

Error Analysis and Correction: Options for Teaching English in Japan

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This report examines error analysis and correction. The initial interest in this came from research on the role of recasts in second language acquisition. In particular, the works of Lyster (1998) and Mackey and Philp (1998) are highly influential. This report will not focus solely on recasts, however. Indeed, there are a number of researchers who have concluded that recasts are not always beneficial. There will be an examination of the role of error correction and the effect(s) of this on not only language acquisition, but the effect on the learner too.

This report will mostly examine error correction in writing and speaking skills. There should be no implication here that the four traditional skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are independent. In fact, there is increasing research suggesting that an interconnective cognitive network with all of these skills is at play regarding second language acquisition. A more holistic approach to education in general is currently a focus of classroom research in recent years. Errors in these two fields are usually related to errors of comprehension, which is important in language output. Finally, this report will look at how can teachers can integrate these methods in a class. It is hoped that this report will be helpful towards teachers of English in Japan, and indeed in other countries. It will also present common threads present in research and make recommendations for error correction in English second language classes in Japan in particular.

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EFL: English as a foreign language

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Teachers are often concerned about correcting learners, while keeping their motivation

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high. In Japan, as well as in other countries, there is often intense pressure for learners to be successful from elementary school right through to high school. In the classroom environment Japanese students often don't speak at all rather than speak and make a mistake in their second language, which is almost always English.

There are certainly no shortage of native English speaking teachers in Japan. Despite this, English proficiency in Japan is at a lower level than its Asian neighbours (English Proficiency Index, 2022, Ang, 2021, Zandt, 2021). This is despite a highly developed education system that includes standardized mandatory English classes. While such rankings may be open to criticism, a situation where there is a generally low level of English would be something for the Japanese government to improve upon and to improve education in Japan overall. English is a compulsory subject in junior high schools and high schools. It has also been recently introduced in elementary schools. After high school, learners can choose to study English in a junior college or university and there are many language schools and university-level English departments in Japan.

Error corrections are inevitable in any classroom. Error correction in language is a crucial part of language acquisition. In a high pressure environment, learners can often lose heart and motivation when getting excessive corrections. With the pressurized educational environment of Japan, and the cultural expectations to succeed, this report will explore error corrections that are effective and keep students motivated.

Error Correction Methodologies

To come to any conclusion regarding what kinds of error correction are more effective than others, there must be an examination of what current methods exist. This section will outline some methodologies regarding error correction.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the audiolingual approach to teaching foreign languages consisted of learners spending much of their class time memorizing, drilling and studying grammar - reminiscent of the phrase "practice makes perfect" (Allwright, 1984, p156, Hendrickson, 1978, p387). When it came to errors, some educators took a severe view. Nelson Brooks published an influential text in 1960 that compared errors to sin: "Like sin, error is to be avoided" but also acknowledged that "its presence is to be expected" (Brooks, 1960, p58). Brooks' solution, in keeping with the methods at the time, was drilling. "The principal method of avoiding error in language learning is to observe and practice the right model a sufficient number of times" (ibid.). Students were never to recognise their own errors (*The Manual*, 1961, p28, 32), and when errors did occur, they were to be immediately corrected by the teacher and practiced in the classroom (Hansen and Wilkins, 1974, pxvii).

It became clear that this approach wasn't working. Learners often forgot what they learned in the classroom. Learners who spoke foreign languages outside the audiolingual

classrooms with proficiency did so due to using the language in communicative situations (Hendrickson, 1978, p387). Even at the beginning of the 1970s, the stance towards errors started to change. “It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the sixties the word ‘error’ was associated with correction, at the end with learning” (George, 1972, p189). The shift towards communication also changed the way educators viewed error correction. Educators started to see the value of errors, as opposed to equating them with sin. Errors showed that learning is taking place and provided feedback (Hendrickson, 1978, p388, Corder, 1973, p265). The influence of cognitive psychology and neuroscience on first and second language acquisition has further influenced methodologies surrounding error correction. Other factors also included the classroom environment: “More important than error-free speech is the creation of an atmosphere in which the students want to talk” (Chastain, 1971, p249).

So now that errors are seen as a positive and necessary aspect of learning, there can be a focus on questions regarding error correction. These includes the “*wh*” questions - *who*, *what*, *when*, and *how* (Burt 1975, p53, Ellis, 2009, p3, Hendrickson, 1978, p389, Herron, 1981, p11).

Who corrects errors?

Do teachers or learners correct errors? Classroom teachers often assume the responsibility for correcting student errors. The teacher is expected to be a source of information about the target language (Hendrickson, 1978, p395). In keeping with more research from the 1970s, Corder suggested that the teacher’s function in error correction is “to provide data and examples” (1973, p336). While few language educators would deny the teacher’s active role in correcting errors, it has been suggested that teachers should not dominate the correction procedures.

Learners are part of the learning experience, too, and should be more proactive when faced with error correction. This can take the form of *self-repair* and *peer correction*. *Self-repair* occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has taken place, which in turn prompts the learner to self-correct (Panova and Lyster, 2002, p585). This type of correction can be dynamic and motivating for the learners (Li, 2014, p197). *Peer correction*, is when a student different from the one who initially made the error provides correction. Both self - and peer corrections follow elicitive types of corrective feedback which come from the teacher. Peer corrective feedback and its related interaction seem to have positive impacts on second language (L2) learning and acquisition (Allwright, 1984, p157, Lyster et al., 2013, p28).

Despite advantages associated with self-repair and peer correction, they are not fail-safe methods. Learners may expect teachers to correct, and self-correction is unlikely if the learner does not have prior knowledge about the linguistic form in question (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p101, Li, 2014, p197). Learners may hesitate to point out each other’s mistakes (Adams, 2018, p3, Lyster et al., 2013, p28). Some teachers and students dismiss peer

interaction as games dressed up as communication ‘activities’ and there may be more value placed on corrections directly from the teacher. (Adams, 2018, p2, 3, Lyster et al., 2013: 29). Teachers may also worry about peer interactions. Learners may provide each other with erroneous input, or may not provide feedback on important errors (Adams, 2018, p3, Lyster et al., 2013: 29). There are also concerns that students may revert to their first languages (L1s), particularly in homogeneous classrooms. Peer correction is unlikely to be effective unless the teacher has fostered a classroom environment that is positive for peer interaction. This reflects the impact of environment on the learner. This is particularly important for error correction, as a non-conductive environment can create an awkward or even hostile atmosphere when a teacher corrects a learner.

While learners may be hesitant in correcting their classmates’ linguistic errors, this does not mean that they do not want to be corrected (Lyster et al., 2013, p28). In fact, this is one area of research which seems fairly strong: learners want and expect corrections (Lyster et al., 2013, p7, p8). In fact, teachers are often more reluctant to give corrections than what the students want (Hendrickson, 1978, p389, Kerr, 2017, Lyster et al., 2013, p8).

What errors are to be corrected?

Not all errors are created equal. Burt (1975) suggested in an oft-quoted study that teachers should focus on “*global*” rather than “*local* errors” (p56, 57), (also quoted in Ellis, 2009, p6, Kerr, 2017, p6). *Global errors* are errors that affect overall sentence organization. *Local errors* are errors that affect single elements in a sentence. While global errors impede comprehension, local errors usually do not result in communicative breakdowns. Before correcting errors, teachers need to consider whether the errors need to be corrected at all, and, if so, why (Gorbet, 1974, p55). When students are unable to recognize their own errors, they need the assistance of someone more proficient in their target language. However, it is also clear that not every single error in a sentence needs to be corrected. This can have negative impacts on student confidence and motivation. A number of language educators suggest that errors that stigmatize the learner from the perspective of native speakers should be among the first corrected (Hendrickson, 1978, p391).

When do errors get corrected?

Perhaps the most difficult challenge of language teaching is determining when to correct and when to ignore student errors (Ellis, 2009, p3, Gorbet 1974, p19). There has been much research on the timing of feedback, particularly contrasting immediate and delayed feedback. Immediate error correction can result in faster rates of acquisition, whereas immediate error correction during fluency building can detract from automatic learning and associated strategies (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p98). It should be noted that Hattie and Timperley’s findings here are specific to their particular research.

The Interactionist framework argues that corrective feedback works best when it occurs in context at the time the learner makes the error (Ellis, 2009, p5). Stevick's "silent method" of teaching advocates that when a student hesitates in answering, the teacher does nothing for five to ten seconds, giving the student a chance to replay the information (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p9, Herron, 1981, p11).

Teachers are often concerned with the affective impact of error correction. This is because it can have an impact on student confidence, anxiety and motivation. When feedback is provided immediately, a clarification request or a reformulation is less likely to break up the flow of communication, rather than an explicit correction (Kerr, 2017, p7). Related to this is the topic of *recasts*, which will be discussed in the next section.

Another factor teachers should consider is learner uptake. This is how effectively the learner processes the error. Uptake does not occur when either (a.) feedback is followed by the teacher continuing the topic; therefore the student does not respond to the feedback, or (b.) feedback fails to be noticed, which can be particularly apparent in peer correction situations (Panova and Lyster, 2002, p585).

Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen have argued that a more important issue is the degree of explicitness and implicitness of learning. This is crossing into the *how* question, rather than *when*, and is not necessarily concerned with timing. They argue that having an idea of the extent to which explicit and implicit error correction can be effective in restructuring the learners' interlanguage is theoretically and pedagogically critical. It may provide understanding of how humans cognitively acquire a second language. It also may aid teachers in choosing whether to correct students explicitly or implicitly. *Explicit correction* provides the learner with direct forms of feedback from the teacher. Teachers direct the learner to the error. *Implicit correction* provides the learner with indirect forms of feedback. The implicit feedback provided to the learner in the present research is in the form of the *recast* – the correct reformulation of the learners' erroneous utterances (Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2008, p83).

How should errors be corrected?

As Cohen suggested as far back as 1983, there really is no consensus as to whether extensive or limited correction is best, as to who should do the correcting, and so forth (Cohen, 1983, p6). When teachers tolerate some student errors, students often feel more confident about using the target language than if all their errors are corrected (Hendrickson, 1978, p388).

The role of recasts

Recasts are when the teacher reformulates learner oral errors. Recasts are suited to communicative classrooms, because they usually don't interrupt the flow of communication,

they aid keeping students' attention focused on meaning, and provide scaffolds that enable learners to participate interactively that requires linguistic abilities exceeding their current developmental level (Lyster et al., 2013, p10). Recasts are often considered implicit but can be quite explicit (Lyster et al., 2013, p3). Recasts work quickly and often seamlessly. This is hypothesized to free up cognitive resources in the learner that would otherwise be used for semantic processing (Lyster et al., 2013, p10). Recasts are used often at the expense of other types of error correction (Panova and Lyster, 2002 p573, 590). Most language teachers have probably used some type of recast (and they come in many forms) in their classrooms.

Despite this popularity, recasts have been criticised as ambiguous to learners (Ellis, 2009, p10, Panova and Lyster, 2002, p577). In some studies, it was found that recasts had no more effect than explicit correction (Lyster et al., 2013, p3). Mackey & Philp proposed that recasts "may be red herrings" (1998, p338). Prompts have also been found to be overall more effective than recasts. Recasts and explicit correction can lead only to repetition of correct forms by students, whereas prompts can lead, not to repetition, but either to self-repair or peer-repair (Lyster et al., 2013, p12). The low rate of repair following recasts in some contexts was due to the fact that teachers often followed recasts with topic-continuation which prevented students from responding to specific recasts (Lyster et al., 2013, p12). Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen also found that recasts were the least effective type of correction in their study. In addition, they found that prompts were more effective (2008, p83). Lyster and Ranta (1997) say that recasts and explicit correction provide correct forms and don't encourage learner response ('uptake'), while prompts, withhold the correct form and promote learner uptake (Li, 2014, p196).

Despite calling them "red herrings", Mackey & Philp mention that recasts, in some cases, 'are part of negotiation sequences and function as confirmation checks' (1998, p342). Panova and Lyster posit that recasts provide considerable positive evidence, but are not to be advocated as the most effective way of providing negative evidence (2002, p591). Even critics of recasts conclude that further research is essential to have a clear idea on the role that the manner of correction plays in restructuring learners' interlanguage (Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2008, p83).

Error Correction – Writing

The previous methodologies have mainly been concerned with oral corrective feedback and error correction. It is clear that there are many different methods that teachers have at their disposal to correct learners. Similar differences in opinion exist where written corrective feedback is concerned (Ellis, 2009, p5).

Ellis's 2009 study describes an academic argument between Truscott (1996) and Ferris (1999) regarding error correction in writing. Truscott advocated what Ellis called "the

strong claim that correcting learners' errors in a written composition may enable them to (temporarily) eliminate errors... but has no effect on grammatical accuracy in a new piece of writing". Therefore it does not result in acquisition (p5). Ferris, on the other hand, argued that if the correction was clear and consistent acquisition would take place (ibid.).

Cohen (1975) also has done a comprehensive study on writers of Hebrew. A key point from this study was the effectiveness of an error correction type called *reformulation*. Here, the native target language speaking teacher will directly re-write the learner's essay, "preserving all the learner's ideas." The learner then compares the corrected version with the original essay with errors. (p1). While the native speaker corrected the essay, the learner still felt that the core ideas were theirs, and this had a positive effect on their motivation and confidence (p6, 7). The learners also felt that the corrections came from a valuable source and this heightened validity to the corrections. Some students prefer to be corrected from the teacher.

Another key point of Cohen's study featured a correction group. In Cohen's study, the correction group rated their feedback higher than the reformulation group (p13, 14). The correction group were also more positive about the extent to which the assistants helped them (p14, 16). The students had no real complaints about the correction method. If anything, they would have liked to have had more sessions (p15).

Reformulation, while less effective according to this study is by no means an unnecessary method of feedback. One of Cohen's assistants recorded that, "Some reformulations were excellent-using great style, but they were beyond the learners" (p17). Cohen concluded that the reformulation approach can be "overwhelming" (p18).

Cohen mentioned another approach which was simply to let the learners write consistently as much as possible. The idea was that learners become more confident and over time this naturally leads to fewer errors. The student will be encouraged to re-write the corrected essays at home, which will "fossilize" interlanguage structures (p4). The teacher will intervene to suggest where the essay needs correction (p5).

Much like speaking, and possibly in a more literal way for the teacher to follow, error patterns can become very apparent in learners' writing. Learners start doing tasks before they have mastered the language, and so it is incumbent on teachers to be aware of the variety of errors that occur in student speech and writing. Familiarity with error types is valuable for determining the sequence and emphasis of instruction in the EFL classroom (Burt, 1975, p53, 54). One aspect of language acquisition that has been extensively studied is the assumed interference of the L1 in creating certain types of L2 errors. Although interference from a students' L1 is the major predictor of *phonological errors... interference errors* are only one type of the errors found in syntax, morphology and lexicon of student speech and writing in the target language (Burt, 1975, p54).

Cohen's conclusion is probably appropriate here. "Perhaps a major value of the

reformulation approach is that it emphasizes the fact that there is more than one correct way to write things in a second language” (1975, p19). What is clear though, is that native speaking teachers appear to be seen as a valuable part of the classroom, and teachers need to be aware of student error patterns as they arise. Again, corrections are expected and a necessary part of language acquisition.

Error Correction: Two Recommendations for English Teachers in Japan

Japanese research has suggested that recasts are popular and familiar with both teachers and students. Yoshida (2008) compared learners’ preferences for recasts in comparison to other types of corrective feedback (including prompts). Teachers preferred giving recasts because they are conducive to maintaining a “supportive classroom environment” (p89) and are also more efficient regarding time management. Long et al. (1998), found short-term benefits for recasts among learners of Japanese and a preferred locative construction. The authors’ own survey on Japanese college students also reflected this. So while recasts are not the optimal method of error correction, it is recommended that they strongly feature in a Japanese second language classroom.

Peer correction is also recommended, again, with its caveats. Most Japanese classrooms are homogenous. In such a class, one student will easily be able to recognize another’s error (Hendrickson, 1978, p396). In the author’s survey, students were very receptive to this, and enjoyed working in groups. Sato and Lyster found that learners provided one another with significantly more elicitation feedback than did native speakers, who provided learners with significantly more reformulation feedback. (Lyster et al., 2013, p27). A tendency for learners with higher proficiency to work out errors on their own is understandable, because self-repair is easier as learners become more proficient in the target language. This may not apply to the average class in Japan, which would likely have very mixed ability learners.

Conclusion

Error correction is provided by an outside agent (a teacher, peer and others) regarding aspects of a learner’s performance or understanding. It typically occurs after instruction, and it is among the most critical influences on learning. It is expected, and generally appreciated by learners. Providing a succinct conclusion is difficult. Hyland and Hyland (2006) commented “it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions and generalizations from the literature as a result of varied populations, treatments and research designs” (p84). There are a huge variety of contextual factors that influence the extent to which error correction is effective. For example, it is not possible to arrive at any general conclusion regarding the relative efficacy of immediate and delayed error correction. And the use of only one type

of error correction could never cover every base in every class. While it is clear that some error correction is more effective than none, there are still many variables that influence error correction effectiveness differentially.

Some connections are present among all of the research. An active teacher presence is absolutely necessary in a second language classroom. While teachers should not dominate in a student-focused communication class, they need to guide the student on the errors that they are making. The teacher's presence is necessary to determine any error patterns that develop in learner speaking or writing. The teacher can also determine what the best method is to correct errors as they arise, and as has been demonstrated, there are many different ways to do this. Peer correction and group work are also effective methods, and teachers in Japan should use the homogeneous nature of the classes to their advantage.

While not without criticism, recasts are one such effective method of correction. There is evidence that teachers use this type of error correction extensively in Japan and students in turn expect some type of recast in the classroom. In addition, the enhanced flow of communication that recasts provide can enhance student confidence, which is sorely needed in Japanese classrooms. In a highly pressurised society and environment, anything that improves learner confidence can only have a positive effect on learning and language acquisition.

Finally, it should be stated that any error correction method should put the needs of the learner first. Not all errors need to be corrected, and any correction interaction should be done to meet the learners' academic, social and emotional needs. Teachers should be assured that learners need and expect correction. They should also be assured that errors mean that actual learning is taking place and therefore should not shy from error correction.

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