Questioning the value and relevance of error correction in English language teaching

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Introduction

Error correction is considered to be one of the most important areas of teaching practice in the English language classroom, and accepted without due credence given to its applicability and acceptability within different contexts. Implicit within language teaching is the notion that a student's language contains 'errors' and that it needs 'correction' in relation to British or American norms of use. However correcting students' 'errors' should not necessarily be the default position taken by the teacher in the English language classroom. In this short article I aim to challenge the validity of error correction, examine the attitudes of South-East Asian English language teachers towards error correction, and suggest a different approach to correction in the English language classroom.

Different Englishes

The English language, influenced by contact with other languages, has changed and adapted to meet the needs of the speakers in different contexts. There has been a considerable amount of research in World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which detail the variation within English usage[1]. Kachru[2] tentatively divided English speaking countries into inner, outer, and expanding circles. The inner circle refers to countries where English is the first language of the speakers, such as Britain, America, Australia, and Canada. The outer circle comprises countries where English has become nativized and the users speak English in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and pragmatics which differ from native English speakers (NES). English has been adopted and adapted by the speakers in these countries and utilized as a linguistic resource between speakers who may or may not share other languages. English may also serve official functions in government or as a medium of instruction in schools.

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[1] Kachru, Braj B, Yamuna Kachru, and Cecil L Nelson, eds. The Handbook of World Englishes. Oxford, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Seidlhofer, Barbara. Understanding English as a Lingua Franca. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011.
[2] Kachru, Braj B, Yamuna Kachru, and Cecil L Nelson, eds. The Handbook of World Englishes. Oxford, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Alternative English varieties have been observed and recorded in India, Nigeria, Singapore, and Hong Kong, in addition to several other countries[3].

The expanding circle of English was initially conceptualised as containing countries where English does not serve a purpose within the country as a form of communication but acts as a *lingua franca* in international communication between speakers who do not share a language. However, increasingly the distinction between the outer and expanding circles is becoming blurred, with English serving an internal function in specific fields, such as education, within expanding circle countries[4]. In both the outer and expanding circles of English, the speakers are considered norm-breakers in respect to British and American Standard English. This is evident within English language teaching (ELT), more widely in education, and noticeable in the attitudes that people have towards different varieties of English.

In fact, the changes that have occurred to the English language have implications for English education everywhere, including inner circle communities. English is becoming increasingly less applicable as a model for teaching *spoken* English in native English speaking countries. For example, Makoni and Pennycook[5] highlight the absurdity of fluent native speakers of English, from countries such as Liberia, Ghana, and Jamaica, who study in the UK or America, being assigned ESOL classes because their language does not conform to British or American English. This was also observed by the participants in my study, who noted that fluent Indian English speakers are assigned ESOL classes because their language does not match what is expected in Britain.

Furthermore, superdiversity within the UK, resulting from increasing immigration, has contributed to changes in the linguistic features of English speakers. These changes are evident mainly in urban contexts where speakers use non-standard varieties of English and create hybrid languages[6]. Although the majority of ELF research has focused on the communication practices between non-native speakers and contexts outside native English speaking countries, ELF does not exclude native speakers and it is

[3] Trudgill, Peter, and Jean Hannah. International English. (3rd ed) ed. London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1994.

[4] Jenkins, J. English as a Lingua Franca in the International University: The Politics of Academic English Language Policy. Oxon: Routledge, 2014.

[5] Makoni, Sinfree, and Alastair Pennycook. "Disinventing Multilingualism; from Monological Multilingualism to Multilingua Francas." In The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism, edited by Marilyn Martin-Jones, Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese, 439-53. London: Routledge, 2012.

[6] Rampton, Ben. "From 'Multi-Ethnic Adolescent Heteroglossia' to 'Contemporary Urban Vernaculars'." Language and Communication 31 (2011): 276-94. Cheshire, Jenny , Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox, and Elvind Torgersen. "Contact, the Feature Pool and the Speech Community: The Emergence of Multicultural London English." Journal of Sociolinguistics 15, no. 2 (2011): 151-96. Vertovec, Steven. "Super-Diversity and Its Implications." Ethnic and Racial Studies 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024-54.

becoming increasingly important to consider its importance within the UK. This is not necessarily restricted to informal contexts such as the market place or social situations, but also in professional occupations, which include academia and the media. The implication of these changes to English both globally and nationally is that British and American native speaker norms are not necessarily suitable models for all contexts in multilingual environments.

The response in ELT

While English has diversified in different contexts, English language teaching (ELT) has not responded to recent research and clings doggedly to a method of teaching which posits one model of language: either British or US English targets. Some of the leading authors within the field of ELT pay little attention to the implications of the diversification of English in their guidance on how to teach English. Although Harmer[7] refers briefly to World Englishes and ELF research in his most recent edition of *The Practice of Language Teaching*, this seems to have no significant impact on teaching practices. He dedicates a chapter to error correction, but his main concerns are related to how to correct and when to correct. Another leading author in the field, Scrivener[8], shows similar concerns to Harmer. Both authors also suggest that when encountering an 'error' the teacher should consider whether to correct the error. However, for the authors, this relates to whether the purpose of the activity is fluency or accuracy, and there is little consideration if a linguistic form is appropriate for the learners' context. Scrivener[9] (298) also argues that 'wrong intonation seems to cause more unintended offence to native speakers than almost any other kind of error'. This appears to assume that the main interlocutor for non-native speakers would be a native speaker, and that native speaker intonation has to be the correct, and only, one.

Teachers' language attitudes: a case study

In my study, I examined South East Asian teachers' attitudes to error correction, which indicated support for this teaching practice in the classroom. However this conflicted with the attitudes that some of the teachers have about language. The reasons for this can be partly attributable to teacher training, and also to the different language ideologies that have influenced the teachers' language attitudes. The following extracts are taken from my PhD study which focused on the language attitudes of South East Asian English language teachers living in the UK.

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[7] Harmer, Jeremy. The Practice of English Language Teaching. 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2011.

[8] Scrivener, Jim. Learning Teaching. Oxford: Macmillian Education, 2005.

[9] Scrivener, Jim. Learning Teaching. Oxford: Macmillian Education, 2005.

There were differences between the participants depending on whether they were first or second generation migrants. In extract 1 Ashna, a first generation migrant, is more open to language variation, while Arti is a second generation migrant and views language in more binary terms. The transcription conventions used in the research can be found in appendix 1 on p.9.

Extract 1

1. Ashna: i i i have heard some of the <u>in</u> in::: <u>in</u> our teaching environment
2.   they will say ↑well i just hate it when somebody <u>speaks</u> like that
3.   then i [yeah
4. Arti: [they can't use correct english why are they teaching yeah
5.   course you do there is
6. Ashna: they can't teach and I'm thinking to myself well what are you
7.   talking about <u>eng</u>lish is a mish mash of everything so (.) i think you
8.   need to go and (.) research your language @@@@@@@@
9. [...]
10. Ashna: i've come across i've come across teachers that will say that and
11.   they say oh i really <u>hate it</u> you know oh i don't watch that i mean
12.   have you seen in the oh i don't think his english correct and i'm
13.   thinking well what are you talking about are you saying that your
14.   english is=
15. Arti: =perfect
16. Ashna: <u>superior</u>

Both Arti and Ashna agree that they have heard linguistic discrimination in the teaching environment and dislike this attitude, and positioning themselves as being more open to accepting language differences. However there are some implicit differences in Arti and Ashna's perception of this prejudice. For example when Arti completes Ashna sentence in ll.14 'are you saying your English is' with the word 'perfect', Ashna rejects this word choice and instead uses the word 'superior'. This seems to imply that Arti views language as being either correct or incorrect, while Ashna is more inclined to view language in terms of continuum of usage. Ashna also recognises that the English language has mixed with other languages in the past and continues to mix in ll.7-8 while Arti appears to relate correctness to dialectal differences. These differences would imply perhaps that Ashna would have more openness to other varieties of English than Arti, and this is perhaps related to their personal experience, with Arti born in the UK and Ashna was born in Malawi and arrived in the UK when she was 14.

These differences in attitudes to language are also evident in another focus group in extract 2.

Extract 2

1. Parul: well if if people <u>want</u> to learn english as a foreign language is it
2.   then they would expect to be taught (.) you know the [british
3.   model
4. Jashith: [they
5.   wouldn't be expected to be taught indian english would they
6. Parul: yeah
7. I: why not (1.0)
8. Parul: because they want to learn the language maybe with a view to
9.   coming to england or whatever you know
10. Nalini: i don't think people who really don't want to come out of their
11.   own origin place do want to learn british or or or or american
12.   english <u>i</u> <u>don't</u> think <u>so</u> if I was in kenya i would stick to my kenya i
13.   didn't want to learn (.) how they speak in britain

Parul places stress on 'want' in l.2, which would seem to indicate a reasonably strong belief that students want to learn British or American English. Jashith agrees with Parul and both of these teachers are second generation migrants. In contrast, Nalini, who is a first generation migrant, does not fully agree with the other participants. Nalini draws on her own experience of using English in another country, before she came to the UK, and rejects the idea that she should use British English when she is in Kenya and instead would 'stick to her Kenyan' (English) in l.12, tending not to conform to a normative views of the English language.

Nalini's openness to language variation was also evident during her interview, when we were discussing error correction in extract 3.

Extract 3

1. Nalini: sometimes (.) i feel that we shouldn't change them (1.0) sort of
2.   more:::: over sort of it should be changed to a certain extent but
3.   keep their own originality kind of thing you know their own
4.   culture thing you know their own first language erm as long as it's
5.   clear enough for communication
6. I: okay
7. Nalini: i wouldn't change them totally to be an english speaker kind of
8.   thing you know because it's a second language (.) they are
9.   communicating what they want to communicate they can think in
10.   the second language but speak the language in English and as long
11.   as they are saying those words which are correct it's fine should

12.   have the independence and the rights to speak what they want to
13.   speak it doesn't say bad things or wrong things to use as they wish

Nalini reiterates her opinion of the importance of communication over accuracy, noting that if the student's language is good enough for communication outside the classroom, and they are able to pass an exam, then the language is acceptable in ll.4-5. Nalini questions whether she should change the student's language, as she implies that it is related to their identity in ll.7-8, not wanting to change them to be English speakers because it is their second language. It is evident in my research that first generation migrants have a different set of attitudes to language and are more attuned and accepting of different varieties of English. Pollock[10] has highlighted several differences in deep-seated language ideologies between South East Asia and Europe, in relation to multilingualism, standardization and purification to name a few. Highlighting Pollock's research, Canagarajah[11] argues that it is necessary to take into account competing ideologies, and this would seem to be evident in the responses of the participants' in my study. For example, despite Nalini's attitude towards multilingualism and language variation, she also notes in l.11 that people can speak how they want 'as long as they are saying those words that are correct', which would seem to contradict earlier statements.

Even though Nalini appears to have a more lenient attitude towards error correction and is more open to different varieties of English than some of the other participants, she still agrees in the focus group that learners omission of 's' in plurals and third person singular is wrong in extract 4, l.7.

Extract 4

1. Parul: that would be wrong
2. Jashith: it would be unacceptable really wouldn't it
3. I: well what about if there was a whole group of them all (.) doing it
4. Parul: well yo- you'd have to correct them wouldn't you (1.0) you'd
5.   have to correct them (.) you could only correct them so many
              times
6. Nalini: you can't do a whole group saying yes -s wrong [that is not
7.   right (1.5) unless you've let them do that

The teachers in the focus group argue in ll.1 and l.6 that language that does not conform to British English is wrong, and in l2 that it is 'unacceptable' and that there is a

[10] Pollock, S. The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.
[11] Canagarajah, A Suresh. Translingual Practice. New York: Routledge, 2013.

need to 'correct them', ll.4-5. Therefore, although Nalini appears more accepting of differences in languages, she is still conditioned into viewing differences from British English as errors, in relation to her teaching practices. This would seem to suggest that attitudes to language correction in the classroom stem from teacher training and is in contrast to the attitudes of some teachers towards language.

Accuracy vs. Meaning focused correction

A compromise can be found in teachers' approaches to language correction. I would argue that a greater focus should be given to meaning focused instruction, where correction is required by the teacher to enable comprehension of the spoken discourse. I am not suggesting that teachers do not implicitly do this practice in the classroom, but it is not given due prominence in teacher training or even mentioned as error correction in teaching reference books. Instead, the focus is on correcting students in terms of native speaker norms. Negotiation of meaning appears to be restricted to interactions between students, with teachers supplying appropriate native English phrases to enable students to do this, but the teacher should be leading by example. The difference in these approaches to correction can be observed in the following two extracts.

Extract 5

1.	Nalini:	She goes block-ed i said no you say toilet blo<u>cked</u> you know so
2.		you sort of tell them you know because some of them cannot
3.		speak ð the or θ so i tell them the tongue should come out you
4.		know a- a- and this is how you should speak i will make sure
5.		they learn the correct way

Extract 6

1.	Mahima:	what's your favourite drink and she said bater and i thought it was
2.		new form of <u>drink</u> until i said where does it come from oh from
3.		the tap then it occurred to me that she's saying water

Meaning focused correction would be more relevant for speakers in a diverse linguistic environment outside the classroom than accuracy focused correction towards a native English model. A meaning focused correction by teachers would encourage accommodation, clarification, and negotiation strategies which are the skills a learner needs to communicate outside the classroom, given the diversity of Englishes in both native and non-native English speaking countries.   In addition, accuracy focused instruction may be counter-productive for the learner because the language form the teacher is correcting might have more prestige in the students' local context.

Superdiversity[12] has created a polycentric environment and multiple sets of norms, and therefore, from this perspective, it is no longer appropriate for the state to impose a single set of norms and more important for migrants to be able to shift between different language norms[13]. Furthermore meaning focused correction would also validate the beliefs of many English language teachers around the world. In my study, the multilingual teachers appeared to be less concerned about correcting learners' spoken language and tended to emphasise the importance of fluency and communication. However many felt compelled to correct in terms of accuracy because of the expectation of the students and the college and belief it would be beneficial for their exams. In addition meaning focused correction for spoken English would also make a clear division between speaking and writing, with speaking skills focusing on intelligibility and communication. Finally meaning focused correction would arguably be more effective than one focused on accuracy because it is conceivable that students would internalise this form of correction because it is related to intelligibility. However, empirical research is required to ascertain the validity of this claim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that, because of the diversification of English around the world, it is necessary for English language teachers to adapt their teaching practice, including error correction. Most criticisms of error correction as a teaching practice have come from researchers in second language acquisition. Truscott[14] argues that error correction is not necessarily effective and it is difficult to tell whether a student's corrected language is from the teacher or other input outside the classroom. Truscott also notes that while a correction may be effective in the short term, in the long term the student could continue to use the previous language form. He also points out that there is a possibility that the learner will overgeneralisation and use the language form in inappropriate contexts. However, while I agree with this criticism, it is still from a perspective of language being correct or incorrect. It is necessary to problematize the concept of language and consider the notion of error in language teaching to determine the value of this teaching practice.

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[12] Vertovec, Steven. "Super-Diversity and Its Implications." Ethnic and Racial Studies 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024-54.

[13] Blommaert, Jan. "Citizenship, Language, and Superdiversity: Towards Complexity." Journal of Language, Identity and Education 12 (2013): 193-96.

[14] Truscott, John. "What's Wrong with Oral Grammar Correction." The Canadian Modern Language Review 55, no. 4 (1999): 437-56.

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Transcription conventions

(@@@@)   Laughter: The length of the @ indicates the length of the laughter

[Left sided bracket indicate where overlapping speech occurs

(1.5)   Numbers in parentheses indicate the periods of silence in tenths of second

(.)   Indicates a pause in talk of less than 0.2 seconds

Becas-   A hyphen indicates words which are incomplete because of abrupt cut off
or self-interruption

<u>He</u> says   Underlined words indicate stress or emphasis

↑   An arrow pointing upwards indicate a marked pitch rise

=   Equal signs indicate latching with no noticeable silence between the talk of
different people

:::   Colons indicate the sound was prolonged

[...]   Parentheses with three dots indicate that there is a gap between the
sections of the transcription which were not include