

Error Correction Strategies and the Japanese University Context

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Introduction

Learners of English will inevitably make mistakes and most teachers engaged in English teaching agree that correction of mistakes is a fundamental part of teaching. However, research on the effectiveness of correction strategies / corrective feedback seems far from conclusive. Despite this lack of consensus, teachers, in most cases, must employ corrective feedback and the choice of which variety to use should, ideally, be based on some form of research evidence.

This paper will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the main strategies for delivering corrective feedback and consider their suitability to the Japanese university communicative classroom. To do this it is first necessary to clarify what exactly is meant by an error and why correction of these errors is important.

Errors, mistakes and the importance of correction

Edge (1989) suggests that errors are just one of three categories that comprise a mistake:

- Slips, which a student can self-correct;
- Errors, which a student can't self-correct, but where it is clear which form

- the students wanted to use, and where the class is familiar with that form;
- Attempts, where students have no real idea how to structure what they want to mean, or where intended meaning and structure are not clear to the teacher.
- (Edge, 1989:11).

Despite errors here being a subgroup, the majority of research on the subject of correction (e.g. Lyster, 1998, Ammar & Spada, 2006; Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001) uses the term ‘error’ as Edge (1989) uses the term ‘mistake’ i.e. to encompass all of the three categories above. One notable exception of this is Johnson (1988) who suggests that errors result from faulty or absent knowledge while mistakes, which are not affected by knowledge, are a consequence of the operating conditions that impact learners’ ‘processing ability’. Such inconsistency in the use of these terms may prove problematic for teachers wishing to investigate correction strategies and does not bode well for researchers who may be talking about different things.

Despite the lack of uniformity in terminology, this paper will use the term ‘error’ as a collective term inline with most current research. In this usage errors demonstrate a lack of linguistic knowledge, whereas mistakes can be considered slips that result from the real-time use of language, confidence issues, etc. Learner errors may occur through the use of lexis and grammar, or the way sentences are organised and linked to create texts (Thornbury, 1999) and phonological errors (Lyster, 1998a). This paper will focus on grammatical and lexical errors.

There is a greater consensus on why errors occur with transfer from the L1 and developmental errors that occur from learners working within the rules of the L2 being seen as being responsible for most errors (Thornbury, 1999; Harmer, 2007). Ignoring these errors is seen by most as potentially damaging to the linguistic development of the learner as correction may be necessary to prevent fossilization and encourage students’ ability to self-correct (Dekeyser,

1993, Thornbury, 1999).

Despite such warnings about ignoring errors, few writers advise correcting everything and Edge (1989:17) advises teachers to “think of correction as a way of giving information or feedback to your students, just when it will support their learning”. Edge’s belief that correction should be employed when it benefits students’ learning rather than as a matter of course is supported by other writers who advocate that teachers consider certain factors before employing a correction strategy. Thornbury (1999), for example, suggests that, before correcting an error, a teacher should consider:

- The type of error – does it have a major effect on communication? Can it be self-corrected?
- The type of activity – what effect will correction have on the activity?
- The type of learner – will correction discourage participation? Do learners expect correction?

These three factors which Thornbury advises teachers to consider have more to do with the context than the effectiveness of the correction strategy employed. With this in mind, it is prudent to consider the contextual features relevant to many Japanese university communicative classrooms before examining the actual correction strategies that may be used within.

The Japanese Context

One of the key influences on English language teaching in universities is the students’ experience before they enter university. The Japanese educational system is famous for its university entrance examinations and the ‘examination hell’ or preparations for the university entrance examination begin in earnest many months before the first tests are taken.

The English requirement for the first entrance examination is the same for all students (at the time of writing) with the individual universities then demanding that further tests be taken as their courses or prestige demands. Given that the first

entrance exam is taken by all and is often all that is required, schools across Japan feverishly prepare their students for the test to such a degree that this extends far beyond the classroom and has become a national obsession (Shimahara, 1991). As Hyland points out, “Written examinations alone determine grades and future success” (Hyland, 1993 pp73).

With English being a compulsory element of the entrance examination it is unsurprising that it exerts an enormous impact on English teaching at high schools, an impact that is considered by many to be overly negative (Terauchi 1995, Shimahara 1991, Fujimoto 1999). The English component of the entrance examination overwhelmingly focuses on the students understanding of grammar and vocabulary. As such, the teaching methods, curriculum and energy of teachers and students at high schools are devoted to meeting the requirements of the entrance examination.

One consequence of these examinations is that all students will have received instruction designed to help them reach a certain level of grammatical and lexical knowledge. However, this knowledge has been largely taught, practiced and tested through written forms and so does not necessarily translate in to a proficiency of output. Despite the Japanese Ministry of Education attempting to increase the number of communicative classes students attend at high school (MEXT, 2002, 2003, 2004), the literature and my own personal experience teaching in Japan suggest that students entering the communicative classroom in Japanese universities will have a good deal of grammatical and lexical knowledge but little experience or proficiency in any kind of production, particularly oral.

From this mismatch one may predict a high number of errors. However, the number of errors might not be as high as one may think due to well documented problems with a low willingness to communicate among Japanese students (Yashima, 2002). Though empirical evidence to support the generalisation of low levels of willingness to communicate among Japanese students is limited, many writers engaged in language education suggest it is the case (McVeigh,

2002; O'Sullivan, 1996; Helgesen, 1993). There are several reasons suggested for this lack of willingness to communicate, reasons that would seem to have bearing on the choice of correction strategies.

Literature on the characteristics of Japanese students (Karan, 2005, Dorji, 1997) suggests that Japanese students tend to be quiet and reserved and research conducted in the classroom found that Japanese students do not like to take risks (Dorji, 1997). Japanese students have also been characterised as being unable to express their opinions, debate or even discuss issues (Allen, 1996). One frequently cited reason for this lack of personal expression in class is a strong group mentality and preoccupation with maintaining group cohesion (O'Sullivan, 1996, Anderson, 1993). The Japanese saying of "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down" is often used to illustrate this phenomenon. Another reason is that Japanese teachers and students hold a belief that 'teachers are to teach' (Azuma 1998) and, therefore, students are to sit and learn; a belief that is manifest in the classroom through the dominance of traditional methods and materials, and passivity of students (Hyland, 1993).

Though there is undoubtedly a grain of truth in such generalisations, personal experience suggests that these characteristics may not be as common as believed. Indeed, a number of studies suggest that students wish to move in another direction. When asked why they studied English, 60% of university students answered that communication was most important (Terauchi, 1995). A desire for more semi-free to free task types was also expressed by university students (Davies, 2006).

These preferences among Japanese students would seem to contradict writers who suggest that, due to university entrance examinations, English ceases to be a means of communication and becomes a collection of rules and forms to be memorised to pass the examination (Terauchi 1995, Shimahara 1991, Fujimoto 1999, McVeigh, 2002). English for the entrance examination may be a simple matter of remembering and regurgitating grammar and lexis but once this has

been done it seems university students are looking for more communicative English. The desire for communicative English, however, would seem to be inconsistent with the widely held characterisation of the Japanese learner of English and supports the calls of those pressing for a more accurate and less judgemental representations of culture in TESOL (Atkinson, 2004, Kachru, 1995).

Correction Strategies

Before evaluating correction strategies in relation to the Japanese context, it is necessary to examine the different strategies themselves. The first thing one notices when looking at texts offering guidance on correction strategies (Harmer, 2007; Thornbury, 1999; Edge, 1989) is the great number of strategies that exist. Lyster & Ranta (1997) identified the six main types of corrective strategy used in the classroom:

1. Explicit Correction – The Correct form is supplied by the teacher and the error is clearly indicated.
2. Recasts – The teacher implicitly reformulates the student’s sentence into the correct form.
3. Elicitation – The teacher elicits a reformulation from the student by questioning what was said, suggestive pausing, or directly asking for reformulation.
4. Metalinguistic Clues – The teacher provides information on the well-formedness of the utterance.
5. Clarification Requests – The teacher questions what was said, for example, “I don’t understand”.
6. Repetition – The teacher repeats the error using intonation to highlight the error.

The frequency of use of the above strategies was found to differ greatly. The frequencies expressed as a percentage were:

Recasts – 55%

Elicitation – 14%

Clarification Requests – 11%

Metalinguistic Clues – 8%

Explicit Correction – 7%

Repetition of Error – 5%

(Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Lyster & Ranta (1997) divided correction strategies into two groups; those that require the negotiation of form between teacher and learner (elicitation, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, repetition of error) and those where the correct form is simply given (recasts, explicit correction).

Recasts and explicit correction

With recasts representing over half of all correction it is perhaps unsurprising that they are the subject of most research in the field (Lyster, 1998b; Nicholas et al, 2001; Ellis & Sheen, 2006, Leeman, 2003; Carpenter & Seon Jeon, 2006). When compared to no corrective feedback, recasts have been found to have a positive impact on student learning (Doughty & Varela, 1998). Though this ‘better than nothing’ conclusion is not a strong endorsement of recasts, the influence they have can be enhanced. Their positive impact was found to be most significant “when it is clear to the learner that the recast is a reaction to the accuracy of the form, not the content of the original utterance” (Nicholas et al, 2001:720).

Suggesting that recasts are better than nothing is not necessary high praise and, unsurprisingly, most of the attention on recasts has tended to be negative. One major criticism of recasts is that they are ambiguous (Lyster, 1998b; Ellis & Sheen, 2006). It is quite possible that learners may miss the corrective function of recasts as they are delivered in the same way as “noncorrective repetition following well-formed learner utterances” (Lyster 1998b: 187) and “because they

are so frequent, and because they appear to be as likely to be accompanied by expressions of approval as are repetitions of correct utterances, learners may be less sensitive to recasts as ‘corrective’” (Nicholas et al, 2001:743). Ellis & Sheen (2006) add that even if the corrective use of a recast is noticed, it may still not be clear what corrective function it takes. Recasts may be used to correct meaning or form, and the learner may be left wondering which is the subject of the recast.

Consequently, recasts are seen by some (Lyster, 1998a; Lightbown & Spada, 1990) as an implicit form of correction and, therefore, it is unsurprising that learners may miss the correction. However, Ellis & Sheen (2006) suggest that recasts can be both implicit and explicit. Some recasts may be quite transparent and “it is not difficult to find examples of recasts that are just as explicit as so-called explicit correction” (Ellis and Sheen, 2006:596). Explicit correction would simply be, therefore, a more salient recast.

This point also highlights a problem, not so much with recasts themselves, but with how they are viewed. What a recast actually is and how it is ‘performed’ seems to differ among writers. This issue has implications for the entire field because as Ammar & Spada (2006:548) point out, studies that examine recasts “cannot be directly compared because of a fundamental difference in the way recasts were operationalized”. In addition, recasts differ across contexts, such as in New Zealand and Korea where they are characterised by rising intonation (Carpenter & Seon Jeon, 2006). It would seem reasonable to assume also that recasts will likely differ across teachers, learners, and type of error. Such a view is held by Ellis & Sheen (2006:575) who indicate that “recasts can take many different forms and perform a variety of functions (not all corrective), which makes definition difficult” and that as a consequence, recasts should not be treated as a homogeneous construct. Despite such cautions, no reclassification seems to be forthcoming.

Negotiation of form

Edge (1989:24) suggests that “the best form of correction is self-correction”, a belief that appears to be well supported (Allwright, 1975; Hendrickson, 1978). The importance of allowing learners to self-correct is central to correction strategies that require a ‘negotiation of form’ (elicitation, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, repetition of error). Lyster & Ranta (1997) assessed learners uptake (if the learner reacts to the correction in anyway) and repair (if the students self-correct), and found that recasts had the lowest rate of both uptake and repair where as elicitation resulted in the highest levels of both. Although measuring uptake would seem unnecessary as recasts do not require any response from learners and elicitation by its very nature will likely always guarantee a reaction of some kind, the results do seem significant as they point to elicitation (as well as other varieties of negotiated form) as resulting in higher levels of repair.

This finding was supported by the work of Ammar & Spada (2006) who found that prompts (techniques that push learners to self-correct) were more effective than recasts. Whereas Lyster (1998a) had judged effectiveness of correction on uptake and repair, Ammar & Spada gave students both immediate and delayed post tests. They found that low level learners performed better following the use of prompts rather than recasts. Higher level learners were found to show no significant difference in performance between recasts and prompts though all students were found to benefit greatly from both types of correction when compared to no correction (Ammar & Spada, 2006). Ultimately, correction strategies that require a negotiation of form be it through the elicitation of output from learners (Lyster, 1998a, 2004) or metalinguistic clues (Carroll & Swain, 1993) have been found to be more effective in terms of repair and recall than recasts.

Discussion

Though the evidence seems to point to strategies of negotiation, such as elicitation, as being the most effective, one must question the studies themselves. Studies that suggest the value of such strategies (Lyster, 1998a; Ammar & Spada, 2006; Carroll & Swain, 1993) do so by contrasting them with recasts. Yet, as we have seen, there seems to be a clear difference among operationalized definitions of recasts and so too in the consistency in implementation of them within classrooms across the globe. In addition, the evidence that does exist does not seem to warrant the immediate abandonment of recasts in favour of more negotiated forms of correction. Indeed, Ammar & Spada (2006) found no significant difference between the use of recasts and prompts among advanced learners.

By questioning the consistency of meaning and use of 'recasts' it would be prudent to question elicitation and other forms of correction through negotiation of meaning. In his work on correction, Edge (1989) offers many different strategies such as:

- Finger correction used by the teacher to indicate something is missing.
- Repeating a sentence up to the mistake and inviting someone to continue.
- Repeating the sentence including the mistake and indicating by intonation or body language where the mistake is and invite correction.
- Going on to invite peer elicitation should the answer not be forthcoming from the learner.

All strategies on this list, which is in no way exhaustive, can be termed elicitation, or at the very least, 'negotiation of form' or 'prompts'. Just as it seems that there is little consistency in the operationalized form of recasts, so too is it the case for elicitation. Even if a valid operationalized forms are consistently applied, most research in the field is conducted in the laboratory and one can question its relevance to the communicative classroom.

When examining the research conducted on recasts, Ellis and Sheen (2006:597) point out that "recasts do not occur in a social vacuum, and their

efficacy might be influenced by sociopsychological factors that determine learners' receptivity to them". Correction strategies have only been viewed in terms of their effectiveness on acquisition, cultural variables and relevancy have not been considerations. As an EFL teacher in Japan, cultural appropriacy is extremely important for me when considering classroom strategies and so I find its absence among the research to be quite startling.

With cultural factors overlooked and the empirical evidence being rather inconsistent, it seems that one should listen to the advice of authors such as Thornbury (1999), Johnson (1988) and Harmer (2007:142) who suggest that "decisions about how to react to performance will depend upon the stance of the lesson, the activity, the type of mistake and the particular student who is making that mistake".

In a communicative classroom elicitation would seem to be more suitable. Students engaged in conversation may miss the meaning of a recast and such an interjection may disrupt or stem the flow of communication. Elicitation on the other hand can represent a digression in conversation rather than a pause or end. By requesting clarification or eliciting a response from students the teacher is continuing communication. By 'negotiating' with students the teacher not only encourages communication but, as Edge (1989:27) suggests, "the more the students are involved in correction, the more they have to think about the language". Japanese students at university have been through intensive grammar study and now demand communicative English, elicitation would seem to be appropriate to this demand.

However, as Japan is an EFL context and Japanese students will have had little opportunity to engage in communicative activities prior to university, one must be wary of excessive correction. With Japanese students typically possessing a good knowledge of grammar and lexis by the time they enter university, the focus must be on fluency over accuracy and so the teacher must exercise restraint in correction, correcting only when it is necessary for understanding or

to prevent possible fossilization of a frequent mistake. Restraint in correction may be forced upon the teacher also as university classes tend to be large and so the time available may not allow for as many corrective elicitations as the teacher would like.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper had been to examine the research on corrective strategies with a view to finding the strategy that is proven to be most effective and culturally relevant. A review of several studies in the field made it clear that the work carried out not only fails to consider culture as a variable or identify the relative effectiveness of the different corrective strategies, but also begs the question of whether the evidence that does exist is reliable and relevant to 'real-life' classrooms. It would seem that no two corrections are the same as they will be dependent on numerous variables. If this is the case, research into their effect on acquisition would seem to produce tentative results at best. Though elicitation would seem to be most relevant to the Japanese university communicative classroom context, the teacher should select their correction strategies on the exact context in which they teach.

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