advisable to give learners a question or cue that encourages them to self-correct. For example, for the sentence "She go to work every day," the teacher might ask, "Who is the subject?" and "Which verb form is used with she?" If the learner cannot correct the sentence, the teacher can provide a brief rule or model sentence. During free communication, the teacher may avoid interrupting the conversation and discuss selected errors after the activity.

Exercises should be selected to match the identified error type. For grammatical errors, sentence reformulation and creating new examples are recommended; for lexical errors, collocation practice and context-based choices; for phonological errors, listening, repetition, and stress exercises; and for pragmatic errors, situational dialogues and comparisons of formal and informal

language. Exercises should progress from simple selection tasks to semi-controlled activities and then to independent speaking tasks.

3.3. Reassessment

Learners should use the same language feature in a new context. Repeating the original sentence from memory is not sufficient evidence: learners should independently select the correct form with a different verb, subject, or situation. For example, after practising "She goes," learners can produce new examples such as "My brother studies" and "The manager checks." If the error recurs, the teacher changes the type of exercise or the level of support.

3.4. Error Recording and Pedagogical Decision-Making

Recording errors should not become a burdensome paperwork exercise. Teachers can use a concise table or electronic log to record the date, task type, error example, error category, recurrence, and action taken. It is advisable not to include learners' names in an overall analysis table; codes or numbers can be used when necessary. Such records allow teachers to base decisions on evidence gathered across several lessons rather than on impressions from a single class.

Decisions based on the records can follow three directions. First, if an error occurs among many learners, the teacher can plan a brief whole-class explanation and practice activity. Second, if it appears only among some learners, a small-group or individual task can be assigned. Third, if a learner knows the rule but cannot use it in rapid communication, a timed communicative activity may be more useful than repeating the rule explanation. The log is therefore not merely a list of errors, but a tool for justifying instructional decisions.

4. Practical Application, Evaluation, and Conclusion

The model could be piloted over four to six weeks with an A2–B1 vocational college group. Initially, short diagnostic tasks would be used to identify the two or three most frequent error types. In subsequent lessons, targeted exercises lasting 10–15 minutes would be organised. At the end of each week, learners would complete an "error journal" answering: What error did I make? What is the correct form? Why did I make the error? What new sentence can I create using this rule? The teacher would then plan subsequent lessons using an overview of recurring errors.

In vocational education, tasks should be connected to future workplace responsibilities. Examples include addressing a customer in a service setting, explaining equipment safety in a technical setting, or describing one's experience in a job interview. The error in "Please, explain me this machine" can be analysed through the pattern "explain something to someone." The learner then constructs "Could you explain the safety rules to me?" and gives instructions to a partner. In this way, language form is connected to a vocational communication task.

Evaluating the model solely by a reduction in the number of errors is insufficient. Four indicators are recommended: recurrence of the selected error type; use of the correct form in a new context; independent identification and correction of errors; and the quality of performance in a communicative task. Initial and final tasks should be equivalent in difficulty, and assessment criteria should be established before the study begins. Until empirical results are available, the model should be presented not as a proven effective method but as a reasoned proposal that requires testing.

When applying the method, teachers should recognise that discussing errors publicly may cause learners embarrassment or anxiety. Individual feedback, anonymised examples, and respectful language should be used. If learners' work is used for research, consent and confidentiality requirements must be observed. Rather than attempting to record every error, teachers should focus on recurring errors relevant to the lesson objectives.

In conclusion, the error-based adaptive approach treats errors not as objects of punishment but as evidence of learning needs. Its main contribution is to combine the principles of error analysis, corrective feedback, and formative assessment in a practical five-stage cycle. The model may help teachers adapt lessons to learners' needs and help learners understand their errors and develop independent correction strategies. Future research should pilot the model with different groups and examine outcomes using both quantitative and qualitative indicators.

4.1. Example Lesson Algorithm

The model could be applied in a 45-minute lesson on "Giving Instructions at Work" as follows. During the first five minutes, learners complete a short oral task explaining how to use equipment or carry out a work process. In the next five minutes, the teacher records recurring errors and selects the two types most relevant to the lesson objective. During a 10-minute guided activity, learners analyse verb forms or imperative structures through examples. Over the following 15 minutes, pairs prepare work instructions and explain them orally to a partner; the teacher provides cues or clarifying questions where needed. In the final 10 minutes, learners independently complete a task involving a new situation and write one key takeaway in their error journals. This time allocation is an example that can be adapted to classroom conditions, not a rigid rule.

4.2. Differentiation and Methodological Limitations

The same error may have different causes for different learners. For example, one learner may make an error because they do not know the grammatical rule, while another may struggle because of speaking speed or difficulty retrieving a word. The level of support should therefore vary: learners who need more support may receive key words, a model, or a sentence frame, while more independent learners may be asked to explain the error and create a new example. However, it is not advisable to assign learners permanently to "strong" and "weak" groups; grouping should be temporary and based on the task and current needs.

The proposed model also has limitations. Error recording requires time and consistency from teachers, and monitoring every learner's speech becomes difficult in large groups. Moreover, a reduction in the number of errors does not always mean that language competence has expanded: learners may avoid complex sentences and choose simpler forms. Assessment should therefore consider not only grammatical accuracy but also content, fluency, and task achievement. The model's effectiveness should be examined separately through pilot studies across different groups and topics.

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