How primary School Teachers Handle Pupils' Errors_ in EFL Classrooms: A Case Study of Primary Schools in Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

*There has been a public discontent in Tanzania regarding pupils' fluency and competency in English as a foreign language (EFL). The blame has been directed to teachers due to their inability to deal with the said problem. Since handling pupils' errors is a fundamental process of teaching and learning that has the potential of improving pupils' linguistic fluency and competency, this study sought to explore how primary school teachers handled errors in EFL classrooms. The research study used a qualitative paradigm that employed a case study of sixteen teachers from eight schools of the three Municipalities of Dar es Salaam City, that is, Ilala, Temeke and Kinondoni. Data were mainly collected through classroom observations and were analysed using QSR NVivo NUD*IST. The findings revealed that teachers used a variety of strategies to correct pupils' errors.However, some of the strategies employed were unprofessional and could undermine the teaching-learning process. Implications for teaching and learning EFL in the primary schools in Tanzania and the areas for future research have been discussed.*

Key words: Errors; mistakes; EFL, primary schools

Introduction

There is a popular public opinion about the poor fluency and competency of English as foreign language (EFL) amongst pupils in many Tanzanian schools. In most cases, the blame has been heaped on the teachers who run short of linguistic fluency and competency (Allen, 2008; Barrett, 2007), hence, they are responsible for this deplorable state of affair. Thus, inter alia, the solution to the problem appears to lie on the teachers themselves. Part of the solution to this problem is to improve pupils' linguistic fluency and competency in schools during the teaching-learning process. Error handling is a fundamental pedagogical practice that has the potential of improving pupils' fluency and competency (Li and Lin, 2007). However, little is known about how primary school teachers in Tanzania handle errors in EFL classrooms. To that end, this research study set to explore how primary school teachers handled errors in EFL classrooms for the sake of improving pupils' linguistic fluency and competency.

Several studies have investigated about teaching inside the classrooms in Tanzania by Allen, 2008; Barrett, 2007; Rugemalira, 2005, to name, but a few. From these studies, among other things, there has been dissatisfaction amongst the public on students' fluency and competency in English as a foreign language (EFL). Furthermore, it has been noted that teachers' ability to teach the language is the root cause of the problem (Allen, 2008; Barrett, 2007).

Handling pupils' errors is part and parcel of a pedagogical practice in the teaching-learning process (Li & Lin, 2007; Santagata, 2005). Proper handling of errors is likely to improve the students' fluency and competency. Therefore, what type of errors, how and when teachers handle those errors (Fang & Xue-mie, 2007) are paramount in EFL classrooms.

The study location

This study was carried out in the three municipalities of Dar es Salaam region. Eight primary schools were selected - three schools from Temeke, three from Kinondoni and two from Ilala Municipality. The sample comprised both schools whose medium of instruction is Kiswahili and those of English medium.

Purpose of the study

The study aimed at exploring strategies primary school teachers use in handling errors in EFL classrooms. Since handling of learners' errors is a fundamental aspect in the teaching-learning process, and little is known about the error handling strategies used by EFL teachers in primary schools in Tanzania, this study set to explore the strategies used.

Research questions

The study was guided by the main research question: How do primary school teachers handle errors in EFL classrooms in Tanzania? The following sub-questions were used to address the main research question:

1. Which strategies do teachers use to handle errors in EFL classrooms?
2. What are the similarities and differences in handling errors between English medium primary schools and Kiswahili medium primary schools, if any?

Significance of the study

The study intends to understand the strategies teachers use to handle errors in EFL classrooms; hence, help to identify the type of professional development teachers may need. Also the study will help curriculum developers and other stakeholders to develop teaching learning resources that may address error handling in EFL classrooms.

Literature review

This section begins by giving the difference between errors and mistakes. It then reviews the literature related to error handling in EFL classrooms in general and in Tanzania in particular.

Errors and mistakes

According to Brown (as cited in Fang & Xue-mei, 2007:11), an error is "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker," that is, it is an indication of the student's level of competency. Corder (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008), indicates that an error is not recognised by the learner as an error, hence, it is likely to occur repeatedly. Gass and Selinker (2008) classify two types of errors: interlingual errors - those errors that can be attributed to the mother tongue; and intralingual errors that are due to the language being learned, hence, independent of the mother tongue. Brown defines a mistake as a performance error in that it is a failure to utilise a known system correctly (as cited in Fang & Xue-mei, 2007:11), hence, it is a temporary problem for the learner that may include slip of the tongue or wrong word choice. The learner is able to recognise as a mistake, therefore, the learner has the potential of correcting it if necessary.

Huang (2009) and Santagata (2005) take a constructivist standpoint and indicate that mistakes are a normal phenomenon and are unavoidable. That is, they are part and parcel of the teaching-learning process. Furthermore, Gasss and Selinker (2008) stress that errors are an evidence of the state of a learner's knowledge of the second language and thus should not be viewed solely as a product of imperfect learning, but as an attempt by the learner to figure out some system on the language the learner is exposed to. This view contradicts the behaviourist stance that mistakes are detrimental to learning because they reinforce wrong answers; and therefore, they have to be avoided at all times.

Handling of Pupils' Errors: a Global Perspective

Research studies on error analysis dates as early as the 1950s. Most work in this area is attributed to Robert Lado who studied errors systematically and developed theories about errors (Fang & Xue-mie, 2007). However, there has been a controversy on whether students' errors should be corrected or not, and if they are to be corrected, which errors should be corrected, how, and when (Fang & Xue-mie, 2007).

Dealing with students' mistakes is a fundamental aspect during the teaching-learning process (Li & Lin, 2007; Santagata, 2005), but it is a complex process (Iwata, Dozier, Johnson, Neidert, & Thomason, 2005) as it has to take into account what tocorrect, how to correct and when to correct (Fang & Xue-mie, 2007). That is, what is to be corrected may be based on the teacher's intuition, correction should not be detrimental to the learners' self esteem and when to correct may be determined by teacher's intuition and pupils' feedback. Truscott (2001) adds that error handling

should consider such aspects as context; learner characteristics (age, level); error type; amount of correction; time to correct; and type of correction used (immediate vs delayed correction, spoken vs written, direct vs indirect).

Huang (2009) discourages over-correction as it may result in a psychology of being scared of making mistakes on the part of learners. Thus, he points out that inappropriate error handling strategies tend to frustrate students' self-confidence and enthusiasm.

A study by Naeini (2008) on 32 female Iranian EFL learners indicated that students enjoyed to be corrected and were extremely satisfied with the treatment. This is similar to Harmer's 2005 findings. Li and Lin (2007) found that the teacher's feedback was effective in facilitating students' accuracy when it was accompanied by revision tasks of those learners. Iwata et al. (2005) emphasise that error handling is useful and produces better results, but avoidance may lead to increased correct responses, and improvements in performance during error handling may be temporary. However, Trent (2009) reported that the quietest students did not participate in classroom discussion due to fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence and the language barrier.

EFL in Primary School Classrooms in Tanzania

Research on teaching EFL in primary school classrooms in Tanzania paints a gloomy picture. It has been noted that in many primary schools, teachers lack linguistic fluency and competency (Allen, 2008; Barrett, 2007; Rugemalira, 2005). Ipso facto, this state has the potential of contributing to pupils' inadequate linguistic competency and fluency.

Chonjo (1994) adds that the quality of the buildings, the teaching and learning materials, the working conditions of the teachers, and even the environment of learning is evident that good quality education cannot be provided in the majority of the Tanzanian primary schools.

Malmberg, Wanner, Sumra and Little (2001) point out that the typical form of instruction is based on questions and collective group answers, or repetitions of what the teacher says and that feedback is commonly focused on correct or wrong answers. Therefore, in this way of teaching, deep understanding is a long way to be realized. Worse still, when chorus answers are used especially in large classes, pupils do not get any feedback from the teachers.

Methodology

This section describes the research design, sampling, ethical issues considered, methods of data collection and how data were analysed.

Research approach and design

The study used a qualitative paradigm, where teachers' handling of pupils' errors was explored in a specific and naturalistic place, that is, the classrooms at a given time. The aim of the study was to understand teachers' pedagogical practices in handling such errors.

Using a case study design, the study sought to "understand parts of a case within the context of the whole" (Vaus, 2001: 231) so that the whole is understood in relation to its context where it exists. Vaus stresses that the context is important because it shapes behaviour, and meaning is understood in relation to its context.

Sampling

Eight primary schools and two research participants from each school were selected, based on the following criteria: (a) at least two schools from each municipality including schools whose medium of instruction is English as well as those that use Kiswahili so as to compare and contrast strategies used in each of them (b) willingness of the school authorities and research participants to participate in the research study (c) the research participants were to teach English at primary school level (d) in each school two teachers were selected, one teaching at the lower level (Standards I - IV) and the other teaching at a higher level (Standards V - VII) so as to see the similarities and differences between strategies used within a school.

Ethical considerations

The heads of school were given letters about the visits to their schools and the participation of the teachers in the study. Furthermore, the research participants were given the consent form, stating the purpose of the study, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study if they wished to do so. The participants in this study are not referred to by their names so as to maintain anonymity.

Data were held confidential and were not used for any other purpose other than for this study. Finally, the researcher made all possible efforts to adjust his timings according to the research participants' convenient timings and willingness during classroom observations.

Methods of data collection

Classroom observations
Observation schedules were prepared. Each teacher was observed teaching thrice over a period of three months. The classroom observations ranged from 40 (in single lessons) to 80 (in double lessons) minutes. The observations focused on the strategies the teachers used to correct errors during the teaching-learning process.

Classroom observations were audio taped. At the same time, detailed field notes were taken to capture strategies used by the teachers to handle the pupils' errors that otherwise could not be captured by the audiotape.

The audio-taped classroom observations were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were compared to the written classroom observation notes as a way of checking the validity of the data as well as supplementing the data.

Documentary Review

Teachers' lesson plans were thoroughly read before classroom observations so as to understand the topics to be taught and the teaching-learning strategies the teachers had planned to use. This helped the researcher to give an overview of what was going to be taught.

Data analysis

The transcribed classroom observation data were analysed using QSR NVivo NUD*IST software. The programme, inter alia, helps to organise raw data, link and compare patterns within and across documents (Walsh, 2003). Data collection and data analysis went concurrently. Thus, the previous data analysis process could determine the type of data to be collected thereafter.

Documents from the classroom lesson observations were saved in a rich format text and then imported into the QSR NVivo NUD*IST programme. The documents were then read line by line several times in order to identify emerging categories and themes. The identified categories related to the teachers' handling of pupils' errors were coded using a phrase that best described the data in that category. If a new category emerged, it was created and the text related to it was coded in that category.

Findings

The findings are divided into three areas, namely those related to the teachers' strategies of handling errors, the relationship between English medium and Kiswahili medium primary schools in handling errors, and other findings (that is, findings not related to the research questions).

Handling of the pupils' Errors

About half of the teachers corrected the pupils' errors by saying the correct response and then letting them repeat after them. The example below on Parts of the Body for Class II illustrates the point.

Teacher: What part of the body is this? (Pointing at part of the stomach in a diagram)
Pupil 1: Head
Teacher: No, it is not the head. It is a stomach. All of you say stomach.
Pupils: Stomach (Pupils repeat in unison)

Teacher: Again
Pupils: Stomach

This is a behaviourist approach that is based on the assumption that repetition of the correct response leads to the desired behaviour. However, chances are that pupils may be parroting the words without understanding what they mean.

Ten out of sixteen research participants used repetition, but in a more exciting and challenging way. They could use rising intonation to show doubt of what the pupils had said, hence, prompting the pupils to think about what they had said, and therefore think of correcting the utterance as indicated below:

Teacher: Name objects preceded by the article a
Pupil: A orange
Teacher: A orange? (Teacher's rising tone signalling doubt of what has been said)
Pupil: eh ... an ... an orange
Teacher: Good. It is an orange. Clap hands to her (the class applauds).

Recast was also commonly used. In this case, the teachers implicitly reformulated the pupils' errors without directly indicating that their utterance was incorrect. A topic on Conjunction for Class IV illustrates this point.

Teacher: What's a conjunction?
Pupil: Describe[s] the words
Teacher: Can you give an example of such a word?
Pupil: and, because
Teacher: Make a sentence using and
Pupil: Kurwa and Doto are in Class Four
Teacher: In your sentence, and describes which word?
Pupil: No, not describe. It join[s] words

Perdomo (2008) advocates the use of recast as one of the best ways to improve performance especially for those students with higher level of proficiency. Furthermore, this strategy is non-threatening to learners.

The other significant strategy used by many teachers was to tell a pupil to write the incorrect answer on the blackboard, and then the class discussed the written answer. That is, the teacher could elicit responses from several pupils, based on the response written on the blackboard until the correct response was mentioned or commented upon. Though the strategy appeared to consume more time, it was fruitful.

The other strategy commonly used was clarification request. Teachers could ask several pupils to orally comment on the incorrect response given by one of the pupils. The clarification request could be done by the teacher or by involving other pupils to respond to the given task. A topic on Present Continuous Tense for Class VI is a typical example.

Teacher: Make a sentence using present continuous tense.
Pupil 1: Mary is singing.
Teacher: Well done! Another example.
Pupil 2: We studying English (Verb to be is missing).
Teacher: Ehe! What do you think about that sentence?
Pupil 3: We study English
Teacher: That is a simple present tense. Class! Put it in the continuous tense.
Pupil 4: We are studying English
Teacher: Excellent! The present continuous tense has the verb be + -ing

Seven out of sixteen teachers used an explicit correction strategy. Such teachers categorically said the answer was not correct. They, thus, either provided the correct answer themselves or invited pupils to come up with the correct responses, as indicated below on Telling Time for Class III:

Teacher: How many days are there in a week?
Pupil 1: Twelve
Teacher: No
Pupil 2: There are seven days in a week.
Teacher: Claps her hands

Though a spade is to be called a spade, such a strategy may discourage some pupils as they may decide to remain quiet for fearing to make mistakes.

In some cases, teachers corrected errors beyond the correct answer given. Such a strategy has the potential of developing the pupils' deep understanding as follows:

Teacher: Class! Make sentences using the simple present tense.
Pupil 1: Juma goes to school on Sunday (grammatically correct, but factually wrong).
Teacher: Do you come here on Sunday?
Pupil 2: No school on Sunday.

This example shows that language is not only about correct grammar, it is also about facts because an utterance may be grammatically correct, but factually wrong as indicated in the above example.

Code switching was commonly used by most of the teachers. The major reason for code switching was either the teachers explained a concept in English, but pupils did not understand it, or the teachers themselves were unable to explain the concept in English, hence, the teachers had to resort to code switching to arrest the situation. The example below illustrates the former case.

Teacher: What are the parts of the body?
Pupils: Give no response, but stare at the teacher (a sign of not understanding).
Teacher: Taja sehemu za mwili ('Name the parts of the body'. Almost all the pupils raise their hands to respond to the teacher's question).
Pupil 1: Ears, eyes
Pupil 2: foot

What was notable on pupils' responses was that they did not code switch when giving answers once they had got the concept. If a teacher could have rephrased the statement to facilitate the pupils' understanding, they would have probably given the teacher the correct responses right from the beginning without code switching. There were some teachers who used code switching when there was no good reason to do so.

Error Handling Across Media of Instruction and School Levels

From this study it was found that there was no difference in the strategies used to handle errors in both English medium primary schools and Kiswahili medium primary schools. This gives the impression that the teaching of English is similar across primary schools, regardless of their medium of instruction, though the public tend to believe that the English medium schools teach English much better than the Kiswahili medium primary ones. Furthermore, there was no difference in handling errors in both lower levels as well as higher levels within and across the primary schools.

Other findings

The worst strategy of error handling was when the teachers frowned at a pupil who had made an error and insisted that such a pupil did not deserve to be applauded. Being applauded after giving a correct response mattered a lot to many pupils, hence, being deprived of that reward negatively affected the pupils' self-esteem. This is also a behaviourist approach, where correct responses are reinforced and incorrect ones are discouraged, even through physical or psychological punishments.

As teachers were correcting pupils' mistakes, they also made mistakes themselves. In some cases by insisting that the students were wrong, when actually it were the teachers who were wrong. For example, on the topic on Articles, when the teacher had formed a rule with the students that all

words that begin with a vowel have to be preceded by an article "an" in the singular form, the teacher insisted that a Ugandan should be an Ugandan as well as a university has to be an university, simply because such nouns begin with a vowel "u" despite the doubts raised by some pupils. The teacher was not aware that it is the initial sound that determines the articles to be used, not the vowel per se as in "an hour".

Likewise on the topic of Relative Pronouns, the teacher misled the pupils "by" substituting by for "buy" as indicated in the example the teacher wrote on the blackboard:
"Mangoes are delicious fruits which you can by in the market".

Some pupils were aware about the mistakes made by their teachers, but refrained from challenging them because the teachers were seen as sages on the stage, the masters and givers of knowledge.

Generally, pronunciation by many teachers was poor. This in turn, led the pupils to model incorrect pronunciation from the teachers. There is urgent need for teachers to engage in an in-service professional development so as to alleviate such problems.

Implication on Error Handling for Teaching and Learning in EFL Classrooms

The way the teachers handle errors has implication on teaching and learning in *EFL* classrooms in particular; and in other subjects in general; as error handling is fundamental in the teaching-learning process. Thus, teachers need to know what to correct, how to correct and when to correct. Overcorrection has proved to be not good; hence, as Huang (2009) points out, teachers need to be tolerant towards pupils' mistakes.

Feedback is *sine qua non* for effective learning and teaching, and "the mere repetition of tasks by the students is not likely to lead to improved skills'... for feedback to be most helpful to learners, it must consist of more than the provision of correct answers" (Naeini, 2008:122). Furthermore, "teachers should correct those errors that are especially important and/or which the learners may have special difficulty overcoming on their own" (Truscott, 2001:93).

Teachers' pre-service training, school-based professional development in the form of action research, peer learning ((Allen, 2008; Hattori & Ngeleja, 2007) are, *inter alia*, fundamental to improving their strategies of error handling. Peer learning can be in the form of co-teaching or observing lessons to learn the best practices amongst teachers themselves.

Learners should not be discouraged to make mistakes, but be given the opportunity to experiment what works and what does not work. O'Dwyer (2006) points out that to make mistakes is vital for any meaningful and active learning experience. Therefore, mistakes should be used as stepping stones towards learning the language.

Furthermore, it is important to design more and a variety of classroom activities for learners so that they can self-correct as naturally as possible. Correction will be meaningful and long-lasting once done in context.

Conclusion and Direction for Future Research

The teachers revealed a variety of error handling strategies. Most of them used implicit strategies of error handling such as the use of elicitation, clarification request, soliciting responses from other pupils, recast and repetition. Some teachers gave a feedback in a manner that it promoted the learners' deep understanding of a given concept.

The study revealed that there was no difference in strategies used to correct errors across primary schools with different media of instruction as well as within schools, between lower primary level and higher primary level.

The use of code switching, though it facilitated the understanding of a given concept, was overused for no good reason. Teachers need to learn to rephrase the utterance. This calls for having a good mastery of English language.

The use of rude language and explicit feedback had the potential of frightening the learners. It saved the purpose of defending the teachers' position, but did more harm to the learners. Such unprofessional behaviour is detrimental to the teaching-learning process. Teachers making mistakes on the course of handling errors revealed how the majority of them run short of fluency and competency in English.

Future research could focus on two major aspects, first, the extent to which pupils perceive the teachers' feedback as significant or supportive to their learning and finally, a longitudinal study to find out how error handling strategies relate to the pupils' learning outcomes.

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