

【Research Brief】

Error and Mistake Correction in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper compares the mistake and error correction of three classes of Intermediate English language students enrolled in Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class, 2019. It begins by explaining the distinguishing characteristics between errors and mistakes before outlining the aims of the English Discussion course and its focus on fluency. The paper then describes a study that was conducted to determine which type of feedback led to the greatest improvement in terms of grammatical accuracy among the students. Each of these classes received feedback in a different way with Class 1 receiving feedback on their fluency, Class 2 receiving feedback on their fluency and accuracy, and Class 3 receiving feedback on their fluency, accuracy, and additional grammar instruction from the teacher. The paper concludes with a comparison between the classes and makes suggestions that would help students to improve their grammatical accuracy without having a detrimental effect on their risk-taking or fluency development.

Keywords: *error correction, mistake correction, self-correction, accuracy, fluency*

Introduction

Errors and Mistakes

Coskun (2010) stated that “there are many definitions of error made so far and there seems to be no consensus on a single definition” (p. 1). Therefore, for the benefit of this paper, the author shall define what he considers to be an ‘error’ and a ‘mistake.’ An error is when a student is unaware of what is generally considered accurate in the target language. It represents a gap in the student’s knowledge as they simply do not know the correct form of a sentence or how to say something accurately in the target language. However, a mistake is made when a student flouts what is considered accurate by native speakers either by accident, forgetfulness, or a lack of caring. This implies that they have studied the intended form previously but have neglected to use it accurately in the moment. Therefore, once a student has been taught a grammatical form in English, it becomes a mistake if they repeat the same error again. This is important because it means that whenever a student makes an error, it should be within the purview of the teacher to educate them as to the accurate grammatical form of that utterance. Conversely, in instances when a student has made a mistake, they should be encouraged to correct it themselves. It is this teacher’s belief that this process helps to foster an awareness of students’ own language accuracy, correct their own mistakes in the moment, and leads to a higher level of proficiency in the target language.

As it is not always possible to know whether it is an error or mistake that has been made, the approach to correction should be the same. For instance, student utterances should be written on the whiteboard verbatim to be reviewed as a class after an activity has concluded. This allows every student to participate in correcting erroneous utterances and gain a better understanding of the habitual nature of any errors they make. Using this method, the students can focus on developing their speaking skills before reflecting upon the accuracy of their statements once the activity has

drawn to a close.

Accuracy and Fluency

The English Discussion Class is a compulsory course for all freshmen students at Rikkyo University that aims to develop students' fluency skills. Class sizes are limited to between seven and eight students and divided between four levels (Shelesh, 2020). The course makes use of discussion and communication skills that allow students to assume either the role of a *Listener* who elicits information from others or a *Speaker* who shares information (Centre for English Discussion Class, 2017). For example, in *Lesson 2 – Opinions*, the Listeners can use phrases to ask for opinions while the Speakers use phrases to respond. The course textbook also contains communication skills that feature periodically and encourage students to clarify, confirm, paraphrase, and negotiate meaning (Nakatani, 2010) whenever there is a breakdown in communication.

A key tenet of the course is to develop the students' fluency skills (Schmidt, 1992) through a series of discussion or fluency-based activities (Hurling, 2012). In particular, each lesson begins with a reduced version of Maurice's 4/3/2 Fluency activity (1983) that was later popularised (Nation, 1989) to help students focus on developing their fluency skills without worrying about accuracy. Maurice originally explained that this activity was intentionally "designed to help intermediate and advanced learners to speak more fluently in the target language." (p.429). Therefore, the grammatical architecture of the English language is not the focus of the course, and error correction is only provided in situations that could impede comprehension. It is this teacher's view, however, that both fluency and accuracy are not mutually exclusive. There is room for the development for both, and it is important for students to retain some level of accuracy to avoid the fossilisation of mistakes (Richards and Schmidt, 1985) or potentially misinterpreting what someone else has said.

To explore this idea, let's consider an example from a lesson in which a group of students were discussing petty crime. In this lesson, one student exclaimed "I had umbrella stolen," meaning that he had, at some point in his life, been the victim of an umbrella theft. However, as his classmates were not familiar with the passive form of *causative have* (Leech, Cruickshank, and Ivanić, 1989) and the lack of a possessive pronoun or an agent, they assumed he was using the *present perfect tense* and misinterpreted his utterance to mean that he had stolen the umbrella himself. In their eyes, he was the perpetrator of a crime rather than the victim, which was the complete opposite of his intended meaning. This resulted in a comedy of errors, with them yelling "That is terrible!" in admonishment and him agreeing with them. It was only through teacher intervention and the demonstration of how to confirm and clarify that both parties were able to realise their mistake.

After the discussion was over, the students were invited to compare the sentences "I have stolen an umbrella" and "I had an umbrella stolen" to discuss the difference between the two. The students were then shown some other examples of *causative have* in the passive form and practised making a few examples of their own (e.g. "I had my nails painted"). The teacher also noticed that the students began to use this form in later lessons when discussing things that they had had done for them by others. An example being a student mentioning that they had had their hair cut at a salon.

This misunderstanding was one of the reasons that the author became interested in the relationship between form and function within the English Discussion Class and whether a healthy balance between the two could be reached. It could be argued that the students should have checked understanding and negotiated meaning themselves, however, believing that they had accurately understood one another they felt no cause to do so, and the discussion moved on regardless.

Discussion

The Study

Over the course of a 14-week semester, the erroneous utterances of three intermediate-level discussion classes were written verbatim in a teaching journal using a *reflection-in-action approach* (Murphy, 2014). Each utterance was written beside the name of the interlocutor in order to track the habitual mistakes and errors of both the students individually and each class as a whole.

In doing this, it was clear that there were a lot of common errors and mistakes between members of each class, and these errors were the same between all three classes. The most common mistakes appeared to be subject verb agreement (SVA), comparative adjectives (CompAdj), and word choice (WordChoi). Within the journal, a shorthand note was written next to the students' names for quick and easy review at the start of each lesson. It also made it easier to see how often an individual repeated these mistakes and whether they showed any improvement after receiving feedback or instruction. A sample of some of these mistakes is shown below:

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
SVA	“Old people <u>is</u> good at shogi.” “I think summer festivals <u>is</u> important to celebrate.”	“Children <u>is</u> better to talk to than adults.” “Children <u>is</u> so foolish so I like talking to children.”	“My friends <u>is</u> also at university.” “They already <u>has</u> some presentation skills.”
CompAdj	“We can make our body <u>more stronger</u> .” “The recommendation system is <u>more better</u> .” “Talking to family is <u>more better</u> .”	“Sapporo is <u>more colder</u> than Tokyo so I want to go.” “I think the class in cram school is <u>more good</u> .”	“I think children <u>is</u> more interesting, <u>more better</u> to talk to.” “Children <u>is</u> <u>more cuter</u> than old people so I like talking with them.”
WordChoi	“ <u>How</u> do you think about this question?” “What kind of music you usually <u>hear</u> ?”	“ <u>How</u> do you think?” “Old people often <u>claim</u> me, so I don't like it.” “I study <u>Germany</u> .”	“Sometimes talking to old people makes me feel <u>boring</u> when they talk for too long.”

If the students were to receive no feedback on the accuracy of these statements, it could be assumed that they would make no improvement and these errors could potentially become fossilised (Richards and Schmidt, 1985). To explore the relationship between accuracy, feedback, and improvement, the classes received feedback in three different ways:

Class 1	Received no feedback on accuracy
Class 2	Received feedback on accuracy without grammar instruction
Class 3	Received feedback on accuracy with grammar instruction

As indicated, Class 1 received no feedback on the accuracy of their English. They only received actionable feedback relating to the discussion and communication skills of the course. The only time that errors were addressed and corrected was when they hindered meaning or caused some type of communication problem. By contrast, Classes 2 and 3 were given feedback on the accuracy of their English, however, Class 3 was given additional grammar instruction to help them remember grammatical points or rules. This was always done briefly and in the most simple and memorable way

possible. For example, after making repeated mistakes with comparative adjectives, the teacher wrote this on the whiteboard:

2 syllables or less	=	-er
3 syllables or more	=	more -

After a brief explanation, the teacher ran a substitution drill to help the students practise conjugating adjectives depending on how many syllables the adjective had. For example:

T: *“Cold.”*

S1: *“Colder.”*

T: *“Interesting”*

S2: *“More interesting.”*

Irregular forms were practised once the students had become familiar with the grammar rule and their conjugations became consistently accurate. The irregular adjectives were ‘good, bad’ and ‘boring.’ Class 3 was the only class to receive this additional type of feedback and instruction as it is not usual to introduce or correct grammar in the English Discussion Class.

Feedback

According to Shute (2007), feedback can be praise, verification of accuracy, or an explanation of a correct answer. There are various types of feedback, and they can be administered either immediately or delayed until an activity is over. Narasaki’s (2016) research into student perception of feedback within the English Discussion Class revealed that the majority of participants preferred to receive feedback after discussions. Therefore, the feedback in this study was always delayed. This helped to encourage students to correct their own mistakes and avoid any student from feeling singled out if corrected on the spot. It also meant that everyone could benefit from the same actionable feedback and implement it in later activities.

The process of correcting the utterances for Classes 2 and 3 involved first writing them on the whiteboard before having students volunteer to correct them after their discussions had ended. Any student was welcome to correct the utterances, but the teacher also made sure to ask for a new volunteer each time. To help facilitate this process and highlight habitual errors, utterances were grouped by form (e.g. SVA) and limited to a maximum of three so as not to overwhelm the students. This was to show students that these errors were reoccurring and that they could correct them themselves when speaking.

Self-Correction

Early in the semester, the students of all classes were shown how to correct their own mistakes. This was done with a simple poster and demonstration from the teacher. The students were told that whenever they noticed that they had made a mistake, they should say “Actually...” and then correct it themselves. The poster looked like this:

ACTUALLY
+
[CORRECTION]

The students of all classes immediately began using this adverb to preface any correction that they made, which helped them to sound more natural and fluent.

Results of the Trial

By the end of the semester, it was clear that Class 1 displayed the highest degree of habitual errors and the fewest instances of self-correction. By contrast, Class 2 displayed a reduced degree of repeating mistakes but the highest degree of self-correction. Finally, Class 3 made the fewest mistakes in later lessons and had the lowest degree of self-correction, which suggests they had fewer mistakes to correct and therefore self-correction was not necessary.

In a similar study, Vickers (2006) stated that ‘explicit self-correction seems to be effective in terms of gains in grammatical accuracy’ (p.9). Although, Vickers referred to the accuracy of writing, a similar conclusion can be drawn from the results of this study. Class 3 received additional feedback on form and as a result showed the most improvement. They also succeeded just as well as the other classes in terms of fluency. As students are not graded on their accuracy in this course, there was no pressure for them to be more accurate other than a willingness to learn.

Additionally, a member of Class 3 made an interesting self-correction in a later lesson. Earlier in the semester, he had asked ‘How do you think?’ to a classmate during an activity. However, after being taught that this does not sound natural he corrected this same mistake in a later class by saying “How do you think? ...Ah! What do you think? How about you?” This self-correction perhaps reveals that because the phrases ‘How about you? What about you?’ and ‘What do you think?’ are all similar, they became jumbled in the student’s mind as he tried to recall them. Initially when the student had first made this mistake and not understood why it was inaccurate, the teacher demonstrated the difference by having him ask each question in succession. The teacher replied “I think it is good” to ‘What’s your opinion?’ and “I use my brain” to “How do you think?”

Conclusion

From this investigation, it is clear that Class 3 showed the greatest improvement in terms of accuracy and that this can be attributed to them receiving additional feedback relating to grammatical form. This feedback and focus had no perceivable effect on their fluency, confidence, risk-taking, or performance as they accomplished just as much as the other classes by the end of the semester. This focus on accuracy meant that by the end of the semester, they no longer made any of the habitual errors that they had at the start while Classes 1 and 2 still displayed some of these mistakes during longer activities.

In the future, it would be interesting to repeat this study with a larger sample of students, a few more control groups, and to structure activities to *focus on form* (Long, 1991, as cited in Kita, 2019) through grammar-based activities, example dialogues, or grammar skeletons. As the course textbook remains largely the same each semester, it would be easy to predict which grammar points students

might make mistakes with and prepare accordingly. For example, as a pattern of mistakes could be seen throughout all classes for Lesson 2, a grammar scaffold, an explanation, or a simple reminder of how to use auxiliary verbs with count/non-count nouns accurately (e.g. “Children are better to talk to.”) could be introduced at some point during the lesson.

The teacher-fronted feedback (Narasaki, 2016) certainly helped the students of Class 3 to understand the grammatical points. However, this feedback could also be accomplished in a more self-reflective way by preselecting sentences that sound similar but can lead to confusion like “What do you think?” and “How do you think?” or the catalyst for this study, “I had an umbrella stolen” vs. “I have stolen an umbrella.”

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