

Attitudes towards Error Correction, Corrective Moves and Their Effects in College English Classrooms in China

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Abstract

This study explored the relationships among teachers' and students' attitudes toward error correction, teachers' actual corrective moves and their effects in college English classrooms in China. The major findings are as follows. Firstly, comparatively speaking, teachers are more negative toward errors and error correction than students. Secondly, Teachers and students have different views of how errors should be corrected. Finally, negotiation of form, favored by both teachers and students, has the best effects among all error correction types; explicit correction, welcomed by students but disliked by teachers, is less effective than negotiation of form but more effective than recast, which is favored by teachers but distasted by students.

Key words: Attitude; Error Correction; Effect; College English Classroom

1. Introduction

There are two opposing views of how students' errors should be treated in the EFL classroom. One is that errors are inappropriate language forms due to lack of language competence, so they are undesirable. As Brook (1960: 58) said, "like sins, errors should be avoided and their impact should be eliminated". Another view is that errors can show the psychological process of language learning, so they are not completely insignificant (Ellis 2000: 47). As Chastain (1971: 249) said, "it's more important to create an atmosphere for students to speak than requiring them not to make errors when speaking". With the deepening of our understanding of learner errors, a common view has gradually been formed: errors are inevitable in the process of language learning, and they are useful and even necessary under certain circumstances (Shi and Liu 2008: 29). Although errors are inevitable in the process of language acquisition, it is still a double-edge sword for language learning. Hu (2002) pointed out, "from a developmental perspective, a learner, whose language is accurate but not fluent, will gradually become fluent if given more opportunities to communicate with English speakers. However, a learner, whose language seems to be fluent but is full of errors, is difficult to become a competent English speaker, because he/she has formed a bad habit of mistaking errors for correct forms and has fossilized some wrong expressions." Based on the above understanding, scholars and language teachers have paid much attention to errors and have studied them from different perspectives.

2. Relevant Studies

The results of investigations on attitude toward errors are consistent with the above understanding. Chenoweth et al. (1983: 79) found that ESL students generally hold a positive attitude toward errors, and they even hope teachers correct more of their errors. Qiu (1997: 44) also found that Chinese EFL learners

hope that teachers correct their errors completely instead of selectively.

What is the effect of error correction on learner's language acquisition? This question has also attracted much attention. Carroll and Swain (1993) and Dekeyser (1993) examined the effect of error correction on learner's language acquisition, resulting in different conclusions. Lyster (2000) discerned the following types of error correction: Explicit Correction: teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student has said was incorrect; Recast: teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of student's utterance; Negotiation of Form, which includes elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetition.

Recently, recast and its influence on learner's language development have been hotly studied. Han (2002) and Leeman (2003) found that recast significantly facilitates learner's language learning performance. Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Lyster (2000) found that recast is not very effective in eliciting learner's self repair. Zhao and Wang (2016) explored the impact of recasts on the production of English questions and found that recasts bring more benefit to low-level and intermediate-level learners than to the high-level group. Uptake (i.e., students' immediate response toward teachers' error correction) is also hotly studied in recent years. Ellis (2001) found that the form of teacher-student interaction affects the quantity and quality of learner uptake. Panova and Lyster (2002) found that teachers obviously favor such error correction types as recast and translation, etc., but the resulting student uptake and repair rates are very low. Wei (2015) found that recast doesn't lead to students' high uptake and repair rates.

The above studies explored error correction in foreign language teaching from different perspectives. However, so far, no empirical research has been conducted on the relations among teachers' attitude, learners' attitude, teachers' actual corrective moves and their effects in College English Classrooms in China. The present study is a preliminary attempt in this regard.

This study tries to find answers to the following questions: 1). What are the similarities and differences of teachers' and students' attitudes toward errors and error correction in College English classroom teaching? 2). What are the similarities and differences of teachers' attitudes toward error correction and their real error correction moves? 3). What is the result when teachers' and students have different attitudes toward error correction?

3. Research Description

3.1 Participants

Six English teachers and 240 students at Nanjing Normal University and Nanjing Xiaozhuang University participated in the research. Nanjing Normal University is a key (211 Project) university, while Nanjing Xiaozhuang University is not. The six English teachers are non-native English speakers but all have over three years' teaching experience. The students are all freshmen and sophomores. The classes range from 35 to 55 students.

3.2 Data Collection

Firstly, the researcher administered the questionnaire survey on the students and teachers. Then, the researcher observed and audio-recorded 18 classes of the six teachers (three classes each teacher),

resulting in 15.2 hours of audio-recordings. The researcher then interviewed each teacher immediately after their classes. Finally, the researcher transcribed the audio-recordings into written documents for further analysis.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

This study employs the conceptual framework the author used in his previous study of teacher correction and learner uptake in Chinese junior middle school English classrooms (Shi 2005). According to the framework, there are three major types of learner errors: grammar, pronunciation, and lexical; three major types of error correction: explicit correction, recast, and negotiation of form; two major types of uptake: repair and needs-repair. Repair is further divided into: repetition, incorporation, self-repair and peer-repair, while needs-repair is composed of acknowledgement, different error, same error, hesitation, off-target, and partial repair.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Comparison of Teachers' and Students' attitudes towards Errors and Error Correction

Hendrickson (1978) attempts to find out the answers of the five questions:

1. Should students' errors be corrected?
2. When to correct students' errors?
3. What students' errors should be corrected?
4. How to correct students' errors?
5. Who should correct students' errors?

The questionnaire used in this study to investigate teachers' and students' attitudes toward error correction is based on the above questions. Because the teachers either correct students' errors immediately or don't correct at all, the questionnaire does not involve "Question 2: When to correct students' errors?", but includes a part of "general understandings of errors". The questionnaire is composed of 19 close-ended (multiple choice) questions and one open-ended question. The multiple choice questions use the five-response Likert scale (1-5), indicating totally agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and totally disagree (1). The data were analyzed with SPSS22, displaying statistics such as the Mean (hereinafter referred to as M) and the Standard Deviation (hereinafter referred to as S. D.)

Part One (Questions 1-4) involves the general understandings of errors. The statistical results show that: teachers and students generally think that errors are not terrible; they are even helpful for language acquisition. Part Two (Questions 5-7) investigates the question "Should students' errors be corrected?" The findings indicate that teachers and students generally think that errors should be corrected. There is some difference in the answers to Question 7 "Teachers' constant correction of students' errors will discourage students' endeavor to use English". The M of the teachers is 4.3 and that of the students is 2.9. The S. D. of the teachers is 0.62 and that of the students is 0.88. This shows that compared to teachers, the students generally hold a more positive attitude toward error correction.

Part Three (Questions 8-10) is about "What students' errors should be corrected?" The results show that: teachers and students all think that grammar, lexical and pronunciation errors should be corrected. Pronunciation errors should be given top priority (Teachers' M is 4.33; Students' M is 4.3), followed by

grammar errors (Teachers' M is 3.67; Students' M is 4.03) and finally lexical errors (Teachers' M is 3.67; Students' M is 3.98)

Part Four (Questions 11-13) deals with "Who should correct students' errors?" The statistical results indicate that: teachers and students generally think that grammar and lexical errors should be corrected by teachers. 70% of students and 53% of teachers think that lexical errors should be corrected by the students themselves. It is worth noting that most students don't like peer correction. The possible reason may be that due to certain affective features, the students would like to study independently. Thus, certain protection mechanism is developed among the students and peer correction tends to be ineffective (Qiu 1997:44).

Part Five (Questions 14-19) involves "How to correct students' errors?" The result of Question 14 (Explicit Correction) is as follows: Teachers: M=2.63, S. D. =0.65; Students: M=4.16, S. D. =0.8. This shows that the teachers generally disapprove this type of error correct, while the students generally hope that their teachers correct their errors explicitly. The result of Question 15 (Recast) is as follows: Teachers: M=4.0, S. D. =0.85; Students: M=2.65, S. D. =0.98. This shows that the teachers generally approve recast as a type of error correction, while the students generally don't like the teachers recast their errors. Questions 16, 17, 18, 19 are about negotiation of form, the teachers' M is 3.53 while the students' M is 3.62, showing that both teachers and students generally identify with this type of error correction. The above statistics show that the teachers like recast most, followed by negotiation of form, but don't like explicit correction. In comparison, the students like explicit correction most, followed by negotiation of form, but don't like recast.

4.2 Relations among Teachers' Attitude, Corrective Moves and their Effects

This section mainly involves Part Three and Part Five in the questionnaire. Statistics in Section 4.1 show that teachers think that the errors they should correct most are pronunciation errors, followed by grammar errors, and finally lexical errors. This does not completely accord with their actual corrective moves. In classroom teaching, the correction rates of the three types of errors are: lexical errors: 91%; pronunciation errors: 84%; grammar errors 76%. The above comparison shows that: although the teachers think that they should give top priority to pronunciation errors, in actual teaching, they correct lexical errors with the highest rate. When asked about the reason for the difference, some teachers said in the interviews after class that, although they know pronunciation errors should be corrected whenever possible, due to the tight schedule and limited time in class, and the time-consuming repeating and rereading by the students after the correction, in many situations, pronunciation errors cannot be unhurriedly corrected. However, comparatively speaking, lexical errors can be conveniently corrected without affecting the teaching schedule. The teachers can provide the suitable words directly and proceed with the teaching, without detailed explanation like when correcting grammar errors, and without requiring the students to repeat and reread the words like when correcting pronunciation errors. Lou et al. (2005: 271) also found that due to the influence of a variety of factors, there is a disconnect between (college) English teachers' belief and actual classroom teaching.

The repair rates of the three types of errors after correction are as follows: pronunciation errors: 78%, lexical errors: 62%, and grammar errors: 43%. The above statistics show that pronunciation errors, which the teachers think should be corrected whenever possible, do not have the highest correction rate in actual

teaching, but have the highest repair rate. Lexical errors, with the highest correction rate in actual teaching, have a much lower repair rate than that of pronunciation errors. The possible reason for the highest repair rate of pronunciation errors may be: 1) as a lingua franca of today’s world, the importance of English has been commonly recognized by the people. A good mastery of English has even become a necessary part of people’s life and work. English learners are required to not only be good at writing, but also be able to speak English correctly and fluently. In order to improve oral English, learners must correct their pronunciation errors; 2) Listening takes a large proportion in all the influential English tests such as IELTS, BEC, TOEFL, GRE, etc. English learners are aware that if they cannot master the standard pronunciation, it will be very difficult for them to improve their listening competence and performance (Qiu 1997: 45).

The statistics of Part Five (How to correct students’ errors?) show that the teachers’ think that their favorite error correction type is recast, followed by negotiation of form, but they don’t like explicit correction. This is consistent with their actual error correction in class. Table 1 shows the numbers of correction of the three types of errors in the classroom: Generally speaking, recast is the most frequently used (106 times, 49%), followed by negotiation of form (87 times, 40%), while explicit correction is the least frequently used (22 times, 11%).

Table 1 Three types of error correction in relation to three types of errors

	Grammar Error	Lexical Error	Pronunciation Error
Recast 106 (49%)	60 (5 6 %)	24 (3 9 %)	22 (4 8 %)
Negotiation of form 87 (40%)	43 (3 9 %)	29 (4 8 %)	15 (3 2 %)
Explicit Correction 22 (11%)	5 (5 %)	8 (1 3 %)	9 (2 0 %)

We conducted ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) on the differences between different types of errors and error corrections and their mutual influence. Because the number of explicit correction is very small, it was excluded in the analysis. The results indicate: there is significant difference between the two types of error correction: $\chi^2 (1, 193) = 265.68, p < .001$; there is also significant difference between the three types of errors: $\chi^2 (2, 193) = 388.58, p < .001$. The mutual influence of error correction types and error types is not significant: $\chi^2 (3, 193) = 2.75, p = .252$. (also See Shi and Liu 2008: 31)

4.3 The Effects of Error Corrections Favored by Teachers and Students

This section mainly involves Part Five (How should errors be corrected?) As indicated above, the teachers and students mainly differ in their attitudes toward explicit correction and recast. The teachers generally have negative attitude toward explicit correction, while the students generally hope their teachers correct their errors explicitly. The attitudes toward recast are just the opposite. The teachers generally favor this type of error correction, while the students generally don’t want teachers to recast their errors. As for negotiation of form, teachers and students have the same attitude; they generally accept this type of error correction.

Then, what are the effects of the three types of error correction? Table 2 shows the uptake (including repair and needs-repair) rates of the three types of error correction.

Table 2 Numbers and percentages of uptakes and non-uptakes

Correction Type	Attitude		Correction Effect		
	Teachers	Students	Repair	Needs-Repair	Non-Uptake
Explicit Correction (22)	—	+	12(55%)	3(14%)	7(31%)
Recast (106)	+	—	37(35%)	22(21%)	47(44%)
Negotiation of form (87)	+	+	71(82%)	15(17%)	1(1%)

Note: In the “Attitude” column, ‘+’ indicates positive attitude, ‘—’ indicates negative attitude

Table 2 shows that recast, which is the most popular among the teachers but the most disfavored by the students, has the lowest uptake and repair rates (56% and 35%, respectively). On the contrary, explicit correction, which is the most popular among the students but the most disfavored by the teachers, has much higher uptake and repair rates (69% and 55%, respectively). While, negotiation of form, approved by both teachers and students, has the highest uptake and repair rates (99% and 82%, respectively).

5. Discussion

The reasons for the lowest uptake (including repair) rate of recast are as follows: First, the degree of explicitness of recast is not high. When the teachers recast the students’ errors, they usually implicitly correct the whole or parts of the students’ erroneous utterances, which is similar in form to non-corrective repetitions they use after students’ correct utterances. Recast shares with non-corrective repetitions some common conversational functions, and thus, its original corrective function is, to some degree, ignored by the students. Secondly, the corrective potential of recast is further weakened by all kinds of approving discourses used by teachers to respond to students’ utterances (correct or not) (Lyster 2000: 187-188) . Zhu et al. (2005: 176) also found that the students’ perception of the explicitness of the feedback significantly influences the rates of error recognition and correction. Thirdly, recast, as a type error correction, is ambiguous. In classroom teaching, teachers frequently use recast to correct students’ errors. Its inherent implicitness may lead to ambiguity. Chaudron (1988) considered this ambiguity one of the most serious problems of corrective feedback: teachers’ feedback on students’ utterances has several functions, which can be both positive and corrective (e.g., approval, appreciation, and correction, etc.). This has brought about a problem on the part of the students: error correction may be ignored or is just regarded as a type of feedback. Especially, when the teachers recast students’ grammar or lexical errors, the students may regard the recast as other possible forms of feedback (Shi 2005: 247) . Finally, the students generally don’t like their teachers recast their errors. Therefore, they are likely to raise their affective filter against teachers’ recast (input). In this case, although they can understand what the teachers say, they would not intake the language point readily (Krashen 1982:31) .

The uptake rate of explicit correction is higher than that of recast, which is understandable. First, explicit correction doesn’t have the major weaknesses of recast, i.e., implicitness and ambiguity. Explicit correction means that teachers explicitly show that the students’ utterances are wrong and provide the correct forms. Its corrective function is self-evident and is impossible to be confused with any non-corrective feedback, so it does not have ambiguity. As was pointed out by Lyster (2000: 191), explicit correction has the highest explicitness among the three types of error correction: explicit correction, negotiation of form and recast. Secondly, because the students like explicit correction most, so they tend to accept it affectively and more cooperatively. Finally, because teachers seldom use this type of

error correction, so it tends to be more salient. When the students have attention fatigue towards the implicit and ambiguous recast, teachers' explicit correction is easy to be positively responded by the students.

Negotiation of form, which is favored by both the teachers and students, has the highest uptake and repair rates. The reasons are as follows: negotiation of form can provide the students opportunities to establish some important form-function associations in the target language, without interrupting the communication. In other words, when the teachers use negotiation of form to correct errors, they, on the one hand, give the "discourse right" to the students, and on the other hand, prompt the students to retrieve their own language reserves, which renders negotiation of form bi-directional. Thus, negotiation of form benefits second language acquisition at least in the following two aspects: 1) providing students opportunities to program their internalized declarative knowledge of the target language; 2) allowing the students to reanalyze and repair their language output which does not conform to the target language when they test their new hypothesis about the target language. This will make the students pay attention to the language form in the communicative interaction (Shi and Liu 2008: 32).

6. Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research findings. Firstly, comparatively speaking, the students are more positive toward errors and error correction than the teachers. They think that even if they make errors frequently, they won't lose confidence in learning, and even if the teachers correct their errors repeatedly, this won't discourage them from using English. The teachers' view is just the opposite. Secondly, teachers and students have different views of how errors should be corrected. The teachers generally don't like explicit correction, while the students generally hope their teachers correct their errors explicitly. The teachers generally favor recast, which, however, is disliked by the students. This disagreement, to some extent, influences the success of teaching. Finally, the effect of error correction shows such a trend: the error correction type favored by both the teachers and the students (negotiation of form) is the most effective (having the highest uptake and repair rates); the error correction type liked by the students but disliked by the teachers (explicit correction) has the median effect; the error correction type approved by the teachers but disapproved by the students (recast) is the least effective.

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