Verbal Error Correction in ESL Conversation Classes

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Abstract

This paper primarily focuses on two ideas pertaining to error correction in ESL conversation classes. They are as follows:

1. The timing of corrections made by the teacher, if they are to be made
2. Correction technique preferences of students who study English at Nagasaki Foreign Language College. (FLC)

Introduction

The first section of this paper discusses the basic concepts of what differentiates an 'error' from a 'mistake', as well as facts and opinions put forward by linguistic and pedagogical experts in relation to the timing or requirement of corrections/feedback. Secondly, a summarization of how an in-class error correction survey was compiled and then completed by the aforementioned students. In the third section, data gathered by means of the in-class student survey will be interpreted, displayed and analysed. Finally, in conclusion, a brief statement will be made in regards to the results of the survey in comparison to what the experts in this field suggest.

Discussion

Error correction in ESL Conversation classes is a topic that appears to have caused division amongst linguistic experts and educators alike. Research on error correction methodology is not at all conclusive. References to the topic often either take the view of little correction or no correction at all. For example, Abbott (1981) says "If we take effective communication in English as our aim, then, are we to accept utterances which are incorrect? The answer of course is No." He then goes on to state that, "On the other hand mistakes are inevitable: they occur and recur, sometimes with a frequency that we find alarming. Does this mean that we are to spend all our time pouncing on mistakes? Again, the answer must be No." If we view this matter from the viewpoint of Natural Approach advocates such as Krashen & Terrell, "Our view is that overt error correction of speech even in the best circumstances is likely to have a negative effect on the students' willingness to try to express themselves." (1988) Van Els & Bongaerts (1984) suggest, "There should, of course, also be a place in teaching for feedback on what was done correctly, or rather that something was done correctly." Perhaps this suggestion carries similar importance to the actual correction of errors. After all, if we are looking at communication as our goal, then why should we spend so much time focusing on things that detract from the

act itself? Brooks (1964, in Van Els & Bongaerts, 1984), reportedly an Audiolingual extremist, has been quoted as saying the following: "Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected." Other authors such as Newmark & Reibel (1968) assume that in learning environments that replicate L1 processes, "Learners will learn from their own errors without any help from the outside." In contrast to this opinion, "Adults generally like to be corrected in their attempts to use L2." (Hendrickson, 1980) This statement is justifiable, as through surveying Nagasaki FLC students (NCFL), I have discovered that this point came across in an almost mantra like form from most respondents. Nonetheless, Hendrickson (1978) states, "An excessive concern with error avoidance is counter-productive to learning a foreign language." It could be argued that yes, errors must be corrected, but the educator would need to consider: the student's level, the error in the context of the conversation (does it impede meaning) and does the error relate to the objectives of the teaching programme in question. Hendrickson (1980) firmly believes that this last point is all too often overlooked. Widdowson (1990) perhaps reflects the sentiments of many with his analysis of the situation by noting that, "It has been suggested that learner errors can be seen as evidence of learner achievement. Does this mean that they should not be corrected under any circumstances? If there are circumstances where error correction is legitimate, what are they, and how does the teacher set about it without inhibiting learner development?"

It is also important to briefly discuss and make a few distinctions between an 'error' and a 'mistake'. [For the purpose of this paper, in particular, the survey given to students, all errors or mistakes have been blanketed under one category, "errors".] Brown (2000) states that a mistake is a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip", in that it is a failure to utilise a known system correctly. Brown also suggested that mistakes, when attention is called to them, can be self-corrected. The semantics of the two different phenomena were cast aside in the error correction survey, to reduce confusion or the possibility of misunderstanding by the students.

An error, on the other hand, can not be self-corrected. (James, 1998:83 in Brown, 2000). Brown (2000) also put forward that an error, a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner. The level of incomprehensible language or frequency of errors will dictate what course of action if any is required. Magnan (1979: 343, in Van Els & Bogaerts, 1984) says, of all errors, "There are two types which should be corrected: errors that impede the intelligibility of a message, and those errors that stigmatize the learner from the native speaker's perspective." "One of the problems with both types of errors is that it will be difficult to establish exactly when intelligibility is impeded, or the learner stigmatized." Van Els & Bongaerts (1984). In this text, discussion on the topic of errors leads to Burt & Kiparsky's (1975) proposal of 'local' and global' errors. Hendrickson's definition of a global error is: "A global error is a communicative error that causes a proficient speaker of a foreign language to either misinterpret an oral or written message or to consider the message incomprehensible with the textual content of the error." According to Hendrickson, such errors usually are due to "inadequate lexical knowledge, misuse of prepositions and pronouns, and seriously misspelled lexical items." Olsson (1972) confirmed through research that grammatical errors (local) are less detrimental to intelligibility than lexical errors (global). If having made a decision to correct an error is the first step in the process, the next step is to decide when to correct the utterance or dialogue.

There are many forms or techniques used for correcting verbal errors or mistakes, however this paper is only focusing on making a comparison between 'Immediate feedback' and 'Retrospective feedback' – referred

to hereafter as 'I.F.' and 'R.F'. As the terminology suggests, 'I.F.' is an immediate response to an error or mistake made by a student, whereas 'R.F.' indicates a pause of varying duration. Allwright (1975, in Brown, 2000) demonstrated that there are 7 basic options we have when we deal with an error. For the purpose of this paper we will look at the first two options he listed. Option 1 was to treat or ignore. Option 2 being whether to treat immediately ('I.R') or to delay ('R.F').

Numerous students stated that they benefit from receiving feedback. As the results will show, the majority of students surveyed believe that immediate feedback or correction of errors is beneficial to their acquisition of the English language. It has been argued that error correction can seriously affect motivation and confidence amongst students. This claim may be accurate; nonetheless, survey results from NCFL students demonstrate that this is not the case. On the contrary, more students felt that it was more damaging or less fulfilling to have no corrections made at all. After all, feedback is beneficial to others in the room, not just the student being corrected. The survey results also showed that students believe that hearing others being corrected is a useful tool for reflection on errors and retention of correct language usage.

One also has to consider that if an error is made, can a student really detect their problem? Do we subconsciously give clues or hints, be it through physical actions or changes in our tone of voice? If so, we may unknowingly be providing prompts which, by their nature, are more subtle and less damaging to the confidence of the speaker, as others in the class not directly involved in the conversation may not see the signals or notice the prompts. This may in turn prepare the speaker for any pending corrections, which may lead to disillusionment when they do not actually receive any.

Survey

A survey was given to approximately 50 NCFL students with the intention of discovering their thoughts on error correction. This survey arose from discussions with peers about theirs and their students' preferences, and which method of the two did they find the most effective. Through various readings and researching I was unable to find a definitive answer as to which method works best. The logical reason for the lack of an answer is the fact that there is no single effective method for correcting errors.

The main outcome of the survey was to present an unbiased set of questions about the methods that are currently being used by Japanese and non-Japanese English teachers at NCFL. Secondly, There were also questions about which method of error correction made them feel confident or uncomfortable, how did they view the importance of being corrected, as well as their opinion of the importance of hearing others being corrected. There were also some questions about the students' previous encounters with error correction methods in English conversation classes prior to them attending NCFL

Several of the questions were basically rewordings of the key questions in an attempt to filter the random entries from the legitimate entries, to confirm that the respondents understood the questions and to make sure there was some uniformity and continuity to their thoughts about error correction.

Of the 51 surveys returned, 18 were deemed unreliable sources as they had conflicting answers or patterns of answer selection that didn't correlate with their previous responses. The 33 acceptable surveys were found to be consistent and logical in their response to similar questions. There was also a higher level of understanding

of what was required. Assumption of the respondents understanding was gauged by counting the number of 'not sure' or 'I do not really know' responses. This method was administered to filter surveys that were borderline unacceptable due to mismatching responses, though this method iwas not foolproof.

The data that are presented on the following pages is purely a snapshot of my findings as to what NCFL students said they prefer and what they expect in regards to error correction in English conversation classes. This information is by no means a standard or norm in regards to the expectations of other students, it purely represents the opinions of those who were surveyed. Due to other factors such as English ability and proper understanding of the questions, the same answers may not be found if the same group were to be surveyed again.

Before the survey was handed out, as a class we discussed the meanings of the terminologies that were mentioned in the survey. 'I.R.' and 'R.F.' were the key words that they needed to understand. The two methods were demonstrated to them and I checked for comprehension once again before the survey commenced. In total, the survey comprised of 24 questions. Responses were recorded by choosing yes/no, circle the method used, circle the opinion closest to yours and which of the following opinions is appropriate for you. One section of the survey asked students to estimate the frequency of the technique used. For example, "Which method of error correction is currently being used by your non-Japanese English conversation teacher? Please circle the technique/techniques and write the approximate percentage of the frequency that this technique is used." This information is the most susceptible to error or misunderstanding, therefore the responses to this question acted as a filter enabling me to determine which surveys were correctly completed, or at least had the appearance of being correctly completed.

The questions that will be discussed in the results section are:

Q7; Please circle the answers regarding what type of error correction techniques were used by your non-Japanese English speaking conversation teacher (before NCFL).

Q8; Please circle the answers regarding what type of error correction techniques are used by your non-Japanese English speaking conversation teacher at NCFL.

Q9; Please circle the answers regarding what type of error correction techniques are used by your Japanese English speaking conversation teacher at NCFL.

Q12; Which of the following techniques do you prefer the most? 'I.F', 'R.F.' or no correction?

Q16; Has one of your classmates ever corrected your mistakes?

Q17; Do you ever correct your own mistakes?

Q18; Do you ever correct any of your classmates' mistakes?

Q19; In your opinion, which technique makes you feel confident or comfortable?

Q20; In your opinion, which technique makes you feel unconfident or uncomfortable? (Least preferred method)

Q21; Which answer do you think best suits your opinion of hearing another student being corrected?

Q24; Which answer do you think best suits your opinion of no feedback?

These questions were selected for use in the results section for the following reasons:

1. To distinguish pedagogical differences between non-Japanese and Japanese English teachers, if any such

differences exist.

2. To identify which methods are being used at NCFL.

3. To make a correlation between which method is preferred and how it makes the students feel.

4. To identify which method is possibly detrimental to motivation and other factors that influence language acquisition.

5. To establish whether or not students correct their own errors, or those of their peers.

6. To discover students' feelings towards no correction or feedback, and whether they view it as a positive or a negative.

　　All students that were surveyed were either 1st or 2nd year NCFL students. The ratio of male to female students surveyed is very low, approximately 1:25. It can be assumed that for the purpose of this survey, the ratio of male to female students should not affect the credibility or accuracy of the findings. The average age of the students surveyed was approximately 19 years old. Though the ages between many students do differ slightly, motivation and ability generally does not differ to any great extent. There are however, as you would expect, a low number of students are in the high percentile bracket, likewise for the low percentile bracket. Generally, the bulk of the students surveyed comprised of pre-intermediate leveled English speakers.

　　The results of the survey have been extrapolated in as careful a manner as possible, in an effort to try not to and show bias or preference towards any one particular method. The main questions that articulate the answers connected to the reasoning behind the survey will use graphs or pie charts for ease of interpretation.

Results

The graph below represents responses to questions 8 & 9.

Use of Correction Methods by Japanese and non-Japanese English Teachers
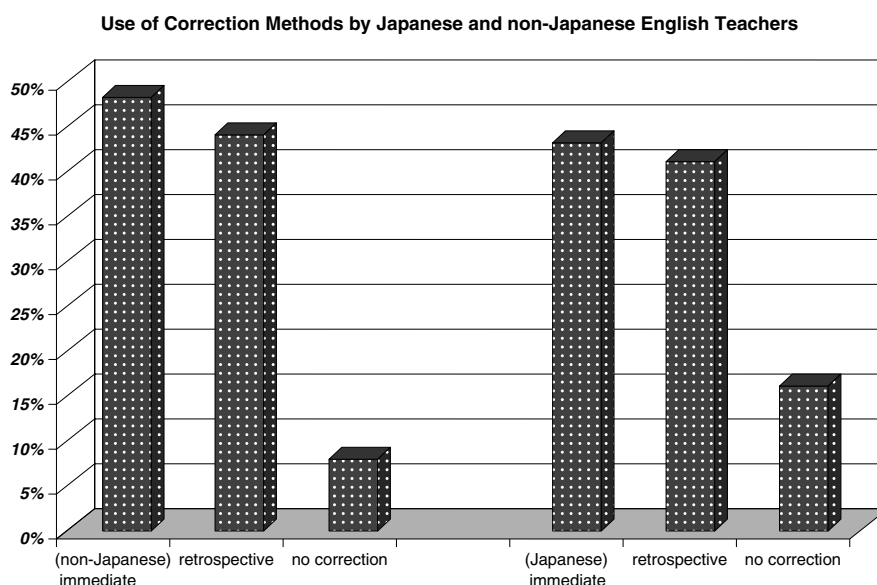
This information only represents English conversation classes at Nagasaki FLC. As illustrated by this graph, there is not a great difference between correction methods used by non-Japanese and Japanese teachers. One may assume that students might feel as comfortable receiving these corrections from either teacher. The question prior to this, Q 7, asked what types of correction were used by non-Japanese English teachers prior to NCFL. Immediate feedback was used 45% of the time, retrospective was used 34% of the time and no corrections were made 21% of the time. As this is a historical question, the accuracy of responses may not be a true indication of what actually happened. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that immediate correction appears to be the standard approach.
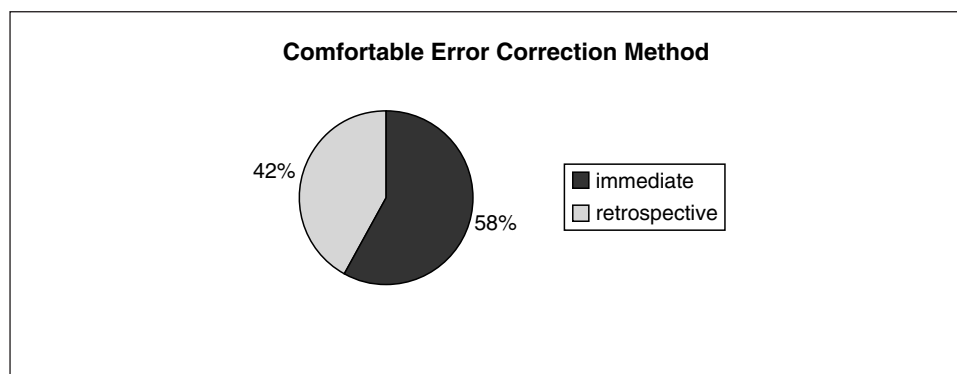
The diagram below reflects responses to question 12.

Prefered Correction Method
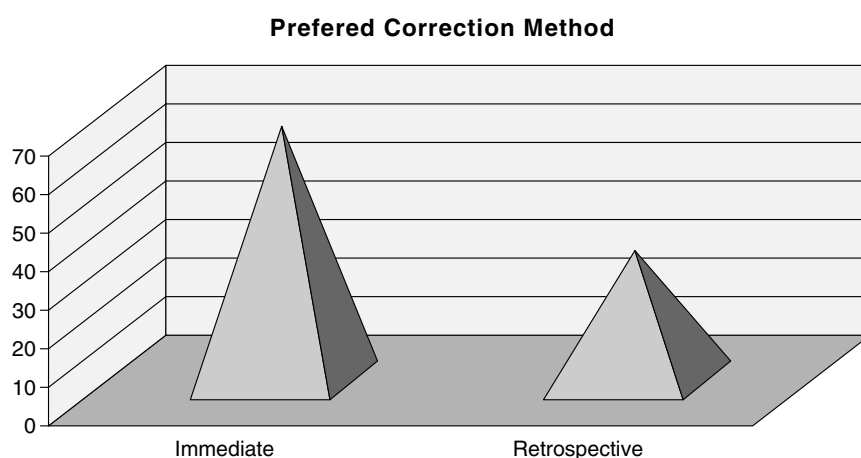
The diagram below reflects responses to questions 16, 17 & 18.

Correction Habits
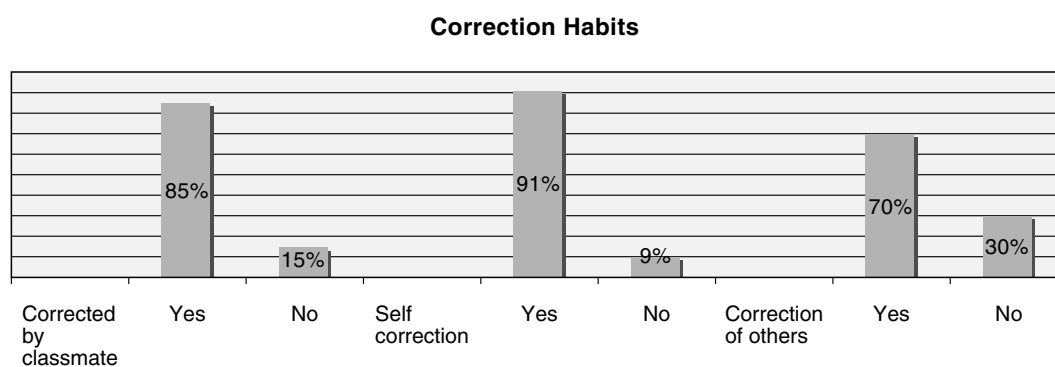
First of all, this information shows us that 85% of students have received correction from a classmate or peer. 91% of respondents said they have done or do correct their own mistakes. 70% of students said that they have corrected another student in class.

The diagram below reflects responses to question 19.

Comfortable Error Correction Method

42%

58%

■ immediate
☐ retrospective

The diagram for question 19 (above) does not show the results for no correction being the preference, as it was not selected as an answer by any of the respondents. This information can not be viewed as being relevant for every situation as it is only a general indication of what the students think.

The diagram below reflects responses to question 20.

Uncomfortable Error Correction Method

6%　12%

82%

■ immediate
☐ retrospective
▨ no correction
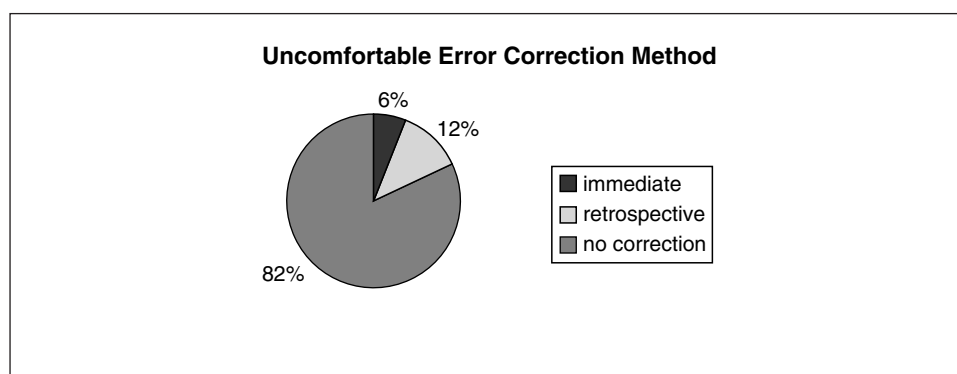
The results for Q 20 provide something to ponder, as earlier on in this paper it was stated by several of the key figures in language pedagogy and learning that no correction is often a preferred option to take, depending of course upon the nature or magnitude of the error. In one's own endeavours to promote conversation and exchange of information, no correction or feedback in reality may lead to students' feeling that they aren't receiving what they have come to expect. If motivation is taken into consideration, according to the students they'd feel better having received feedback. This contrasts with some opinions that interruption or regular correction can be detrimental to providing a good learning environment. Of course this snapshot does not go as far as to say how much correction is preferred, although one can safely assume that Krashen & Terrell's (1988) statement, "Our view is that overt error correction of speech even in the best circumstances is likely to have a negative effect on the students' willingness to try to express themselves" is an accurate summation about the process of error correction.

The diagram below reflects responses to question 21.

Students' Opinions on Hearing Others Being Corrected
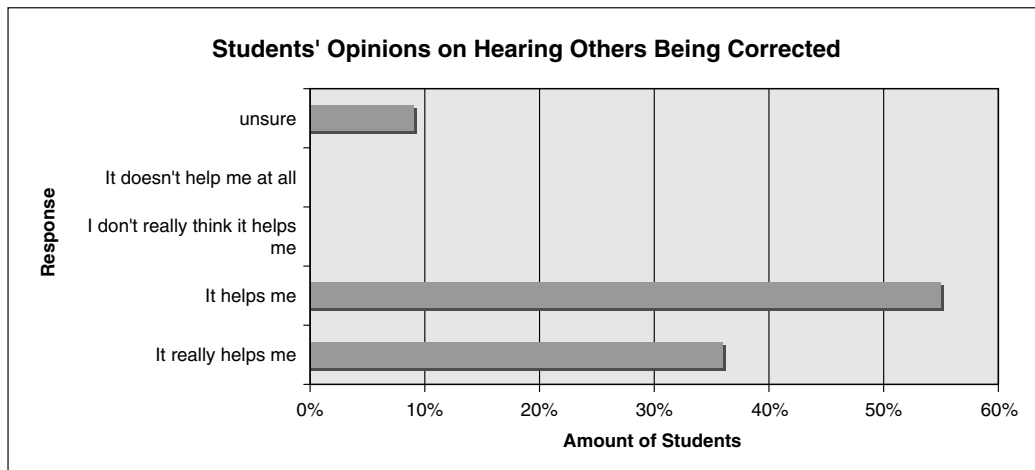
This data suggests that 55% of students surveyed believe that hearing another being corrected helps improve their English. 36% said that it really helps them, whereas only 9% said that they were unsure of the benefits of hearing another being corrected. Since there is no way of telling exactly how the students find it helpful, we can only assume that there are numerous benefits of hearing corrections being made, especially in relation to having the opportunity to hear a correct utterance in a situation where an incorrect utterance was offered.

The diagram below reflects responses to question 24.

Attitudes Towards No Correction
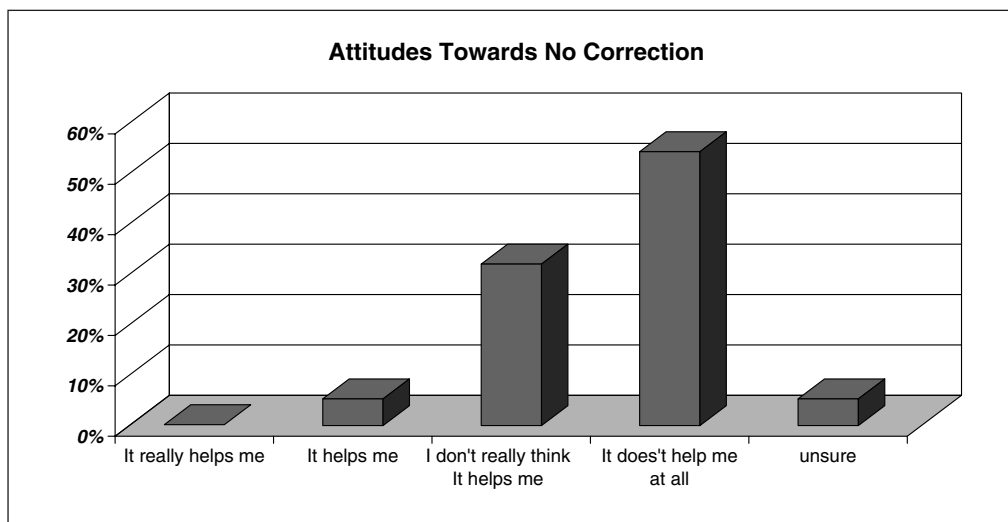
The above information tells us that 55% of respondents believe receiving no correction does not help them at all. 33% said that they do not think it helps them, whilst only 6% stated that it helps them. The remaining 6% said that they are unsure.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the preceding data, it can be said that students generally prefer to be corrected when they make a mistake or an error. The trend appears to favour the use of 'I.F.', however this method still possibly

has detrimental effects on confidence and motivation. On the other hand, as previously demonstrated, students also have negative feelings towards receiving no feedback. This fact may ring true although it is debatable as to whether or not these findings are applicable to other students. In conclusion, error correction is a necessary tool to be used with some discretion by the teacher. Positive feedback in conjunction with recognition of correct utterances must surely accompany each other in the error correction process. No feedback, on the other hand, is also acceptable in certain instances, which must be determined by the teacher. The decision to either correct or not correct must be made in regards to the type, nature, context and frequency of errors.

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