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Errors and Oral Corrective Feedback in University English Classes

Ting Su-Hie
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
shting@cls.unimas.my

Muriatul Khusmah Musa
UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang
muriatul557@ppinang.uitm.edu.my

Lu Aileen Ek-Ling
State Education Department, Sarawak
aileenekling@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In a language classroom which focuses on communicative use of English, the matter of whether to correct learners' errors is often debated. Within this context, the study examined the types of errors which are corrected by instructors. The specific aspects studied were the types of errors made by adult ESL learners in a tertiary institution and the types of corrective feedback used by the instructors. Instructor-student interaction data were obtained from audio recordings of 20 two-hour lessons in an English for Social Purposes course in a Malaysian university. The oral interactions were transcribed and analysed using Lyster and Ranta's (1997) corrective discourse model. Errors which were not treated with corrective feedback were not included in the study. The three types of errors focused on were phonological, lexical and grammatical. From the data set, 119 incidents of noticed errors were identified. The results revealed a tendency for instructors to notice and respond to grammatical errors, followed by phonological errors but lexical errors did not receive as much attention. The oral corrective feedback was usually given in the form of recasts to reformulate part of the students' utterance without pointing out the error explicitly. In comparison, the other five types of corrective feedback were less frequent. Sometimes the instructors responded to an error with different kinds of corrective feedback types. The patterns in oral corrective feedback indicate that instructors are mindful of how error treatment may

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cause anxiety to students and focus attention on ill-formed utterances that affect meaning-making.

Keywords: *errors, corrective feedback, error treatment, English as a Second Language*

Introduction

In communicative language teaching, both meaning and form are emphasised to produce communicatively competent learners. Within this context, form-focussed teaching has a place for error correction. Different terms have been used to refer to error correction, depending on disciplinary orientation. It has been examined as negative evidence by linguists (White, 1989), repair by discourse analysts (Kasper, 1985), corrective feedback by second language teachers (Fanselow, 1977) and focus-on-form in more recent work in classroom second language acquisition (Lightbrown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1991) (cited in Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Over the past two decades, discussions on error treatment included when, which and how errors should be corrected as well as whether learner errors should be corrected at all. These discussions were based on framing questions used by Hendrickson (1978) who wrote one of the comprehensive reviews on error correction in the classroom. Effectiveness of error correction or teacher feedback on second language learning has also been empirically studied.

Generally, there are two opposing views on the effectiveness of error correction in the language classroom with some researchers opposing the practice of error correction and other researchers supporting it. Among the opponents of error correction is Krashen (1982, 1985). Krashen considers second language acquisition as a subconscious process operating in tandem with the reception of comprehensible input. Following this line of thinking, Krashen argued that any knowledge consciously learnt through explicit instruction, including negative evidence, cannot have an impact on second language acquisition. Krashen (1982) refers to error correction as a "serious mistake" (p. 74) and explains that error correction puts students on the defensive and encourage them to avoid using difficult constructions for fear of making mistakes. Krashen also highlights the potentially disruptive effect on discourse that could provide comprehensible input. Empirical studies supporting this view include Allwright (1975) and Fanselow (1977) who concluded that teachers' attempts at error correction were

frequently ambiguous and inconsistent, and therefore, the value of correction was not clearly demonstrated.

However, error correction has its benefits. For example, Swain and Lapkin (1995) stated that feedback, whether internally or externally generated, activates cognitive processes which enable learners to notice problems in their output and push them to a modified output. Corrective feedback is a pedagogical means of offering modified input to learners, which could consequently lead to modified output by the learners (Suzuki, 2004). On a small number of occasions, the modification may only be a mechanical repetition of the alternative form provided by the teacher, in which the learner's attention is neither invested in the retrieval of alternative forms nor even drawn to the mismatch. On the other hand, in terms of opportunities for uptake following negotiation of form, learners are pushed to draw on their own resources to modify or reprocess their non-target output (Swain, 1995). Thus, corrective feedback provides both direct and indirect information about what is grammatical (Long, 1996). From the perspective of the Noticing Hypothesis (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001), corrective feedback plays a facilitative role in drawing learner attention to form. Schmidt (1995) found that learners must consciously pay attention to or notice input in order for L2 learning to proceed. The feedback triggers learners to recognise the gap between their interlanguage and the target norm.

In the area of error correction and corrective feedback, Lyster and Ranta's (1997) analytical model of error treatment has been particularly influential. The earlier models include the IRF (Initiating move-Responding move-Follow-up move) exchange structure (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and the corrective discourse model (Chaudron, 1977). Their model has formed the theoretical framework of numerous studies on teaching of English either as a second or foreign language in Canada (Panova & Lyster, 2002), New Zealand (Sheen, 2004) and Korea (Suzuki, 2004). For the purpose of this study, Lyster and Ranta's (1997) model provides a tool to identify an individual instructor's styles in response to learners' language errors during classroom interaction and facilitates the examination of how learners react to corrective feedback in a variety of patterns. Lyster and Ranta studied the relationship between corrective feedback and learners' uptake in four content-based French immersion classrooms in Canada. They analysed transcripts of 18.3 hours of classroom interaction. The study showed that teachers provided feedback on 62% of erroneous utterances and recasts were the most widely used type of feedback even though they were ineffective at eliciting student-

generated repairs. The findings suggest that feedback types such as metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, clarification requests and repetition of error created opportunities for negotiation of form by promoting more active learner involvement in the error treatment process than feedback types such as recasts and explicit correction. On the basis of the study, Lyster and Ranta developed an analytical model that describes the relationship among types of errors, types of feedback arising from different error types, and the types of feedback that lead to more uptake. Other studies on focus-on-form practices in language classrooms also indicated that the facilitative role of corrective feedback in language development (e.g., Ellis, 2001; Loewen, 2002) although the frequency patterns for error and feedback types varies with instructional setting. For example, Sheen (2004) found that recasts were more frequent in the Korean EFL and New Zealand ESL classroom than in the French Immersion and Canadian ESL classrooms. In view of the variation in patterns of error treatment with geographical setting, it is of interest to examine the responses of Malaysian ESL teachers to language errors of adult learners.

The present study examined error treatment in ESL (English as a Second Language) communicative classrooms in a Malaysian university. The specific aspects studied were the types of errors made by adult ESL learners and the types of corrective feedback used by the instructors.

Theoretical Framework of Study

Lyster and Ranta's (1997) analytical model of error treatment sequence allows an investigation of the relationship between types of error, feedback and learner uptake. In this model, learner error is conceptualised as the starting point of the error treatment sequence. If the learner errors are noticed, teacher feedback ensues, which may be followed by learner uptake. If the learner errors are not noticed or responded to by teachers or if there is no learner uptake, there is topic continuation which may be either teacher- or student-initiated. The errors are categorised into use of first language, gender, grammatical, lexical, phonological and multiple errors. The category of gender error was relevant in Lyster and Ranta's study because French was the target language. In the model, corrective feedback is categorised into recasts, explicit correction, elicitation, clarification requests, repetition of error and metalinguistic feedback. If there is uptake of the feedback, the learner's initial erroneous utterance is

either repaired or continues to need repair in some way. *Repair* refers to "the correct reformulation of an error as uttered in a single student turn, not to the sequence of turns resulting in the correct reformulation; nor does it refer to self-initiated repair" (Lyster, 2001, p. 280). Lyster and Ranta differentiated four kinds of repair which are repetition, or incorporation of the teacher's reformulation, or student-generated repairs in the form of peer- and self-repair. If the utterance needs repair, corrective feedback may again be provided by the teacher. Lyster described the needs-repair category as encompassing student utterances coded as acknowledgement (such as 'yes' or 'no' in response to teacher feedback), hesitation, same or different errors, partial repairs or off-target. Following repair, teachers may seize the moment to reinforce the correct form before continuing with the lesson by making brief statements of approval or by repeating the student's corrected utterance. The operational definitions of learner errors and corrective feedback types are provided in the *Data Analysis* section.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in a Malaysian public university where students had either completed their *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* or matriculation. The students were required to enroll in two English proficiency courses regardless of the degree programme they were in. In addition to the two English courses, students were also required to enroll in foundation English courses if their English proficiency level was below Band 4 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Students with MUET Bands 1 to 3 are not considered competent users of the language. For example, students with MUET Band 3 are described as having a modest command of the language and can use appropriate language but with noticeable inaccuracies. Students with MUET Band 2 have a limited ability to function in the language and lack expressiveness, fluency and appropriacy. In fact, their inaccurate use of the language can result in a breakdown in communication.

The study focused on error treatment in Level 1 of the foundation English course. The course emphasised the use of English for social purposes and was taught using a coursebook written for this purpose (Ting, Kamil, Ho, Tuah & Campbell, 2007). Each unit consisted of

listening comprehension, cultural awareness, language focus, role plays, reading comprehension and written tasks. The students' oral interaction skills were developed based on the concept of scaffolding and the genre-based approach. There were two lessons per week, each lasting two hours and the class size was limited to 30 students.

The course was taught by 24 instructors, of which 20 were involved in the study. One of the instructors was excluded because the teaching was done in a distant campus and there was an inconvenience of data collection arising from the travelling involved. Data from another three instructors were excluded because the researchers could not be present in their class to observe the lesson and take note of contextual cues that would inform the use of oral corrective feedback. The 20 instructors who provided the data for the study consisted of five full-time lecturers employed on a permanent basis by the university and 15 part-time tutors. These instructors were trained to teach English either in Malaysian or foreign universities. The instructors were non-native speakers of English and had multilingual language backgrounds. They were proficient users of English but their beliefs towards error correction were not sought in the study.

Data Collection

As the course focused on listening and speaking skills, most of the activities involved student interactions in the form of role plays, presentations and discussions. The oral interaction provided a good source of data to examine how instructors deal with errors made by students. At the time of the study, there were 49 classes for the Level 1 course but only 20 classes involving 20 instructors were selected for the study. Some instructors taught more than one class but only one of their lessons was observed. The classes involved almost 600 students. The students, aged 20 to mid-20s, had beginning to low intermediate level of proficiency in English. They were in the first year of their university studies.

Before the study was conducted, permission was sought from the Centre for Language Studies and the instructors teaching the course. They were told that the study was on classroom interaction but the specific focus on corrective feedback was not highlighted to the instructors. Other procedural matters related to the research were also explained. Upon obtaining their verbal consent for the study, a schedule for the observation was negotiated. The third researcher conducted non-participant observation during the lessons. The instructor-student discourse was

audio-taped using an MP4 recorder in the first semester of the academic year. At the end of the semester, the audio-taped oral interaction data were transcribed using Eggins and Slade's (1997) system of coding. For example, non-transcribable segments of talk were indicated by empty parentheses and commas were used to signal speaker parceling of non-final talk as opposed to full-stops which were used to signal termination (whether grammatically complete or not). The instructors were identified as I1 to I20 and numbers were also used to identify individual students who spoke up during the lessons observed (e.g., S1, S2).

Data Analysis

The oral interaction data was subsequently analysed for error types and corrective feedback types using Lyster and Ranta's (1997) framework. Only the parts of classroom interaction which involved corrective feedback were analysed and parts which contained errors not responded to by instructors were not included in the analysis. Also excluded from the analysis were parts which consisted of the instructors' delayed feedback and student interaction in the absence of the instructor.

In Lyster and Ranta's (1997) framework, six types of learner errors made by French immersion students were identified: grammatical, lexical, phonological, use of L1, gender and multiple errors. However, in the present study, three categories of errors were excluded. First, use of L1 was not considered learner error in the present study because of the heterogeneity of learners L1 backgrounds. Next, gender error was also not relevant in the present study on the use of English, unlike French which has grammatical gender. Finally, the category of multiple errors was not used because there were no instances of the combination of error types. Even if there were multiple errors, the errors would be categorised based on the linguistic form that the subsequent oral corrective feedback targeted. Hence, the three types of language errors analysed in the present study were grammatical, phonological and lexical errors, operationally defined following Lyster (2001) as follows:

1. Grammatical errors include non-target use of closed classes such as determiners, prepositions and pronouns, grammatical gender, tense, verb morphology, auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, pluralisation, negation, question formation, relativisation and word order.
2. Phonological errors are inaccurate pronunciation of words that often lead to difficulty of comprehension of the target words.

3. Lexical errors include inaccurate, imprecise or inappropriate choices of lexical items in open classes (nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives), non-target derivations of nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives involving incorrect use of prefixes and suffixes.

It needs to be noted that the number of errors was not an absolute number of errors in the two-hour lesson. The frequency refers to errors which were responded to by instructors with immediate corrective feedback.

The seven types of oral corrective feedback that Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified were recasts, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, elicitation, repetition and translation. However, translation was excluded in the present study since the use of various L1 is not considered a language error. The operational definitions used for the six types of corrective feedback were:

1. Recasts involve the instructor's implicit reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance to minimize the error but the instructor does not point out that the student had made an error (e.g., you mean ...).
2. Explicit correction is the explicit provision of the correct form (e.g., No, what you said was wrong).
3. Metalinguistic feedback contains comments, information or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form. It points to the nature of the error but attempts to elicit the information from the student (e.g., How do you say that word?).
4. Clarification requests indicate to students either that their utterance has been misunderstood or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way and that a repetition or reformulation is required (e.g., I'm sorry?)
5. Elicitation refers to a corrective technique that the instructor uses to prompt the student to self-correct by directly eliciting the correct form from students (e.g., It's a --)
6. Repetition refers to the instructor's repetition of the student's erroneous utterance through intonation (e.g., Your reservation will until 8 o'clock?)

As the preliminary analysis of the data indicated that there were some instances of instructors' corrective feedback involving a combination of feedback types, attention was also given to the combination of corrective

feedback during the analysis to find out if there were patterns in the combinations. Results on learner uptake of the corrective feedback are not included in this paper although the larger study took account of this.

Results and Discussion

1. Types of language errors

The results showed there were altogether 119 instances of language errors which received immediate corrective feedback from instructors (Table 1). Of the three types of language errors, grammatical error is the most frequent type of error made by the student and treated with

Table 1. Frequency of Language Errors with Immediate Corrective Feedback

Instructors	Types of errors			
	Grammatical	Phonological	Lexical	Total
1	2	3	2	7
2	3	0	0	3
3	0	3	0	3
4	4	2	0	6
5	0	2	0	2
6	1	2	0	3
7	4	2	0	6
8	0	8	0	8
9	8	1	1	10
10	1	1	1	3
11	1	4	0	5
12	3	0	0	3
13	0	0	0	0
14	12	0	0	12
15	2	1	0	3
16	3	3	2	8
17	7	3	1	11
18	2	0	0	2
19	11	2	0	13
20	8	3	0	11
Frequency	72	40	7	119
Percentage	60.5%	33.6%	5.9%	100.0

corrective feedback (60.5%). Phonological errors received some attention from instructors (33.6%) but very few lexical errors received corrective feedback (5.9%).

An instance of grammatical error is shown in (1), an excerpt from the classroom interaction of Instructor 6:

Excerpt (1)

I6: How do you say when you ask for price?
S1: How much does it cost?
I6: Yes. How much does it cost? Any other ways to say?
S2: How much it is? (Error – grammatical)
I6: Say it again. How much …
S2: How is it?
I6: Yes. How much is it?

The grammatical error was the wrong word order in question formation. Instructor 6 prompted the students for the correct form (How much is it?) to replace the incorrect form (How much it is?).

In this study, phonological errors involving mispronunciation of words were also noticed by the instructors. For example, in (2) the student had mispronounced the word "chemotherapy" and this was noticed by the instructor who offered the correct pronunciation.

Excerpt (2)

S1: I know she shouldn't have gone for the surgery. She should have just concentrated on chemotheraphy /kemәθerәpi/ (Error – phonological)
I4: Chemotheraphy /ki:mәʊθerәpi/
S1: Chemotheraphy /ki:mәʊθerәpi/

In contrast, lexical errors were often ignored by the instructors under study. An instance of a lexical error involving inaccurate use of noun is shown in (3):

Excerpt (3)

S3: I'm sorry, sir. I didn't notice it. Let me change a meal free of change to you. (Error – lexical)
I9: Free of charge. Not free of change.
S3: Free of charge.
I9: Yes. Free of charge.

In this example, the instructor reformulated the wrong use of noun ("free of change") and the student repeated it after him ("free of charge").

A comparison of the results with previous studies conducted in the target language environment indicates the influence of an ESL environment on the noticing of errors. The finding that grammatical errors received the greatest attention from instructors is similar to that of Lyster's (2001) study on the French immersion classroom interaction. Lyster identified 921 error sequences of which 50% were grammatical errors, 18% lexical errors, 16% phonological errors and 16% unsolicited uses of L1. The learners in Lyster's study were French immersion students in grades 4 and 5. However, in Suzuki's (2004) study on Korean ESL learners in New York City, it is phonological errors which received the most corrective feedback (53%), followed by lexical (24%) and grammatical (23%) errors. Suzuki reasoned that the older learners in her study, whose ages ranged from 20s to 50s, made more phonological errors than young learners. In the present study, the ESL learners were in their early twenties. Despite the age difference of the learners, the instructors seemed to have responded to the three error types with a frequency pattern similar to that found by Lyster. In the context of the Malaysian instructional setting, it is possible that instructors be accustomed to a wide range of acceptable pronunciations of words. It is an ESL setting and tolerance of mispronunciation may be high, considering that the meaning can often be obtained from the context. Hence, the instructors under study were found to focus their attention on grammatical errors in their corrective feedback. Based on the distribution of error types receiving corrective feedback, it seems that there is low tolerance for structural inaccuracies among the ESL instructors in the study.

2. Types of corrective feedback

Table 2 shows the frequency of different types of corrective feedback. The total corrective feedback turns is 139 as opposed to 119 for total frequency of errors (Table 1). This indicates that the instructors in the study provided several turns of corrective feedback in response to one error. The types of corrective feedback could be the same or different, and the frequencies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Corrective Feedback Types for Different Error Types

Corrective feedback types	Types of errors				
	Grammatical	Phonological	Lexical	Total	Percentage
Recast	34	36	1	71	51.1
Explicit correction	24	5	2	31	22.3
Metalinguistic feedback	8	2	2	12	8.6
Clarification request	6	2	3	11	7.9
Elicitation	8	0	1	9	6.5
Repetition	5	0	0	5	3.6
Total	85	45	9	139	100.0

Of the six types of corrective feedback, recasting of learner errors was found to be the most frequent. The instructors used recasts to respond to 51.1% of errors made by the students (Table 2). Excerpt (4) shows an instance of recast being used to correct a grammatical error:

Excerpt (4)

S2: Open the packet of noodles using a scissors. (Error – grammatical)
I20: A pair of scissors (Feedback – recast)
S2: Using a pair of scissors.

Although the instructor did not explicitly point out that there was an error, the recast alerted the student to the correct form ("a pair of scissors" instead of "a scissors").

The second most frequently used corrective feedback type is explicit correction, which accounted for 22.3% of total instances of feedback. In comparison to these two responses to learner errors, the other types of corrective feedback were infrequent – less than 10% each. As the frequency of explicit correction is lower than that of recasts, this is an indication that the instructors in this study refrained from making it too obvious that students had made language errors in their speech. An example of explicit correction is shown in (5):

Excerpt (5)

S3: You're in the wrong side of the road. (Error – grammatical)
I20: You're ... You're ... in the wrong side ... of the road? How are you going to do? On the wrong side of the road. Not in. You're on the wrong side of the road. (Feedback – explicit correction)
S3: You're on the wrong side of the road. It should be on your right.

In this excerpt, Instructor 20 began by citing the part of the utterance that was grammatically inaccurate before providing the correct form. Following this, the instructor pointed out that the preposition "in" was a wrong choice and provided the correct form. The student incorporated the well-formed utterance and continued with the role play on giving directions to a particular place.

When the results on corrective feedback were examined in terms of the types of errors, it is evident that grammatical errors were mostly treated with recasts and explicit corrections. Table 2 shows out of 85 instances of grammatical errors, the instructors responded to 40% of the errors (or 34 instances) with recasts and 28.2% (24 instances) with explicit corrections. However, for phonological errors, the common response is recasting with the instructor implicitly reformulating all or part of the ill-pronounced word(s). Table 2 shows that instructors responded to 80% of phonological errors with recast. As the frequency of lexical errors was low (9), a definite pattern of corrective feedback is not evident. Overall, the instructors used recasts in response to grammatical and phonological errors more than any other type of corrective feedback (see also Lyster, 2001).

Recast is also the most frequently used corrective feedback technique in many studies investigating the relationship between error types and corrective feedback (Doughty, 1994; Ellis, 2001; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Sheen, 2004; Suzuki, 2004). Lyster (2001) attributed the teachers' preference for recasting grammatical errors to the complexity of the system-driven rules of grammar that "might not be easily retrievable, were perhaps not yet internalized" (p. 290). Lyster reasoned that recasting is an efficient way to advance the lesson by keeping students' attention focused on the content. The lesson can also be advanced through the use of explicit correction but this corrective feedback technique was used rather infrequently in other studies (e.g., 7% in Lyster & Ranta, 1997; 8.4% in Sheen, 2004). However, in the present study, explicit correction is the second highest in frequency of corrective feedback types (22.3%). The instructors under study may find it necessary to explicitly point out ill-formed utterances in case the students regard recasts of language errors as alternative acceptable forms. Nevertheless, the preference for recast to explicit correction suggests that the instructors did not make their corrective feedback too obvious so as not to disrupt the interaction. Recasts provide students with supportive, scaffolded help in using their second language (Lyster, 2002). Use of implicit reformulative feedback takes account of the students' feelings of

anxiety at having their errors pointed out. Situating the phenomenon of corrective feedback in the context of communicative language teaching, the analysis of classroom interaction revealed that the corrective feedback did not stop the flow of classroom interaction. This addresses the concern of instructors who refrain from correcting their students' errors for fear of disrupting the interaction.

Conclusion

The study investigated the relationship between error types and corrective feedback in adult ESL communicative classroom context. Lyster and Ranta's (1997) analytical model of error treatment sequence was adapted as the framework for analysis. The findings show that the most frequent type of error treated with corrective feedback is grammatical error, followed by phonological and lexical errors. Among the six different types of corrective feedback, recast is the most preferred type of feedback used by the instructors, followed by explicit correction. This study shows that ESL instructors of adult learners at university English courses tend to have lower tolerance of grammatical inaccuracies compared to phonological and lexical errors. In providing corrective feedback, the instructors' preference for implicit rather than explicit feedback suggests a concern for maintaining a safe environment for students to develop communicative skills in English. As the instructor's proficiency in English and beliefs on the necessity of error correction vary, it is possible that the instructors' sensitivity to student speech errors may vary. These influences can be explored in further studies on error treatment practices in the language classroom.

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