

A Study on Error Treatment in Teaching EFL in Senior Schools

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Abstract: This paper made a study of the categories of errors English learners made in senior schools, corrective feedback employed by teachers, learners' uptake and repair, and showed the correlation between error type and corrective feedback techniques, the relationship of teachers' choice of feedback types and learners' uptake and uptake with repair. Moreover, the present study indicated that the distinctive difference existed between the two different proficient learner groups.

1. Introduction

The most obvious approach to study the foreign language is to study the speech and writing of language learners because production data are publicly observable and are presumably reflective of a learner's underlying competence. And studying learners' speech and writing is largely to examine the errors of learners. Therefore, the focus in the study will be on the errors in learner's interlanguage systems.

2. Key terms in the paper

In this paper, there are some technical terms that are essential for understanding the patterns of error treatment. Therefore, the following section will expound some technical terms of error treatment.

2.1 Error

An error is a deviation from the norm of standardized English usage both in grammaticality and in acceptability which occurs in the sequence of a learner's oral or written production. It is distinguished from those hesitations, slips of the tongue, random ungrammaticalities, and other performance lapses in native speaker production as well as in foreign language output.

2.2 Uptake and Repair

Corrective feedback refers to any reaction of teachers that clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner's utterance (Chaudron, 1977). Uptake refers to different types of students' or learners' responses immediately following the feedback, including responses with repair of non-target items as well as utterances still in need of repair (Lyster & Ranta,

1997). Repair refers to the correct reformulation of an error occurring in learner's utterance.

2.3 Error treatment

Error treatment refers to the way in which learners' errors are treated or corrected. In this study, it specifically refers to the way teachers respond to learner utterances with errors and the methods used by teachers to correct the erroneous utterances, i.e. the feedback techniques teachers used to deal with the erroneous utterances.

3. Literature Review of error treatment

3.1 Error categories of Chinese learners of English in senior schools

In the present study, the author examined all the students' utterances with errors and coded them as phonological, grammatical, lexical, pragmatic errors, and use of L₁ (mother tongue). Those errors caused by carelessness (actually we label them as "lapses" or "slips") were excluded from the analysis.

3.2 Feedback types

The study collected and analyzed all the teachers' feedback used in EFL classrooms in Chinese senior schools, and then based on the error treatment model presented by Lyster and Panova (2002), coded them as recast, translation, explicit correction, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback/clue, elicitation, repetition, and nonverbal feedback/clue.

Recast is an implicit corrective feedback move that reformulate or expands an ill-formed, incomplete or inappropriate utterance in an inconspicuous way.

Translation can be seen as a feedback move when it follows a student's unsolicited use of the L1. Lyster and Ranta(1997) coded translations as recasts because of very few of these moves in their database. Translation is a response to a well-formed utterance in Chinese.

Explicit correction clearly gives signals to a student that what he/she said is incorrect and also provides the correct form. Unlike recast and translation, it clearly indicates that student's utterance was ill-formed.

Clarification request is to elicit reformulation or repetition from the students with respect to the ill-formed or inappropriate utterances. Phrases such as "I'm sorry." and "I don't understand." are typical of teacher's clarification request.

Metalinguistic feedback/clue is a feedback move that the teacher gives comments, information, or asks questions related to the well-formation of students' utterance, without explicitly providing correct answer.

Elicitation is a corrective technique in which the teacher directly elicits a reformulation from the student, by asking an open question such as "what's the word/phrase?" or "How do we say it in English?" or by pausing to let the student complete the teacher's utterance, or by asking the student to reformulate the ill-formed utterance.

Repetition refers to the teacher's repetition of the ill-formed part of students' utterance, usually with a change in intonation, stress to highlight the error.

Nonverbal feedback or clue refers to the feedback or clue given by the teacher to indicate that there is something wrong with students' utterance. It's coded in terms of kinetic mechanisms—gesture, tone of voice, and facial expressions. This clue is often conveyed by shaking head, frowning, shrugging shoulder or other facial expressions.

Among these categories of corrective feedback, clarification request, metalinguistic clue,

elicitation, repetition and nonverbal feedback are labeled as negotiation of form. They, along with explicit correction are considered as explicit feedback while recast and translation are considered as implicit feedback.

3.3 Learner's response to corrective feedback—Uptake and Repair

Uptake in the error treatment sequence refers to the student's reaction immediately following the teacher's feedback, including the reaction with repair (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). Uptake does not occur when feedback is followed by teacher-initiated topic continuation thus denying the learner an opportunity to respond to teacher's feedback. It also does not occur when feedback is followed by learner-initiated topic continuation which prevents feedback being verbally acknowledged and noticed, if noticing is measured by the presence of learner's responses.

Repair can occur in the following forms: student's self-repair of an error, peer-repair of an error, and student's repetition or incorporation of teacher's reformulation. Self-repair occurs when the teacher's feedback, not including correct form, prompts the learner who commits the error to self-correct, whereas peer-repair is provided by a student different from the one who initially committed the error.

Self- and peer-repair follow elicitive types of corrective feedback such as repetition, clarification request, metalinguistic clue, elicitation and nonverbal clue. Repetition and incorporation usually follow recast, explicit correction, and translation, because the target form provided by these feedback types can be repeated or incorporated in a longer utterance.

Needs-repair occurs when the teacher gives feedback without the target form, the student has to respond to the teacher's feedback move in some way but the uptake has not resulted in the correct reformulation, thus allowing for error treatment sequence to go beyond the third turn. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), there are six subcategories of needs-repair: acknowledgment (such as "yes" or "no" in response to the teacher's feedback), same error, different error, hesitation, partial repair, and off-target. The needs-repair can lead to additional feedback. If there is no uptake following the teacher's feedback move (i.e. neither "repair" nor "needs-repair"), then either the teacher or student initiates topic continuation.

4. Experimental study

4.1 Subjects

This study was conducted over half a semester in senior middle schools. The subjects were all young low intermediate learners of English as foreign language. They were from two kinds of classes who were instructed by the same teacher. One kind were ordinary classes, with around 60 students each class. The other were the so-called superior classes, with 50 students each class, who were selected from the whole grade according to their marks in the entrance examination, and these students were considered as the high proficiency learners.

4.2 Instrument and Procedures

The research was conducted in an EFL context. In every 45-minute English class, the researchers examined both the teachers and students' attitude toward language errors, and carefully studied their ways of dealing with these errors.

In the observational classrooms, the researchers made video recordings of the interactions in the classrooms for subsequent analysis by using the video camera which was positioned in each classroom in such a way as to capture both the teacher's and the students' utterances and

interactions. The recordings were transcribed by the researchers and it constituted the present research database which contained any kind of instruction such as dialogue, reading, grammar and writing. The researchers then coded and analyzed the database, All the student utterances with errors were first classified to five categories (discussed in the previous section), and then the researchers discerned the types of the teacher's corrective feedback. Finally, the researchers examined the consequences of the teacher's feedback, i.e. whether or not the teacher's reaction to the student utterance with error led to students' uptake with repair or needs-repair. In this study, each unit of analysis contains teacher and student turns in the following order: learner's utterance with error—teacher's feedback—learner's uptake, with either repair of the error or needs-repair. This order reflected what usually happened when a teacher responded to an utterance with errors and when the student attempted to respond to the teacher's feedback move.

Apart from these observational results, the author made further psychological investigation on the views of the teachers and 10 students in both classes. Based on the interview with the teachers and students, the author made a little modification and improvement of this research. Thus the combination of the observational results and the interview laid a foundation for the following discussion.

4.3 Discussion

The high rate of the corrective feedback used by Chinese teachers indicates that teachers in Chinese senior schools value the accuracy of learner utterances, and they still take negative attitude toward learners' language errors. Therefore, they show a low tolerance for learner's errors and usually give response to most of learners' errors to correct them immediately after they occur. These teachers highlight the function of corrective feedback because they believe teacher's feedback does provide students with more opportunities to modify or reprocess their output, and these modified or reprocessed output can be considered to represent the development of learner's interlanguage and is necessary for foreign language mastery.

The high frequency distribution of grammatical, lexical and phonological errors reflects the weak point of the Chinese learners of EFL. It may indicate that learners of primary and junior schools, in the current popular communicative teaching approach, could not properly deal with the relationship between fluency and accuracy. It may also account for teachers' emphasis on the corrective feedback in teaching English as foreign language in Chinese senior schools.

The analysis of the frequency distribution of corrective feedback shows that explicit correction and elicitation are the two most frequently used feedback techniques. Explicit correction and elicitation are both explicit feedback, and evidence shows that, for corrective feedback to be effective, relatively explicit signals were employed because feedback accompanied by linguist signals or including a reduction of learner utterance with added stress for emphasis allow learners' attention to be drawn to their errors. After the explicit feedback, learners may readily and easily notice the target-nontarget mismatches in the interactional input and finally internalize or facilitate self- or peer-repair.

In the research, explicit correction was more frequently used than other feedback moves in low proficient learners while elicitation was more frequently used in high proficient learners. This maybe reflects the distinctive preferred feedback techniques between high and low proficient learners. It can be accounted for by the reason that high proficient learners occupy richer and more complex internalized target language and therefore, they are easy to be elicited to produce reformulation. In contrast, low proficient learners may more depend on the reformulation provided by teachers.

The reason that recast was not the favorite feedback technique in Chinese EFL classrooms in

senior schools is, according to the author, that recast can serve functions of either a positive or negative nature, so learners are unlikely to notice the majority of recasts as negative evidence as the result of its implicit and ambiguous properties. Thus, it is not an effective way to respond to learners' utterances with errors.

As for translation, though it's still popular in some Chinese EFL classrooms as a teaching approach, it is not widely used as a feedback technique to treat learners' errors. In this study, it's only used to respond to the utterances in learners' use of L1. The aim of using translation was to provide additional language input to students. Repetition is used not very often in this study.

Further analysis of the data led to some insight into the relationship between frequency distribution of feedback types across error types. The high rate of teacher's feedback to lexical errors and phonological errors indicates that, nowadays, senior school teachers has begun to pay more attention to content words (involving reading and meaning) and pronunciation (involving oral ability and meaning) as they are essential to the communication and that teachers are making themselves become used to the communicative approach in teaching EFL. However, the 86.4% of the feedback to grammatical errors indicates that they can't break away from the traditional grammar-centered teaching approach all of a sudden. They still emphasize the accuracy. With respect to the pragmatic errors, the low rate of feedback demonstrates that temporarily the teacher is tolerant for these utterances that don't impede the development of learner's target language system. On the other hand, it may be considered as a weak point because it reflects the deficiency in teaching of the customs, culture and relevant backgrounds of the learned language in senior schools.

With respect to the correlation between error types and feedback types, the teacher chose different feedback techniques for different error types. For grammatical errors, because of its rich and complex rules, elicitation becomes teachers' preferred technique, which requires more attention to the analysis of the target and nontarget mismatches which put learner to retrieve target language system, and then produce modified output. Therefore elicitation is more effective than just providing learners with correct form; for lexical errors, because of its varied meaning and complex word class, they may be beyond learners' vocabulary knowledge, so explicit correction can not only explicitly point out the position and cause of the errors but also provide target language to enlarge the learners' vocabulary. For phonological errors, they require models for learners' imitation or repetition rather than negotiation in terms of its property (i.e. mechanically imitate and practice).

A comparison of the two proficiency groups revealed that low proficient learners actually repaired very few of the errors immediately after the teacher's feedback though their uptake may not necessarily be very low, while the rate of repair in high proficiency group was exceptionally high. Obviously, the rate of learners' uptake and repair largely depends on their proficiency level. The learners' proficiency level affects teachers' choice of feedback types, and the opportunities for learners' uptake. Of the eight types of feedback, clarification request, elicitation and metalinguistic clue result in higher rate of learners' uptake and repair, which can be viewed as the more effective feedback techniques.

5. Conclusion

In this study, although most of the high proficient learners have high English level, some of them may be weak in English because the group was chosen according to their total scores in the entrance examination, so the subjects in this study may have some limitations. In order to obtain more exact results, the systematic studies need to be further conducted. Many problems, which remain unclear, such as the relationship between feedback types and the learners' achievements in language learning, the correlation between the feedback choice and the learners' age difference (e.g. the different grades), the correlation between teacher's choice of feedback and teacher's personality, proficiency

level, linguistic point of view and so on, which are still left to be examined by later researches.

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