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ERROS AND THEIR TREATMENT AT THE EARLY SCHOOL AGE

Errors are an integral part of children's language development. The second language acquisition at the early school age is no exception, as taking risks and experimenting with language lead to a variety of errors which, if properly corrected, ultimately have the potential to produce the necessary improvement so much. The target age children like exploring the world of foreign language and being actively engaged in the process of thinking so they could provide the answers for themselves rather than just being presented with it straightaway by the teacher. This challenging and stimulating environment is perfectly suitable for the acquisition of vocabulary, sentence patterns and better pronunciation. Therefore, the aim of the current paper is to show if the various methods of self-correction techniques can ultimately influence and improve students' pronunciation of particular vocabulary items and basic sentences in a better way than by being directly corrected by the teacher. Additionally, this paper sets out to prove how a proper treatment of these errors can facilitate the second language acquisition at the early school age.

Keywords: early school age learners; errors; self correction; teacher correction; error treatment; pronunciation; second language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. AIM OF THE PAPER

Errors are an integral part of children's language development. As a child grows up and experiences its immediate surroundings, s/he is driven by curiosity and willingness to absorb knowledge. Children, at times, seem to acquire information effortlessly. However, any learning process is accompanied by making necessary errors which are stumbling blocks that need to be overcome and serve as evidence that progress is being made. Young learners' second language acquisition is no exception, as taking risks and experimenting with language lead to a variety of errors which, if properly corrected, ultimately have the potential to produce the necessary improvement and validation young learners' are seeking for. Early school age children like exploring the world of foreign language and being actively engaged in the process of thinking so they could provide the answers for themselves rather than just being presented with them straightaway. This challenging and stimulating environment is perfectly suitable for the acquisition of vocabulary, sentence patterns and better pronunciation. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show if the self-correction technique can ultimately influence and improve children's pronunciation of particular vocabulary items and basic sentences in a better way than by being directly corrected by a teacher. Additionally, this paper sets out to prove how a proper treatment of these errors can facilitate early school age children's second language acquisition.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Young learners are well known for their spontaneous acquisition through, primarily, listening and speaking. They are energetic, they respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words, and they often learn indirectly, rather than directly. They find abstract concepts, such as grammar rules difficult to grasp and their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see, hear and crucially have a chance to touch and interact with (Harmer 2007: 82). Therefore, errors are a crucial part of young learners' development and it is vital to recognize and treat them appropriately in order to maximize the learning potential of young

learners. Second language learning is, fundamentally, a process that involves making mistakes and errors. "Mistakes, misjudgments, miscalculations, and erroneous assumptions form an important aspect of learning virtually any skill or acquiring information. Learning to swim, to play tennis, to type, or to read all involve a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes, by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment, and with that feedback to make new attempts that successively approximate desired goals" (Brown 2007: 257). Second language acquisition is similar in nature. Learners will make mistakes in the process of acquisition, and potential errors are welcomed because they allow students to benefit from various forms of feedback on those errors.

Harmer (2007: 137) claims that one of the things that puzzle many teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when those mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. This ultimately leads to the conclusion that not all mistakes are the same in nature. Julian Edge (1989 9-11) suggested that we can divide mistakes into three broad categories: (1) 'slips' (mistakes which students can correct themselves once the mistake has been pointed out to them), (2) 'errors' (mistakes which they cannot correct themselves — and, therefore, need explanations) and (3) 'attempts' (that is when a student tries to say something but does not yet know the correct way of saying it). However, the issue that needs to be addressed is the difference between mistakes and errors, as it can potentially give insight into solving the second language learning problems for young learners.

2.2. MISTAKES AND ERRORS

Understanding the difference between mistakes and errors is important for the proper treatment of potential corrections. Mistakes and errors are fundamentally different and should be treated as such. "A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip," in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. All people make mistakes, in both native and second language situations. Native speakers are normally capable of recognizing and correcting such lapses" or mistakes, which are not the result of a deficiency in competence but the result of some sort of temporary- breakdown or imperfection in the process of producing speech. These hesitations, slips of the tongue, random ungrammaticalities, and other performance lapses in native-speaker production also occur in second language speech. Mistakes, when attention is called to them, can be self corrected" (Brown 2007: 257). Errors,

however, are deeply ingrained and reveal the lack of knowledge. James (1998: 83) states that, unlike mistakes, errors cannot be self-corrected. The teacher is the one whose presence here is of utmost importance. The difference between a mistake and error is clear and noticeable. "If, on one or two occasions, an English learner says 'John cans sing.' but on other occasions says 'John can sing' it is difficult to determine whether 'cans' is a mistake or an error. If, however, further examination of the learner's speech consistently reveals such utterances as 'John wills go.', 'John mays come.' and so forth, with very few instances of correct third-person singular usage of modal auxiliaries, you might safely conclude that 'cans', 'mays', and other such forms are **errors** indicating that the learner has not distinguished modals from other verbs" (Brown 2007: 258).

Students have a tendency to display two different types of errors (Harmer 2007: 137-138). The errors can be classified as:

a) L1 'interference': this occurs when L1 and L2 come in contact with each other, paving the way for a variety of errors at the level of sounds, grammar and word usage. "Arabic, for example, does not have a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/, and Arabic speakers may well say *ferry when* they mean very. I can be at the level of grammar, where a student's first language has a subtly different system: French students often have trouble with the present perfect because there is a similar form in French but the same time concept is expressed slightly differently; Japanese students have problems with article usage because Japanese does not use the same system of *reference*, and so on. It may, finally, be at the level of word usage where similar sounding words have slightly different meanings: *libreria* in Spanish means *bookshop*, not library, *embarasada* means *pregnant*, not *embarrassed*" (Harmer 2007: 137-138).

b) Developmental errors: when a child learns a new rule, s/he starts to use it excessively, even in instances when it is not grammatically correct. A child who starts by saying *He saw* or *He took*, switches to *He seed or He taked*. The process of overgeneralization of a new rule that has been learnt, leads to making mistakes with things that he or she seemed to have known before. Eventually, it is self-corrected, as the child begins to have a more detailed understanding, and he or she goes back to saying *went* and *came* which enables a child to handle the regular past tense endings. The same pattern of developmental errors can be applied to foreign language learning as well (John is more *taller* than Jake, instead of John is *taller* than Jake). Errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process.

When young second-language learners make this kind of error, therefore, they partly demonstrate part the natural process of language learning. Developmental

errors are a part of the learners' interlanguage, that is the version which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually re-shaped as he or she aims towards the full mastery. When responding to errors, teachers should provide feedback and help that re-shaping process, rather than criticize students because they are wrong.

2.3. ERROR CORRECTION

Students' errors are of utmost importance since they can provide potential evidence that progress is being made. Errors often show us that a student is experimenting with language, trying out ideas, taking risks, attempting to communicate, and making progress. Analyzing what errors have been made clarifies exactly which level the student has reached and helps set the syllabus for future language work.

In dealing with errors, teachers have looked for correction techniques that, rather than simply giving students the answer on a plate. This enables the students to make their own corrections. Additionally, it may raise their own awareness about the language they are using. Scrivener (2005: 299) claims that five teacher decisions have to be made when working with oral errors in class:

1. What kind of error has been made (grammatical, pronunciation, etc)?
2. Whether to deal with it (is it useful to correct it)?
3. When to deal with it (now, at the end of the activity, later)?
4. Who will correct? (the teacher, student-self correction, other students?)
5. Which technique to use to indicate that an error has occurred or to enable correction?

Students can display different types of errors during their learning process. They can vary from grammar, intonation, pronunciation, lexis and rhythm. Scrivener (2005: 298) additionally argues that these errors can be classified as following:

a. Alice like this school.	grammar (verb-noun agreement)
b. Where you did go yesterday?	grammar (word order)
c. The secretary is in the office.	pronunciation (word stress)
d. Give me one butterbread!	lexis (incorrect word) - and rude
e. I eat shocolate every day.	pronunciation (/S/ vs. /tJ/)
6. After three years they made a divorce.	lexis (incorrect collocation)

7. I am here since Tuesday.	grammar (wrong tense)
8. I'm going to heat you.	pronunciation (/i/ vs. /i:/)

The focus here, of course, is the aim of the activity. Corrections may be beneficial when dealing with accuracy, while they may prove to be counter-productive when dealing with fluency.

James (1998: 253) believes that student preferences for certain types of corrections cannot be ignored nor should they be put on a pedestal because they are not necessarily more effective for being preferred. However, apart from the most common, teacher-student correction there are also self-correction, student-student correction, small group correction, all class correction and course book correction, all of which can be beneficial to the learning process.

Showing incorrectness to students stands as the vital part of error correction process. Harmer (2007: 144-147) distinguishes between two types of ideas for indicating errors during oral work. These are feedback during accuracy work, and feedback during fluency work. The following techniques proved to be very useful for feedback during the accuracy work:

1. Repeating: asking the student to repeat the target error, additionally using intonation and expression to show that an error was made. The word "again" seems to be the logical choice here.
2. Echoing: teachers can emphasize the part of the sentence that was wrong, e.g. You EATED a hamburger yesterday? EATED? The intonation is, again, very important here.
3. Statement and question: teachers can say *Good try, but there's something missing in your sentence* to indicate that the sentence is not correct.
4. Expression: even though certain expressions can be mocking in certain cultures, a facial expression or a hand gesture can help the students understand that something is wrong.
5. Hinting: a way of helping the students to remind themselves of the language they already know, inserting words like *tense* or *pronunciation* can help the students understand where the error was made. The students, thus, understand which part of the sentence needs to be corrected.
6. Reformulation: a teacher repeats back a corrected version of what the student has said, reformulating the sentence, without making a big issue of it. For example:

STUDENT: The coach said me I was in a football team.
TEACHER: Oh, so he told you that you were in a football team, did he?
STUDENT: Oh yes, I mean he told me. So I was very happy and ...

In all the procedures above, teachers hope that students are able to correct themselves once it has been indicated that something is wrong. However, where students do not know or understand what the problem is (and cannot be expected to resolve it), teachers will want to help the students get it right. Teachers can say the correct version, emphasizing the part containing a problem (e.g. *He PLAYS football*) before saying the sentence normally (e.g. *He plays football*). Teachers can also say the incorrect part correctly (e.g. *Not run. Listen, runs*). If necessary, teachers can explain the grammar (e.g. *We say I go, you go, we go, but for he, she or it, we say 'goes: For example, 'He goes to Paris' or 'Jane goes to Paris'*), or the lexical issue, (e.g. *We use 'material' to denote a matter from which a thing is or can be made, while 'material' can also denote someone concerned with money or possessions rather than the needs of the mind or spirit*). Students can then repeat the sentence correctly.

Feedback during the fluency work requires a slightly different approach in the form of *Gentle correction.* Gentle correction can be offered in a number of ways. We might simply reformulate what the student has said in the expectation that they will pick up our reformulation even though it hardly interrupts their speech. This is illustrated in the following example:

S: *And in my free time, I enjoy to play video games with my friends. Basketball and football are my favorites.*
T: *Yes, I enjoy playing basketball, too.*
S: *Ah, yes, I enjoy playing basketball.*
T: *However, I don't enjoy playing football. It's too violent.*

Still, over-correction during a fluency stage is something that needs to be avoided, because it can potentially interrupt the flow of the activity.

Timing can also be crucial when it comes to error correction. There are different options that can be taken into consideration. There are immediate corrections, corrections made after a few minutes, corrections made at the end of the activity, corrections made later in the lesson, corrections made at the end of the lesson, corrections made in the next lesson, corrections made later in the course and errors which are never corrected. However, there is something important that needs to be observed. "The distinction between accuracy and fluency aims is again important

here. If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then lengthy, immediate correction that diverts from the flow of speaking is less appropriate. We either need to correct briefly and unobtrusively as we go or save any correction for after the activity has finished or later. One strategy used by many teachers during fluency activities is to listen in discreetly and collect a list of overheard errors. Later on, you can use this list to provide sentences to discuss, to set an exercise or to plan the next lesson" (Scrivener 2005: 299-300).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher, in this case the teacher, conducted an experiment in an attempt to prove the potential impact of various error correction techniques over the traditional teacher- to-student oriented correction. The experiment was conducted using the control group (n=16) and the experimental group (n=16), with one oral post-test as a measuring factor for the acquisition of proper vocabulary pronunciation. The young learners, thirty-two of six and seven years old Chinese children at a global and an international online ESL platform "51 Talk" are the English language learning beginners, without any previous English language learning experience (the placement test was conducted by the company). Considering their age, the researcher was focused on the accuracy of their pronunciation with the newly acquired vocabulary, rather than engaging in correcting more challenging grammar structures. The young learners were selected based on their previous engagement and similar level of English language knowledge, with consent from both the parents and the company. Both group learners were presented with the same lesson from the "Classic English Junior" book, level 1-Unit 3-Lesson 7, entitled "Turn off the light" and the focus was to teach the students to learn how to say what a child can do at night through using five simple sentences. The experiment lasted for sixty two days, and considering the fact that the platform offers individual, twenty-minute-long classes, a certain amount of time was required to collect the necessary data. Since the researcher worked in an environment where he was able to carefully select the age (and gender-related) group and, both the control group and the experimental group consisted of an equal number of male and female students, as well as an equal number of six- and seven- year -old children. When it comes to the timing of error correction, the

researcher decides to correct the students straightaway, through direct or self correction techniques, considering that the focus is on the accuracy of the activity. The age and gender data were collected from the official student profiles on the "51 talk" website, that were presented to the researcher.

The control group was expected to acquire knowledge through the typical presentation-practice-production form. The teacher would present five sentences that were in the focus of the lesson to each and every student *(I go to bed at 10 o'clock; I say "Good night to my parents"; I brush my teeth; I put on my pajamas; I turn off the light and sleep).* During the presentation phase, the teacher read every sentence twice and encouraged the student to repeat. The teacher did not ask additional questions considering that the focus was primarily on proper pronunciation. This activity was followed by a short and comprehensible text which facilitated the teacher as he attempted to observe how well the students could actually comprehend the sentences. Subsequently, the students were required to read the given sentences by themselves. The teacher corrected any potential mistakes straightaway, did not allow student self-correction and encouraged the students to repeat immediately after him in the attempt to correct their pronunciation. The practice segment was followed by a brief matching activity upon which the students were required to produce and pronounce the five sentences on their own, without making a mistake, as a form of an oral post test. This activity served as a tool for the teacher to observe how well the errors were actually corrected and student pronunciation was graded for the purpose of the experiment.

The experimental group followed the exact presentation and production pattern, while the practice segment significantly differed from the one presented to the control group. The teacher dealt with the potential mistakes by using six different self correction techniques randomly (*repeating, echoing, expression teaching, statement and question, hinting and reformulation*) in the attempt to prove the validity of the claim that what students discover for themselves is the thing they tend to truly remember, as opposed to being provided with the answer straightaway, which they tend to forget. If students would still be unable to self-correct, the teacher would provide an answer.

The practice segment was also followed by a brief matching activity upon which the students were required to produce and pronounce the five sentences on their own, without making a mistake, as a form of an oral post test. Their pronunciation was, as well, evaluated for the purpose of the experiment and it was based on the correct pronunciation provided by the teacher.

The oral post test, which was intended for both the control group and the experimental group, was conducted within the twenty-five-minute lesson, at the very end of the class period. It consisted of student pronouncing the new vocabulary items within the five selected sentences. There was a total of five points in the test where the maximum number of properly pronounced sentences was awarded five points and the minimum number was awarded one point. Each vocabulary item that was properly pronounced within a sentence was awarded with one point. The grading system was designed as follows:

5 points	Grade A (excellent)
4 points	Grade B (very good)
3 points	Grade C (good)
2 points	Grade D (sufficient)
1 points	Grade F (insufficient)

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. FINDINGS

The researcher decided to chose age and gender as the relevant factors when it comes to determining the potential impact of error self-correction techniques on children's second language learning capabilities. The first factor being analyzed was the age factor. Considering the seven year olds in the experimental group, 50% of them received an excellent grade (5 =A), and 37.5% of them received a very good grade (4 = B). Additionally, 12.5 % of the students received a good grade (3 = C). The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for eight experimental group students, aged seven, was 4.12. The control group children, aged seven, on the other hand, exhibited slightly different results. As many as 62.5% of them received an excellent grade (5 = A), 12.5 % received a very good grade (4 = B), while 25 % of them received a good grade. (3 = C). The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for control group children, aged seven was 4.37. Thus, it can be concluded that the seven year old

children in the control group who were exposed to the teacher correction method performed slightly better at the oral test than their peers from the experimental group who were exposed to the self-correction technique.

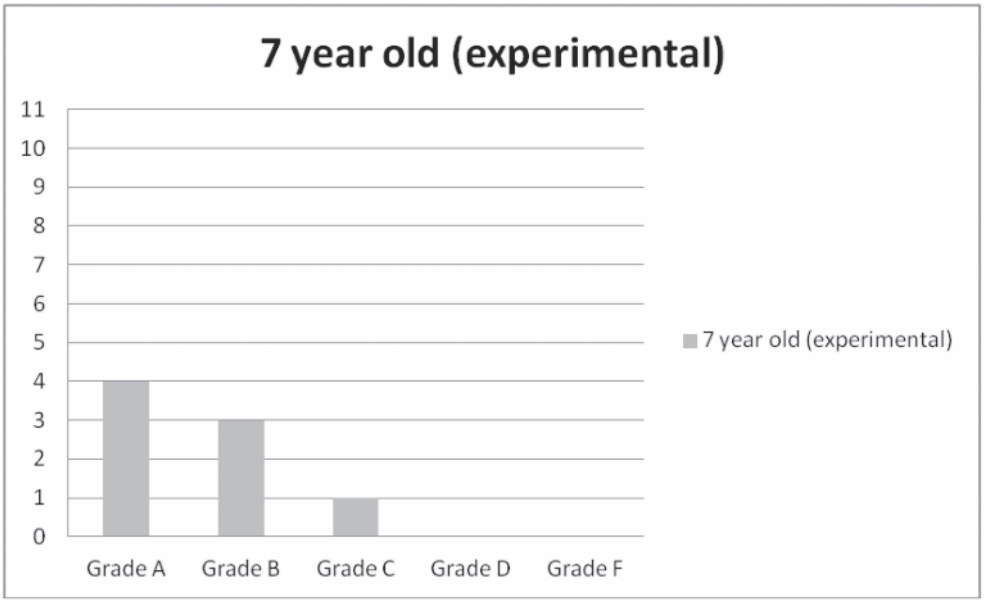

Chart 1: Seven year old students (experimental group)

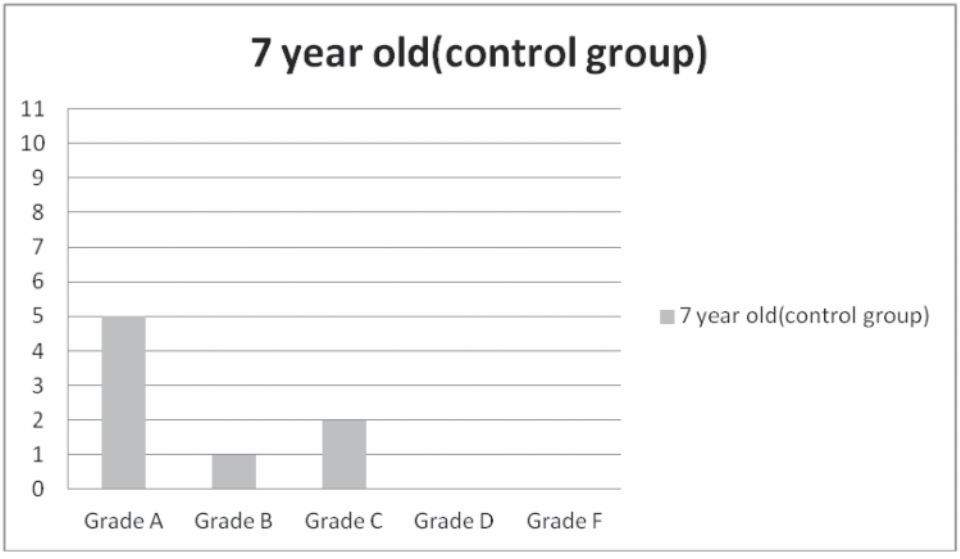

Chart 2: Seven year old students (control group)

However, when it comes to the six year old students, the results significantly favored the experimental group. In the experimental group, 75% received an excellent grade (5 = A), 12.5 % received a good grade (3 = C), and 12.5 % received a satisfactory grade (2 = D). The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for eight students, aged six in the experimental group was 4.37. In the control group, 25 % received an excellent grade (5= A), 25% received a very good grade (4 = B), 37.5 % received a good grade (3 = C), and 12.5 % received a satisfactory grade (2 = D). The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for the eight control group participants aged 6 was 3.62. The provided results strongly favored the use of self correction technique for young learners.

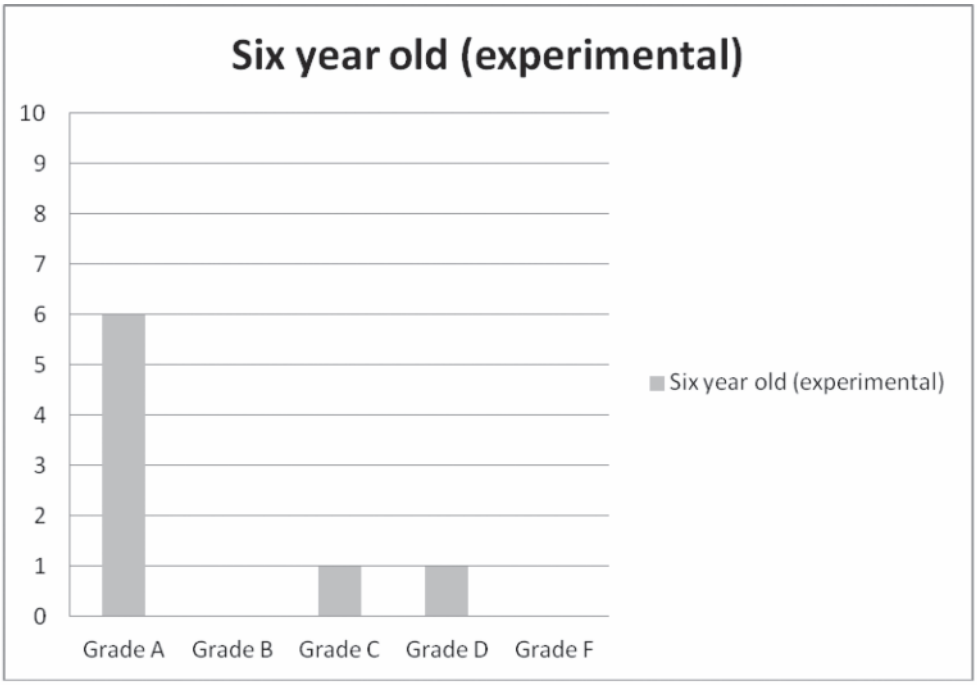

Chart 3: Six year old students (experimental group)

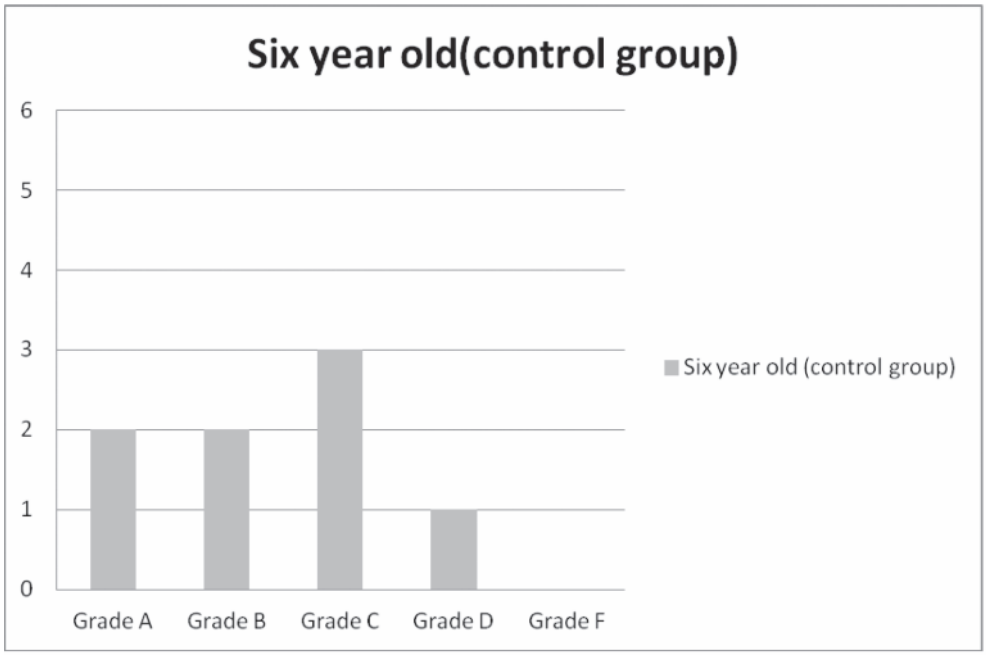

Chart 4: Six year old students (control group)

Gender is another factor which provided interesting data for the analysis. The boys from the experimental group tended to perform slightly better than the boys from the control group. In the experimental group, there were 62.5% of the participants with As, as well as 25 % of them with Bs. Moreover, 12.5% of them received Cs. The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for eight male children in the experimental group was 4.50. In the control group, on the other hand, there were 50 % of them with As, 37.5% of them received Bs, and 12.5 % who received Cs. The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for eight male children in the control group was 4.37.

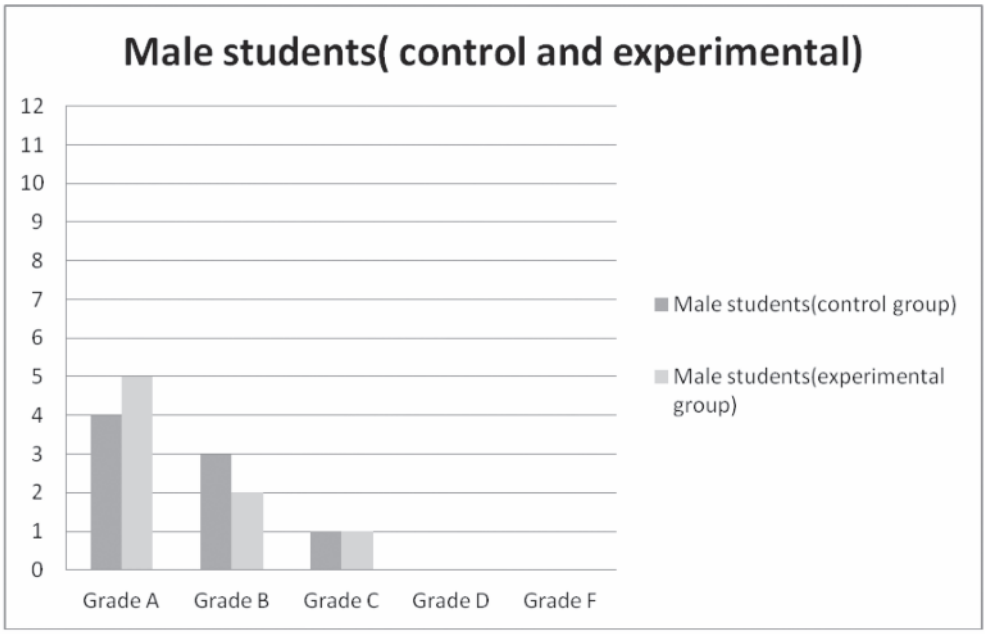

Chart 5: Male students (control and experimental group)

However, with the female students, the results were somewhat different and the gap was even wider. In the experimental group, 62.5% received As, while 12.5 % received Bs, as well as 12.5% who received Cs and 12.5% who received Ds. The grade point average for eight female children in the experimental group was 4.25. These results were better than the results of female children in the control group, where 37.5% received As, 50% received Cs, and 12.5 % percent received Ds. The grade point average for eight female children in the control group was 3.62.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the male and female students from the experimental group played a prominent role in determining the potential impact of the self-correction technique. While the male students, who were a part of the experimental group performed slightly better than their peers in the control group, the female students from the experimental group performed significantly better than the female students from the control group.

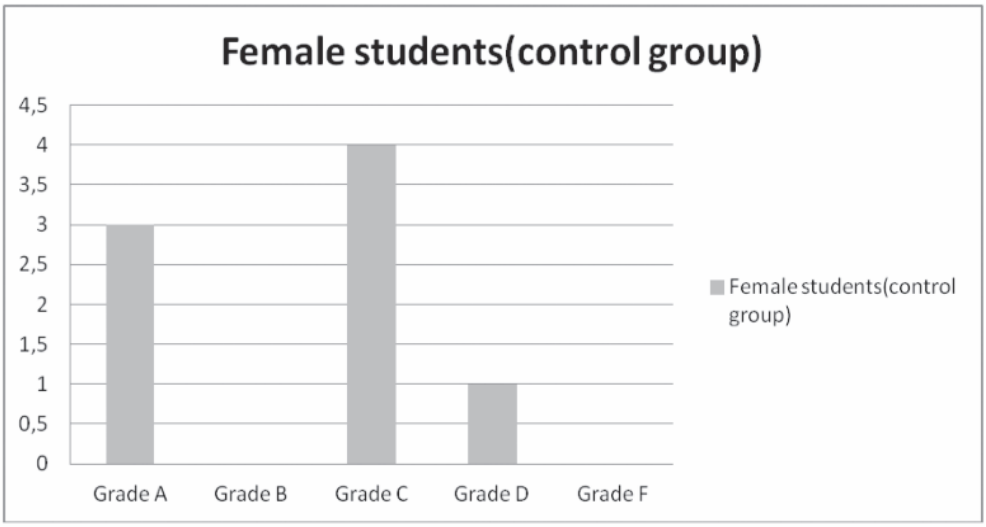

Chart 6: Female students (control group)

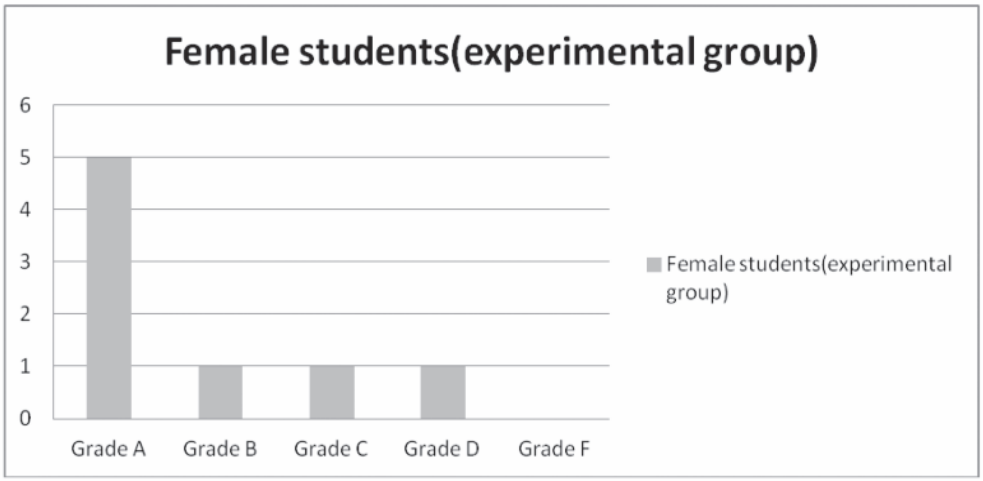

Chart 7: Female students (experimental group)

The overall student success favored the experimental group and the impact of the self-correction technique to a certain extent. In the experimental group, 62.5% of the students received As, 18.7% received Bs, and 12.5 % received Cs. There were, additionally, 6.25% of the students with Ds. The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for the nineteen students in the experimental group was 4.37. When it comes

to the control group, 43.75% received As, 18.75 % received Bs and 31.7 % of them received Cs. There were 6.25% of the students who received Ds. The grade point average (on a scale from 1 to 5) for the sixteen students in the control group was 4.0.

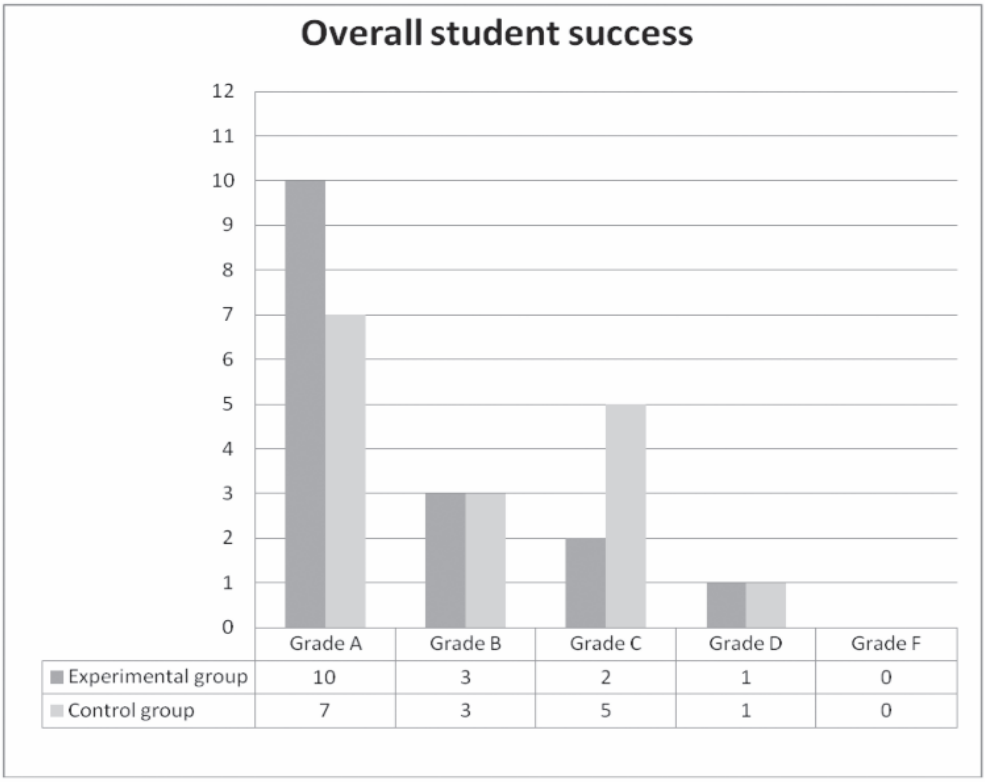

Chart 8: Overall student success

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper set out to prove whether the self-correction technique can potentially influence and improve the children's pronunciation of particular vocabulary items and basic sentences in a better way than by being directly corrected by the teacher. Additionally, this paper set out to prove how proper treatment of these errors can facilitate young learners' second language acquisition. Based on the findings, it can easily be concluded that the biggest impact of the self-correction technique was on six year old children when it comes to age, and female students when it comes to

gender, considering the fact that they performed significantly better than their peers from the control group. Consequently, six year old female students seem to have benefited the most by the self-correction technique introduced by the teacher. Additionally the success of the experimental group was substantiated by the overall success of the students which favoured the students who were exposed to the self correction technique. However, considering the fact that this is a very small sample (32 students in total), further research is needed to substantiate the claim that the self-correction technique is, in fact, the best possible solution for error correction at the early school age. Further research should include higher number of early school age students over a longer period of time (if needed), focusing on the correct pronunciation of phrases with the inclusion of longer sentences and not just the selected vocabulary items. Additionally, the research should include the productive skills of writing and speaking at a very basic level, which would provide a suitable error-making environment. This would enable the students to make a significant amount of errors and, consequently, thrive when being exposed to the self-correction technique. Students could potentially prepare brief presentations (writing or speaking) about a particular topic, with the newly acquired vocabulary (*i.e. daily activities*), where the teacher could attempt to prove that the self-correction technique is the obvious choice for error correction, as the students who teach themselves will benefit more from it than the students who were exposed to the teacher-student correction.

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GREŠKE I NJIHOVO TRETIRANJE KOD UČENIKA RANE ŠKOLSKE DOBI

Sažetak

Greške su sastavni dio u procesu razvoja djeteta. Učenici rane školske dobi i njihov proces usvajanja drugog stranog jezika u tom pogledu nisu izuzetak. Preuzimanje rizika i jezičko eksperimentisanje mogu voditi do različitih tipova grešaka, koje, ukoliko su adekvatno ispravljene, imaju potencijal da u konačnici kod učenika proizvedu prijeko potrebni napredak. Učenici u ranoj školskoj dobi vole istraživati svijet stranog jezika i vole biti aktivno uključeni u proces razmišljanja. Na taj način, oni sami mogu doći do odgovora, umjesto da im nastavnik dā odgovore na licu mjesta. Ovakav tip izazovnog i u isto vrijeme stimulirajućeg okruženja je savršeno prikladan za usvajanje vokabulara, rečeničnih konstrukcija, kao i za poboljšanje izgovora. Stoga, cilj ovog rada je da propita da li različite metode tehnika samoispravljanja mogu, u konačnici, uticati na izgovor određenih jedinica vokabulara kao i osnovnih rečenica i eventualno ih poboljšati na uspješniji način u poređenju sa direktnom ispravkom od strane nastavnika. Dodatno, cilj ovog rada je da pokaže kako pravilno tretiranje ovih grešaka može olakšati proces usvajanja stranog jezika kod učenika rane školske dobi.

Ključne riječi: učenici rane školske dobi; greške; samoispravljanje; ispravljanje od strane nastavnika; tretiranje grešaka; izgovor; usvajanje stranog jezika

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