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How Do Inexperienced English Teachers Treat Students' Oral Errors?

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英語教師初心者はいかに生徒の口頭の誤りに対処しているか

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Abstract

In an attempt to provide descriptive data on novice teachers' error treatment behaviors, 41 junior high school English lessons taught by student teachers were transcribed and analyzed. The findings were as follows; (1) the average frequency of error occurrence was extremely low, which turned out to be due to the overuse of grammatical explanations and repetitive drills, (2) the most frequent errors observed were errors in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, (3) only a small portion of the errors committed was ignored, (4) treatment types for mechanical English practice which directly provided correct answers were used more than self-corrective treatments, (5) for communication practice non-interruptive types of error treatment were more used than interruptive types, but only a limited number of the subjects used the former types.

1. Introduction

The present study attempts to provide basic descriptive data on student teachers' error treatments. The final, yet far distant, goal of error treatment research is to empirically prove the cognitive and affective effects of different kinds of error treatment on acquisition. However, as Ellis (1994 : 585) points out, before we can set out on the ambitious undertaking of empirical verification, it is first necessary to investigate what error treatment options are used by teachers, how often they are used, and what factors influence their use in practice. Such descriptive work on error treatments will help us find meaningful questions to tackle, helping us aim towards more informed and principled uses of error treatments in the classroom.

Many studies provide descriptive data on English-speaking teachers' treatment of oral errors in the second language classroom context (e. g. Allwright 1975, Chaudron 1977, Fanselow 1977, Nystrom 1983, Chaudron 1986). However, descriptive studies on non-native teachers' oral error treatment in the foreign

language classroom context in Japan are very limited in number. For example, Yoneyama's (1982) pioneering work investigates student teachers' corrective behaviors. Kubota(1991) explores seven experienced high school teachers' patterns of verbal behaviors toward students' errors. My study intends to replicate and complement the findings of these two studies.

2. The Study

(1) Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how novice teachers (student teachers) treat students' oral errors in class. More specifically this study tries to answer the three following questions :

- (a) How often are errors committed in classes? How are they distributed according to linguistic and other areas?
- (b) How often are errors ignored by student teachers? Which linguistic areas are ignored the most?
- (c) Can student teachers differentiate use of error treatments depending on practice types?

Along with a research interest to gain some insights into the nature of effective error treatments, this study is also motivated by the present writer's need to gain some implications for teacher training, in particular, in terms of the weaknesses of student teachers in error correction.

(2) Subjects and Methods

The subjects of this study were 41 student teachers who taught at junior high schools as part of their requirements of the student teaching program. They were all native speakers of Japanese. Of the 41, 19 were juniors and 22 were seniors at the university. There were 14 male student teachers and 27 female ones. The student teachers taught for 5 or 6 weeks at junior high schools in and around Hakodate. None of them were aware of the purpose of this study.

41 classes were videotaped over a five year period from 1991 to 1996. All of the classes were the final class for evaluation as required by the student teaching program. The classes usually lasted for 50 minutes, and all of them were transcribed. The students' errors were located and classified. Errors are defined as any of the student's utterances that deviate from standard English, or wrong answers that do not meet the teacher's expectations about the task or question. Only speech errors were analyzed. Errors in answers to questions that require students to give grammatical explanations in Japanese were excluded in the analysis. When judgment of the correctness of a particular utterance was difficult, a native speaker was consulted. The student teachers' error treatment moves were then coded by two other teachers of English. The coding was done according to a category system adapted from Yoneyama (1982)(see Appendix 1 for the categories, their definitions and examples).

3. Results and Discussion

(1) Error Frequency

Table 1 shows the frequencies of errors observed in class. The average error frequency for the first

year classes was 4.18 per class, for the second year classes 3.54, for the third year classes 3.00. The overall frequency for all the classes was 3.80. The general trend was that the error frequency decreased as the grade year increased. This is presumably because beginning level classes generally included more oral practice than more advanced classes.

Table 1 Average Numbers of Errors Observed in Class

Grade	1	2	3	Total
N.of Teachers	22	13	6	41
Total N. of Errors	92	46	18	156
Average Occurrence of Errors	4.18	3.54	3.00	3.80

One important fact that should be pointed out is that the total frequency of error occurrence was extremely low. On the average, only 3.8 oral errors were committed during the fifty-minute classes. This low error frequency found in the present study might seem to be a desirable feature of successful classes. However, a close examination of the class protocols revealed that classes with low frequencies of errors were not necessarily effective or successful. In many classes error frequencies were low because there were not many opportunities provided for the students to try out what they learned. In other words, most of the class time of such classes was spent not so much on students' oral production in communicative practices, but rather for grammatical explanations and repetitive drills where the possibility of making errors is low.

The notion that error-free classes are better classes needs to be seriously reconsidered. It might be considered that experienced teachers allow few errors to occur in class, but, in fact, this is not necessarily the case. For example, Kubota (1991) reports that 95 errors were observed in seven English classes taught by experienced high school teachers, which means that on the average, 13.6 errors were committed per class. This figure is far greater than that of the present study (3.8 errors per class). Although the exact reason for the difference can only be conjectured, the most probable reason would be that Kubota's subject teachers provided ample opportunities for challenging the student's current knowledge of English, whereas the student teachers of this study did not.

This problem of error frequency in a class can also be viewed in relation to the degree of "communicativeness" of the class. An examination of the 41 classes revealed that classes with abundant communicative interactions tended to have more errors than classes with great amounts of grammar explanations or repetitive drills. For example, of the first year classes, the class with the highest error frequency (9 errors) was taught by a female student who used English most interactively with students promoting communicative exchanges during the class. She was a fluent speaker of English who had studied in Canada for 8 months. On the other hand, the class with the lowest error frequency (2 errors) was taught by a male student who used Japanese most of the time and extensively used repetitive drills. There were, of course, some exceptions, but in general, as far as the student teachers' classes analyzed in this study are concerned, it can be said that the more communicative interactions there are in the class, the more errors are committed. It even looks as if the degree of "communicative health" of a class could be measured by the number of errors committed in the class.

(2) Error Distribution

Table 2 shows the distribution of the errors observed. Along with linguistic areas, three more categories have been added. "Different task" refers to the student's errors arising from his or her misunderstandings regarding the nature of the task he or she was supposed to do. The category of translation errors was included since there were cases where it was difficult to determine the linguistic causes of translation errors. "Content errors" refers to those errors caused by the student's factual misunderstandings.

The most frequent errors were those of grammar (44%), which suggests that most of the classroom drills and activities were concerned with grammar. The second were vocabulary errors (22%), and the third were pronunciation errors (11%). This order of frequency roughly corresponds with Chaudron (1988) and Kubota's (1991) studies which show a similarity in the prevalence of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary errors, although different orders of the three were obtained in each study.

Table 2 Distribution of Errors

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Translation	Different Task	Discourse	Content	Total
N. of Errors	69	35	17	13	10	7	5	156
%	44%	22%	11%	8%	6%	4%	3%	100%

(3) Rate of Errors Ignored

The percentages of errors ignored for respective error areas are shown in Table 3. Discourse errors were ignored the most (43%), followed by grammar errors (26%), and pronunciation errors (6%).

Of the 156 errors observed, the percentage of errors ignored was 15%, and that of those treated was 85%. Thus, the majority of the errors received some kind of corrective feedback. A similar result was obtained by Yoneyama (1982) who reported that 9.5% of the errors committed in the classroom are ignored by student teachers. This tendency for the teacher to correct most errors committed in the classroom in some way or other sharply contrasts with error correction in natural communication outside the classroom (Chun, et al. 1982). The clear difference between classroom and natural settings should remind us that an overuse of overt error correction can greatly interfere with natural exchanges of messages.

Table 3 Rate of Errors Ignored

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Translation	Different Task	Discourse	Content	Total (%)
Ignored	18 26%	1 3%	1 6%	0 0%	0 0%	3 43%	0 0%	23 (15%)
Treated	51 74%	34 97%	16 94%	13 100%	10 100%	4 57%	5 100%	133 (85%)
Total	69	35	17	13	10	7	5	156

Two kinds of error ignorance were discernible from the class protocol. One was "recognition failures", and the other was "positive ignorance". Recognition failures are caused by the teacher's inaccurate knowledge of English or inattentiveness. For example, one of the student teachers ignored the error in the sentence "Do you like tomato?" It was clear that this student teacher did not know that "tomato" had to be pluralized in this case, since she herself produced the same kind of errors elsewhere during the class. Error ignorance is also caused by the teacher's inattentiveness. Student teachers often tend to fail to recognize errors committed by students as they are busy making complex decisions during a class. Positive ignorance is one option of error treatment in which a teacher deliberately ignores student errors, giving allowance to a student who is correctly producing other target items of greater importance, or a teacher trying not to break the flow of communicative interactions. For example, one student teacher reported that she intentionally ignored an error in the past verb form because the student was able to correctly produce a relativized sentence which was the target item of the lesson.

While positive ignorance is a principled use of error ignorance, recognition failure is clearly undesirable for two reasons. First, a continuous ignorance of particular errors can lead to the fossilization of those errors. Second, if the teacher does not recognize errors committed, there is no way for the teacher to keep mental notes of the errors so that he or she can devise ways to eradicate those errors later. It is necessary for teacher trainers to make sure that student teachers have accurate knowledge of English grammar and also pay closer attention to errors during class hours.

(4) Use of Error Treatments in Communicative and Mechanical Practice

Are student teachers versatile enough to differentiate use of various error treatment options according to the kind of practice they use, in particular, mechanical practice and communicative practice? Mechanical practice here is defined as any kind of practice where there is only one correct answer expected, whereas communicative practice is defined as any kind of practice where new information is exchanged, making the answer partly or wholly unpredictable by the teacher. Each type of error treatment was tallied for the two categories of mechanical and communicative practice. The result of the tally is reported in Table 4.

Let us first look at what error treatments are used to correct errors in mechanical practices. Many studies have shown that teachers extensively use "direct provisions", that is, to directly provide correct answers to the student (Yoneyama 1982, Kubota 1991, Fanselow 1977, etc.). To counteract this tendency, researchers recommend the use of "self-corrective treatments", i.e. error treatments that allow the learner to search for the answer autonomously (e.g. Holley & King 1994, Fanselow 1977, Van Lier 1988).

How much did the student teachers of the present study use each of the two kinds of error treatments in mechanical practices? It is possible to classify some of the treatments listed in Table 6 into the two kinds, although we must keep in mind that the classification is a matter of degree rather than a black and white decision. Treatments that can be regarded as direct provision type are No. 4, 5 and 8. The frequency percentage of each are 19%, 12%, and 7% respectively, which total 38%. Treatments that can be regarded as self-corrective are No. 9, 10, 11, and 12. The frequency percentage of each are 12%, 1%, 9%, and 8% respectively, which amounts to 30% of the total.

Table 4 Differential Use of Error Treatments by Practice Type

	Treatment	Mechanical Practice	%	Communication Practice	%	Total	%
1	Ignore	7	5%	20	37%	27	14%
2	Acceptance of Errors	10	7%	1	2%	11	6%
3	Giving Correct Answers (Implicit)	0	0%	9	17%	9	5%
4	Giving Correct Answers (Explicit)	26	19%	5	9%	31	16%
5	Giving Part of Correct Answers	16	12%	6	11%	22	12%
6	Different Media	2	1%	1	2%	3	2%
7	Answers by Another Student	1	0%	0	0%	1	1%
8	Giving Information	10	7%	0	0%	10	5%
9	Giving Indirect Answers	16	12%	0	0%	16	8%
10	Presenting Alternatives	2	1%	0	0%	2	1%
11	Repetition of Questions	12	9%	3	6%	15	8%
12	Repetition with Rising Intonation	11	8%	3	6%	14	7%
13	Repeats with NO	3	2%	2	4%	5	3%
14	<i>Again?, What?</i>	5	4%	0	0%	5	3%
15	<i>No</i>	3	2%	2	4%	5	3%
16	Transfer	12	9%	1	2%	13	7%
17	Others	1	0%	1	2%	2	1%
	Total	137	100%	54	100%	191	100%

The direct provision types were slightly more common than the self-corrective types. Although it is difficult to evaluate this balance of the two kinds of error treatments, more use of self-corrective types should be considered, since, if direct provisions are overused, an undesirable effect can be expected. Learners will be deprived of hypothesis-testing opportunities in which they try to modify inaccurate interlanguage rules in an attempt to find a correct answer themselves. Therefore, as a number of researchers recommend (Holley & King 1994, Fanselow 1977, van Lier 1988), the use of treatments to promote self-correction by such as giving hints along with an increased wait time should be considered more, while investigating their effects further.

Next, we shall look at the frequencies of error treatments used for communicative practice. An interesting question here is whether the student teachers were able to use more "non-interruptive treatments" than "interruptive treatments". The former are those in which the teacher responds to the learner's message content with an intention to maintain the flow of communication. The latter treatments draw the learner's attention to the surface form of a message, thus breaking the flow of communication.

The treatments classifiable as non-interruptive are No. 1 and 3 in Table 4. The former simply let errors pass untreated while the latter is a kind of error treatment that attempts to respond to the message while implicitly providing a correct form. To give an example of the latter type observed in this study, when a student said "A-kun like nurse", the teacher responded "Oh, A-kun likes nurses". The percentages of their frequencies are 37% and 17%, which, if combined, occupies 54% of all the treatments used for communication practice. Most of the other treatments can be classified as interruptive treatments (No. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16). Their frequencies total 42%.

Thus non-interruptive treatments were more common than interruptive ones, which suggests that, in general, the student teachers were able to use more appropriate treatment types for communication practices. However, although the percentage of non-interruptive treatments seems to be great enough, a close analysis shows that these treatments are in fact only used by a limited number of the subjects. Of the 41 student teachers, only 11 used treatment No. 1, only 4 used treatment No. 3. Considering that some instances of No. 1 were "recognition failures" as discussed above, meaning they were not intentional uses of the treatment option, we could say that not many of the student teachers were able to make conscious use of non-interruptive error treatments during communicative practices. Particularly, the small number of users of treatment No. 3 is disappointing. This treatment option is one of the most appropriate for communication practice since it is one of the few error treatments that balances fluency and accuracy. The principal reason for the small number of No. 3 users would be that this treatment puts a greater demand on the teacher's communication ability than the other options, and requires a relaxed attitude towards oral communication. This is born out by the fact that, of the 4 student teachers who used this option, 3 studied in Canada for 8 months. Further efforts are necessary to train student teachers in using this non-interruptive error treatment so that they can promote communication in the classrooms as well as maintaining accuracy.

4. Conclusion

With the recent emphasis on communication, error correction might be considered unnecessary in the classroom. However, on the contrary, error correction has an important role in foreign language learning. As has been pointed out by Shachter (1991), unlike children learning a first language, older learners learning a foreign language can benefit from receiving negative feedback from the teacher. It is an important part of the language teacher's responsibility to provide appropriate feedback for the learner's interlanguage development. Thus, more research is needed to investigate effective error treatment.

This study is exploratory in nature and thus has posed more questions than solved ones. Further research questions remain to be investigated.

- (1) What is the relationship between error frequency and the effectiveness of classroom instruction on acquisition?
- (2) What is the relationship between error frequency and the amount of communicative interactions in the classroom?
- (3) Are self-corrections more effective for acquisition than corrections by the teacher?
- (4) What are the cognitive and affective effects of non-interruptive and interruptive treatments on the learner during communication practices?
- (5) How do experienced teachers differentiate the use of error treatment options according to the kind of practice, and how do they compare with novice teachers.
- (6) What is the difference between native and non-native teachers' error treatment?
- (7) What are the most effective corrective treatments for different linguistic areas (e. g. pronunciation, grammar, and lexical errors)?

Note

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Appendix

Descriptions of Error Treatment Types

	Type	Description	Example
1	Ignore	The teacher(T) either ignores the student's (S) erroneous responses on purpose or just lets them go without notice. T may or may not know the occurrence of an error.	S:I asked Miss Kimura to shake hand with Tanaka. T:はい、Thank you very much.
2	Acceptance of Errors	T accepts S's response with the accompaniment of accepting behavior, verbal or non-verbal. T may go on to correct the error.	T:What's the meaning of this "translate"? S:「通訳する」 T: O.K.通訳する。又は翻訳する。
3	Giving Correct Answers (Implicit)	Without breaking the flow of communication T responds to S's utterance at the meaning level. However, T implicitly provides a correct form.	S:A-kun likes nurse. T:Oh, A-kun likes nurses.
4	Giving Correct Answers (Explicit)	T gives the correct answer explicitly. T provides the whole sentence.	S:It's book. T:It's a book.
5	Giving Part of Correct Answers	T gives the correct answer explicitly. T provides part of the correct sentence.	S:I watch TV at six thirteen. T:Thirty.
6	Different Media	T tries to correct S's utterance by using non-verbal media such as pointing to a written word on the board or a picture.	S:その若い男の人は...T:(板書を指して)これこれ。先にここを訳して。
7	Answers by Another Student	Another S jumps in to correct Ss' error before T corrects it.	T:(訳させるつもりで)「いつも」 S1:also. S2:えっ、alwaysだよ。
8	Giving Information	T gives an explanation on a particular point of a language item which he judges to be a stumbling block. T subsequently gives the correct answer.	(3単現の疑問文の練習で) T:likeは、元の形に戻っているね。いい?もう一回。Does Nobita like dogs?
9	Giving Indirect Answers	T gives hints to have Ss try to find the answer themselves. T does not provide the correct answer.	S:Yes, I... T:彼女はできますかって聞いているんだから。はい、みんなで。 S:Yes, she can.
10	Presents Alternatives	T gives alternatives to lead an S to a correct answer.	S:It's eleven fifty. T:Fifty ですか。fifteen ですか。 S:Fifteen.
11	Repetition of Questions	T repeats the same question to give S another chance to figure out the answer.	T:Does Ken get up at seven thirty? S:Yes. T:Does Ken get up at seven thirty? S:No.
12	Repetition with Rising Intonation	Without providing the correct model T repeats S's wrong response partly or wholly, with rising intonation to let S know about the fact, location, and nature of the error.	S:No, she doesn't. T:No, she...(rising intonation). Please say again. S:No, she isn't.
13	Repeats with NO	T denies S's answer repeating the S's response.	S:Does Nobita likes dogs? T:likes じゃないね。
14	Again?,	T asks S to repeat his or her answer.	S:Where do you buy egg? T:ん? S:あつ、eggs.
15	No	T simply denies S's answer.	S:I can..play skate. T:No. I can skate.
16	Transfer	T abandons the interaction with S and transfer the task to another S.	T:Draw. A君。この意味は? S:引く T:そういう意味もあるけど、ここの本文ではどういう意味だったっけ。 分かんないかな。じゃBさん。
17	Others	All the other unclassifiable treatments.	