

Attitudes and Preferences of ESL Students to Error Correction*

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This article presents the findings of a survey of ESL students' attitudes toward and preferences for the correction of spoken errors by native speaker friends. The 418 subjects reported generally positive attitudes toward error correction, and claimed to prefer even more correction than their friends did. They saw correcting errors as facilitating--even being necessary--for the improvement of their oral English.

1. Introduction

The role of error correction by ESL/EFL teachers has been an issue for a long time. Generally the focus of this interest has been restricted to one side of the desk--the teacher's. Relatively little research has been conducted on the reactions of the students to the correction of their mistakes. To our knowledge, no research has been done on error correction in native speaker-nonnative speaker peer relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of an investigation of the attitudes and preferences of students learning English as a second language to determine their

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reactions to the correction of their mistakes by their native
our efforts to understand the role error correction plays in
second language learning. As Cathcart and Olsen (1976:41) point
out, "it is important to ascertain what students and teachers
assume to be the most effective methods for correcting errors."

As corrective feedback is provided for the benefit of the
learners, their attitudes and preferences are important. In
fact, Allwright (1975) states that the effectiveness of the
treatment of error will depend on how it is perceived by the
second language learner rather than what it was intended to be by
the native speaker. Vigil and Oller (1976:228) claim that
feedback creates "desired instability" which encourages the
learner to make the appropriate changes. Thus, if the learner
has a negative reaction to error correction, the desired changes
might not be brought about.

In addition, it is important to discover if attitudes toward
and preferences for error correction by ESL students from
different countries are similar or different. It is also
important to learn if there are differences toward error
correction between men and women. In addition, we need to know
what aspects of the target language ESL students perceive they
need the most help with, and to discover if they indeed receive
feedback from the NS friends in those areas.

While there has been no research in this area of native
speaker-nonnative speaker discourse, there have been a number of
insightful studies which treated second/foreign language error
correction attitudes and preferences in the classroom. Cathcart
and Olsen (1976), for example, reported the results of a

questionnaire designed to assess the reactions on nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English to error correction in the language classroom. While the focus of their study was on the particular form preferred for the feedback, one finding of relevance to our study is that NNSs reported liking corrective feedback and, in general, regardless of level of proficiency in English, they wanted more of it. Cathcart and Olsen stated that of the 188 students surveyed, 75% of them wanted correction "all of the time." (1976:45). Interestingly, however, when the NNSs were provided with correction of nearly all of their errors, they changed their minds, finding it difficult to think coherently with constant correction (1976:50). Thus there seems to be a saturation level for the amount of correction students will tolerate.

Cathcart and Olsen's work also investigated what areas of language their subjects deemed important for correction. The students who were surveyed thought that pronunciation, first, and then grammar were the most important areas that their teachers should correct. Whether this finding was due to nonclassroom correction in other areas (e.g., vocabulary, discourse, fact) was not investigated.

The present article is one in a series from a study of repair strategies in native speaker-nonnative speaker conversations designed to provide insights into the second language learning process. Other reports describe the types of errors corrected by native speakers (Chun, Day, Chenoweth, and Luppescu 1982), repair strategies (Day, Chenoweth, Chun, and

Lupescu 1982), and nonnative speaker self-repair (Day, Chenoweth, Chun, and Lupescu 1981). Before describing the study, it is necessary to note that the term error correction as used in this article refers to information provided by a native speaker in reaction to NNS error. Long (1977) made a distinction between error correction and teacher feedback on learner error. Error feedback, according to Long, is knowledge of results, or error detection, and is designed to promote correction, but is not correction. Long viewed correction as describing the hoped for result of feedback to error. This distinction is important, but for the purposes of this paper, we will use error correction to refer to the information which the NS provides the student after an error has been committed.

2.0 Method

The data for our investigation were gathered by distributing a questionnaire (see Appendix) to students studying ESL in three different programs in Honolulu: Hawaii Pacific College (HPC); New Intensive Course in English (NICE); and the English Language Institute (ELI). The latter two programs are at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

The questionnaire was revised after being pilot-tested in an ELI graduate writing class. It was then distributed to all other ELI classes and to students in NICE and HPC. We gave the questionnaires to the teachers, and asked them to give them to their students to complete. The teachers reported that some of their students used dictionaries or asked questions in order to determine the differences in meaning in the terms never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. The teachers collected the

questionnaires, which were then returned to us. We received 418 completed questionnaires: 228 from ELI; 111 from HPC; and 79 from NICE.

The ELI students were considered advanced since they had scored at least 450 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language to gain admittance to the University as degree candidates. Those in the NICE program were designated as beginners, based on a placement examination. The HPC students were at the beginning and intermediate levels of English proficiency, as determined by entrance and class examinations.

We are aware of the limitations of self-report data gathered by questionnaires seeking to determine the attitudes of those who are completing the questionnaires (e.g., Oller 1981). We believe, however, that the questions which we asked the subjects to respond to were of such a nature as to minimize such potential sources of variance as self-flattery or the approval motive.

3. Results

In analyzing the data, different groups were compared. For example, answers from males were compared with those from females. We investigated the influence of the level of English proficiency on responses as estimated by the program (ELI, NICE, HPC) in which the respondent was enrolled. Where the number of respondents made it possible, responses from a particular nationality were examined. These groups were from Hong Kong (n=65), Japan (n=125), Korea (n=36), Taiwan (n=67), and Vietnam (n=58).

In tabulating the responses to the open-ended question

concerning attitude (#9: How do you feel when a friend corrects your English? Explain.), a response such as "good" was coded as positive; responses such as "stupid" were coded as negative; and responses such as "I feel embarrass (sic) but it helps my English" were coded as ambiguous. For one statistical analysis, the negative category was combined with the ambiguous category in order to compare these responses with those answers coded as positive.

Chi-square tests were performed to assess the overall attitudes of the NNSs to error correction. The first test showed significantly more subjects holding positive attitudes to error correction than subjects holding negative attitudes ($\chi^2 = 140.1$, $df=1$, $p < .0001$). The test was repeated on responses from males, females, and ELI, HPC, and NICE groups, and the different nationality groups, with similar results. Only one group, Koreans, displayed no significant attitudes--either positive or negative--toward correction. The results are given in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

We also tested to determine if the types of errors corrected (e.g., pronunciation) by the NNSs were dependent on the program level of the NNS or the sex of the NNS. The chi-square test revealed no significant differences. The same test did show significant differences in perceptions of the types of errors corrected for the various nationality groups. These results are also displayed in Table 1.

We then used the chi-square test to measure the amount of correction which the NNSs reported they wanted. This analysis

was done by sex and by program. The results, given in Table 2, show that in general, the subjects wanted significantly more correction from their NS friends than they reported they were receiving ($x^2 = 80.67$, $df=1$, $p<.001$). The only subgroups which did not indicate a significant desire for more correction were the HPC males and the NICE females.

Place Table 2 about here

When perceived amount and desired amount of correction were tested, the chi-square analysis demonstrated that equal amounts were perceived to occur across groups. That is, there were no significant differences among the various nationalities, between the sexes, and among the students enrolled in the various ESL programs.

Another chi-square test showed that there was no significant difference in response to the question, "If your friends do correct your English, what do they correct?" between word choice and pronunciation. On the same question, a significant difference occurred between word choice and word order ($x^2=35.44$, $df=1$, $p<.01$), but between word form and word order there was no significant difference. There was also a significant difference between word order and facts ($x^2 =31.5$, $df=1$, $p<.01$). This general pattern of the NNSs reporting that they were corrected most in the areas of pronunciation and word choice, then for word form and word order, and finally for factual accuracy, is maintained regardless of sex, nationality, or program level of the NNS.

4. Discussion

The finding that the NNSs in our study have, in general, a positive attitude toward the correction of their errors by their NS friends is consistent with what Cathcart and Olsen (1976) reported for the ESL classroom. Our subjects provided such comments as: "I feel happy because I can improve my English if they correct my mistakes." "I think it is necessary to me and that is a good way to me for learning English." "I appreciate my friends, although I feel disappointed at myself sometimes. However my English has to be corrected to improve." Another commented that she felt good only if a close friend corrected her English. If someone she just met corrected her, she did not like it.

This overall positive attitude toward error correction in social settings was independent of the ESL program in which the subjects were enrolled and the sex of the subjects. For the NNSs of a particular nationality, the response was positive for all groups except Koreans. As we see in Table 1, the Korean subjects were the only group which did not have a significantly positive attitude toward correction. We have no idea why this particular nationality did not prefer error correction.

As groups (overall, male, female, ELI males and females, HPC females, NICE males), most students claimed to want more correction than they reported receiving. NICE females (who were all from Japan) and HPC males reported not wanting significantly more correction. However, they reported that they did not want it "rarely;" most stated they wanted it "sometimes." As a female in the NICE program noted, "too much corrects is no good

for me. Because I get nerveous (sic) in English..."

The types of errors which our subjects reported to be corrected by NSs were shown to be independent of the ESL program in which the students were enrolled. But it was not independent of nationality, as students from Hong Kong perceived they received more correction of word order and pronunciation, and Koreans perceived that they received frequent word order corrections. Males and females perceived receiving equal amounts for each type of correction. This is interesting, for it suggests that NS error correction is not based on sex. Given stereotypical images of a woman's role in society, we might have expected that the females in our study would report receiving more correction than males because of their lower status.

Both the amount of correction the subjects perceived receiving from NSs and the amount of correction they reported as desirable were independent of both program level and nationality. Furthermore, the responses from males and females to perceived amount of correction and desirable amount of correction were similar. This means that the same proportions in each group thought they received and would like to receive similar amounts.

The NNSs surveyed reported that NSs corrected pronunciation and word choice errors the most often, with no significant difference between the two. Word form and word order errors were corrected less frequently than pronunciation and word choice, with no significant difference between word form and word order errors. They reported that factual errors were corrected least often. This general pattern was maintained regardless of program

or nationality.

The importance which the subjects placed on vocabulary supports findings by other researchers. Politzer (1978), in an investigation of the errors which English speakers of German made, found that native speakers of German reported vocabulary errors to be the most serious. In a study of errors in writing committed by nonnative speakers of German, Delisle (1982) discovered that native speakers of German also ranked vocabulary errors as most serious. To her, this meant that "...incorrect choice of words is the greatest handicap to effective communication." (1982:41). Neither study investigated errors of fact or discourse.

Day and his colleagues, in another investigation of NS-NNS error correction reported in Chun et al. 1982, found that NSs did correct pronunciation and word choice errors made by their NNS friends. In terms of the gross number of corrections, the NSs corrected pronunciation and word choice more than other categories of errors. But in terms of correction versus errors, Chun et al. were unable to determine the number of pronunciation errors, finding it difficult to distinguish pronunciation errors from systematic nonnative phonological patterns prevalent in the speech of NNSs. The NNSs in the questionnaire survey were not asked about the highest percentages of items corrected; rather they had to indicate what was corrected most. Perhaps it is for this reason that their perceptions were indeed accurate. NNSs are aware that they are being corrected and they seem to be aware, also, of the major areas that are being treated. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are aware of their

errors.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented the findings of a survey of the attitudes toward and preferences for the correction of spoken errors of NNSs by their NS friends. In general, the 418 ESL students surveyed had positive attitudes toward correction of their mistakes, and they reported that they would prefer even more correction. They saw correcting errors as facilitating--even being necessary--for the improvement of their oral English.

The observation that error correction facilitates and perhaps is even necessary for successful second language acquisition has not been supported by empirical evidence. In the study mentioned above by Chun et al. (1982), it was found that the NSs corrected only 8.9% of all spoken errors by their NNS friends in 15.1 hours of recorded discourse. In light of the relatively small percentage of corrected errors, we would urge caution in interpreting the NNSs' desires for more error correction. Future research should investigate whether correction is an integral part of successful second language acquisition. One theory of second language acquisition claims that the learner posits hypotheses about the target language which are constantly being tested and revised according to input. It is important to learn if error correction has to be part of this input.

It is also important to learn the restrictions, if any, on correcting errors. For example, is the ethnicity or culture of the NNS a significant factor? The subjects in our investigation

were mainly from Asian and Pacific countries. The Korean students apparently did not have a positive attitude toward error correction, while other national groups did. Would students from the Middle East, for example, favor error correction? Do attitudes and preferences differ from country to country?

We conclude by pointing out that it would be inappropriate to infer from this investigation that ESL teachers should or should not correct the errors of their students. As we noted above, the role of error correction in second language acquisition has not been determined.

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Appendix

Language Questionnaire

We are conducting this survey to gather background information about students in English language programs in Honolulu. Please answer the following questions. Notice that you do not need to put your name on this form.

1. How long have you been in the U.S.?
2. Have you been in other English-speaking countries before?

If yes, for how long?

3. How long have you studied English as a subject?
4. How long have you been in this school?
5. Before coming to this school, did you use English outside of school? For example, did you speak English with any friends or relatives or at work on a regular basis? Describe.
6. Do you have any English-speaking friends? (Relatives, neighbors, etc.)
7. a. How often do your English-speaking friends correct your English?

() Never () Rarely () Sometimes () Often () Always

- b. If they do correct your English, what do they correct?

(Check all appropriate boxes.)

- () Order of words
- () Choice of words (vocabulary)
- () Form of words (e.g., subject-verb agreement, plurals...)
- () Pronunciation of words
- () Facts

8. How often would you like them to correct your English?

() Never () Rarely () Sometimes () Often () Always

9. How do you feel when a friend corrects your English?

Explain.

Table 1. Results of Chi-Square Tests Showing NNS Attitudes to Error Correction by NS Friends. +=positive attitudes; -=negative attitudes; *= $p < .01$

Groups	Attitudes			
	N	+	- and Ambiguous	χ^2
Males	214	165	49	62.88*
Females	204	165	39	77.82*
ELI	228	176	52	67.44*
HPC	111	90	21	42.89*
NICE	79	64	15	30.39*
Hong Kong	65	51	14	21.06*
Japan	125	94	31	31.75*
Korea	36	20	16	.44
Taiwan	67	54	13	25.09*
Vietnam	58	49	9	27.59*

Table 2. Results of Chi-Square Tests Showing Amount of Correction Desired by NNSs. #= $p < .001$

Group	Amount of Correction Desired			χ^2
	N	More	Same	
ELI				
Females	111	96	15	59.11#
Males	107	82	25	30.36#
HPC				
Females	45	33	12	9.80#
Males	52	28	24	.31
NICE				
Females	38	20	18	.11
Males	31	21	10	15.50#
Totals				
Females	194	149	45	55.75#
Males	190	131	59	27.28#
Females & Males				
Males	384	280	104	80.67#

 18 NNSs indicated they wanted less correction; 16 did not respond to this part of the questionnaire.