5. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING: ADDRESSING GRAMATICAL ERRORS

Once these have been identified as the errors, what should be done about the grammatical errors students make? Should we focus on every error, or just on a few? According to Cowan (2008), to answer these questions, we must look at the development of interlanguage, which has been the central focus of my project. In this last sections of my work, I will present some ideas about how I can help my students correct or produce more accurate language, specifically in the use of the simple past —ed form. After focusing on the different authors and their invaluable research, and gathering the variety of information in addition with my close observation with my students, I feel I can understand in a lot more clear manner the teaching/learning process involved when working with a foreign language.

5.1 Correcting Grammatical Errors: Strategies that Focus on Communication

The issue of whether to address grammatical errors has been debated from some time. Schwarts and Gubala-Ryzak, and Truscott (in Cowan, 2008, p. 47) have argued the futility of any error correction but there is a body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of error correction. This evidence comes from research that focused on the interaction between teachers and students and how feedback from teachers can encourage students to notice the grammatical errors that they are making. According to Cowan (2008, p. 47) ‘interaction feedback research’ is devoted to determining which kinds of feedback are most effective in producing a sudden moment of insight, when a student notices the difference between what he or she has said and what the grammatical rule dictates. Many researchers in this field feel that without such
moments, very little progress will be made in improving the student’s grammar. A major consideration is how a teacher can get the student to notice a grammatical error and correct it without interrupting the communication that is taking place. Cowan (2008) mentions the following possible techniques to correct grammar errors.

5.1.1. Recasting

Recasting is a technique that has been used with some success. In recasting, the teacher draws the student’s attention to what he or she has just said, with the expectation that the student will self-correct. Recasting can take several forms.

We have the following example in simple past:

Student: He goed out at 8 o’clock.

Teacher: I see.

Student: And then he . . .

Teacher: But, uhm, goed, goed, is that correct?

Student: No . . . uhm, went. He went out. (Cowan, 2008 p. 47)

A variation on this is to repeat what the student says, emphasizing the forms that need to be changed to draw sufficient attention to the need to repair the utterance. If the student does not respond, the teacher supplies a correct form to invoke a response.

5.1.2. Preemptive Targeting of Errors
*Pre emptive Targeting of Errors* is another way that Cowan (2008) mentions for addressing persistent errors, and it involves an adaptation of processing instruction. This procedure involves explicitly teaching a specific structure, then drawing attention to a frequent problem associated with that structure, and finally having students apply what they have learned by processing sentences. In this stage, the students provide judgements about the grammaticality of sentences under the teacher’s guidance.

Schwarts and Gubala-Ryzak, and Truscott (in Cowan, 2008, p. 47) also mention that when using the “recasting” technique, a teacher must find a way for a student to notice a grammar error and correct it without interrupting the communication that is taking place so as not to confuse them or have them lose their concentration. I think that said in other words, we must address our students’ attention to their errors without having them lose the communicative concentration they are having at the time, so as to make them aware of the error they are making at the present time and have them correct themselves without us interfering directly with that correction. I believe that I, at some point, am doing this with my students. When I previously mentioned an activity I had with my students, where I signal an error here and there, without telling them the answer, but having them analyze and think a little harder on the exercises they are doing, we are using the recasting technique, which I feel helps students a great deal, because they are actually producing correct language by their own merit with only a slight push by the teacher. From what I have seen, this really gives them a sense of satisfaction.

### 5.1.3. Adaptation Processing Instruction

Another technique used is the *Adaptation Processing Instruction* (Schwartz in Cowan, 2008), and it consists on teaching students a specific structure, then drawing their attention to a
frequent problem associated with that structure, and at the end, having students apply what they have learned by processing sentences. In this case, I feel it is very similar, if not the same as Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP). I strongly believe that this is also a very useful tool in learning another language and it has students feel more at ease and confident of what they are doing.

5.1.4. Interactive Feedback

In relation to interactive feedback, it is something I use very much during my classes because first of all, it helps those students that did not get it right or did not understand from the beginning, and second, it reassures those students that did get it right and did understand the first time around, reinforcing their learning process. As I focused on the simple past –ed ending on especially irregular verbs, and even if it was only for a very short time (since it only covers one unit in the semester), I could not help but notice that both regular and irregular verbs are very much linked. The reason I believe this happens is because students seem to acknowledge the grammar focus as the same on both regular and irregular verbs. I cannot say for a fact the reason some of them feel as if it were the same on either ones. What I can say is that they feel overwhelmed because they feel it is too much information to process in so little time and even if I focused some more on this particular unit than in others (since it is what my work is based on), and had better results than other semesters of teaching the same level, I feel that I could do a lot more if only there were more time to do it. Although the results of this semester have been in a positive way, I think it is because of the extra time I dedicated to the simple past –ed ending. Nevertheless, being very honest, I think that there is a lot to do but I also think that it can be done with a little more effort from my part and a little more effort from my students’ part. However,
after analyzing and learning more about interlanguage, I understand my students more, and I understand that not all errors are errors, but a process through which learners go through and even if they do not have a one hundred percent proficiency level, this does not mean they are not learning, what it may mean is that they are going through a phase were a teaching/learning process is taking place. We as teachers should not feel less motivated because our students are not learning as we would want them to, and students should not feel that they are not learning at a certain rhythm. Maybe it is time for us teachers to explain to learners of another language, in a general manner, the problems they are going to be going through but, with effort and dedication, will be able to surpass. I feel that this is important because it will give them an explanation to as why they sometimes feel they and we are against a brick wall. I am not saying we should take a whole semester for this, but maybe at the beginning of their first English level and later on the next levels, maybe when we notice that we are having trouble with an important amount of students. Maybe it is time for teachers to focus more on what students know and not so much on what they do not.

We as teachers can easily identify those students that are really interested in learning English from those that have little or no interest at all, but I believe that we must always do our best to try to integrate all of our students in our classes so as to give them the same learning opportunities. I think that it is important to mention “Interlanguage” to students, so that they may also understand that they are going through a learning process where it is alright to have errors because they are being introduced to another language and they are trying to use that new language as if it were their mother tong. I strongly believe that this will be very helpful and motivate them to keep trying and to continue to pursue the learning of a second language.
5.2 Correcting Grammatical Errors: Strategies that Focus on Form

It is important to take into account that the problem with my students is contextualized to an EFL setting where the students do not receive sufficient exposure to the language to be able to overcome the overgeneralization errors as naturally (as children do). Because of this additional strategies or techniques must be used when students do not respond to subtle or indirect correction, as some of the strategies mentioned above. Sharwood Smith (1994, p. 178) explains that if the learners understand the language and commit it to memory, some are then capable of explaining that aspect themselves on another occasion. However sensitivity to negative evidence remains a problem in other cases, and the learner needs to know (in an effective sense “know”) that certain possibilities currently accepted by his or her IL are not only absent from the input but are actually “incorrect”. He adds that the controversy however is whether providing metalinguistic information actually helps build that subconscious, inaccessible system that some linguists call ‘competence’ and, indeed, whether there is any other way of helping the natural process of acquisition. The most obvious way is to try to affect subconscious processes beneficially is by making relevant evidence in the input salient. He further explains (1994) that what is called grammatical “consciousness raising” does not have to involve teaching rules and grammatical paradigms, but could range from subtly highlighting relevant aspects of the input to elaborate explanations of the L2 structure. These metalinguistic activities in the classroom, such as error-detection exercises, may be directed towards providing negative evidence. In this same regard, Schmidt (in Ellis, 2001) claimed that consciousness, in the sense of awareness of the form of input at the level of “noticing”, is necessary to subsequent second language acquisition (SLA). For this purpose, activities such as the following that raise awareness to a specific
language form may be helpful in getting students to correct or overcome language errors and continue with their development process.

In English language teaching, a particular variant of focused tasks can be used called consciousness raising (CR) tasks (Ellis, 2001). CR tasks are designed to draw learner’s attention to a particular linguistic feature through a range of inductive and deductive procedures. The assumption here is not that a feature once raised to consciousness will be immediately incorporated into the learners’ interlanguage, but that it is a first step in that direction. There are different variants to this type of task-based instruction that focuses on form. However, in general terms the task requires *language input* to be analyzed by the learners, *a procedure* where the learners analyze and discuss the metalanguage, and a specific *outcome or product* from the learners, which may be a chart or a list of words that in some way evidences insight into the grammar being focused on.