Students' Uptake of Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

In second language acquisition, errors by learners are seen as an indicator of progress in language. However, errors must be properly treated. The treatment of error is possible through corrective feedback. In view of the fact that present day language teaching is geared towards communicative competence, this paper aims to show how students respond to corrective feedback. A writing task is administered to a class of forty seven students. A pretest is given after an instructional lesson. Two weeks later, a post test is given based on the language items provided in corrective feedback. The post test shows the response of the students to corrective feedback. Consequently, the paper discusses factors that might have caused poor response of the students after corrective feedback. The paper recommends a three prong approach in error treatment: provision of good atmosphere for learning by the government, adoption of good learning strategy by the students and the use of interactive feedback by teachers for the communicative enhancement of learners.

Keywords: *Uptake, second language acquisition, error treatment, noticing, corrective feedback*

Introduction

Second language teaching is aimed towards second language acquisition. Second language acquisition is similar to the process children acquire their first language. For competence in the second language it is required that the learners interact in the target language naturally (Krashen, 2002, p.1).

Learners in second language setting are exposed to two types of input: positive evidence and negative evidence (Kim, 2005, p.1). Positive evidence refers to authentic native speaker discourse in a simplified and elaborate format to facilitate learner's comprehension. On the other hand, negative evidence which provides information as to what is unacceptable in a language. The provision of negative evidence is reaction to the production of error by second language learners.

Second language learners have certain aims to achieve. Criper and Widdowson (1975, pp.180-182) explain that language permeates society and helps to define and maintain social institutions and social values. Based on this, second language teachings have certain aims in perspective. These aims are explained subsequently.

Second language teaching aims at developing in second language learners certain forms of linguistic behaviour which targets on native speakers abilities. Proficiency in the target language would provide access to scientific and technical knowledge which is unavailable to learners through the medium of their first language.

Second language teaching is directed towards an institutional purpose: economic, political and educational. In view of the importance of language for economic, political and educational development, language can be used as a tool for participation or exclusion (Bamgbose, 2003, p.71).

Since second language learning aims at participation, it means that proficiency in the target language is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, errors creep up during second language learning. These errors are to be properly treated. A proper treatment reflects in uptake.

This paper aims to provide answers to the following questions.

1.   What instructional setting would enhance positive uptake of corrective feedback?
2.   What learning strategies would enhance positive uptake of corrective feedback?
3.   What instructional strategy would enhance positive uptake of corrective feedback?

This paper aims to examine the instructional setting, learning strategies and teaching strategies that would enhance corrective feedback.

For a thorough examination of uptake of corrective feedback, this paper is divided into five parts. Part one is for introduction; part two has the background as well as review of relevant literature. Part three explains the research methodology. Part four contains presentation and analysis of data. Part five anchors the paper with summary and recommendation.

Background

Three theories of language acquisition have over the year affected second language teaching. The three main theories are based on the behaviourist perspective, the innate/linguist perspective and the interactional/developmental perspective (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, pp.10-17). These theoretical perspectives have bearings on corrective feedback.

The behavioural approach views learning a language as a process of habit formation resulting from input and reinforcement of correct habits and negative reinforcement of mistakes. Learners had a blank canvass and had input for language acquisition through imitation of a set of habits. (Woozley, n.d. p.3). All learning, verbal or non verbal takes place through the establishment of habits which were development based on input from the environment (Xiangui, 2005, p.121). Based on this theory, errors in second language were seen as interference from habits acquired in the first language (Woozley n.d. p.2). Behaviourism sees error as a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure (Maicusi et al., 2000, p.2).

The innate perspective is based on Chomsky's views on language acquisition. Using rational logic, reason extrapolation and inference, Chomsky sees language acquisition as the gradual, creative build up of knowledge systems, resulting in implored general competence, rather than performance of habits in isolated instances (Woozley, n .d. p.4). In other words, the innate creativity in language learners is based on the internal cognitive learning. The innate perspective is based on cognitivism which is related to the idea that language is rule formation not habit formation (Odo, 2007, p.219). By innatist approach, error is needed for progress. Based on Chomsky's idea, that a child generates language through innate universal structures, errors are conceived as a progressive step which shows learners experiment by trial and error. The learner forms a hypothesis of the language as the rule system. The over simplified form results in errors which occur less as the learners modify and improve their knowledge of the target language (Woozley, n .d., p.5).

The third theory is language acquisition based on the social interactionist approach. By this approach, the social and interactive nature of language affects language acquisition. Language acquisition is achieved through the operation of the social context which relates to the negotiation of meaning not just the one-way process of comprehensible input. The social interactionist approach view errors as a social norm as well as a cognitive process. (Maicusi et al., 2000, p.2). Maicusi quotes George who notes that different definitions are given for errors by different persons. Errors by children are seen as transitional forms. Errors by native speakers are seen as slips of the tongue and as unwanted forms if made by second language learners. Because errors by second

language learners are seen as unwanted forms, Lennon (in Maicusi et al., 2000, p.1) explains that errors are linguistic forms which are unlikely to be produced by the native speakers of a language.

Woozley (n.d., p.5) list the following as types of errors.

1. Overgeneralization- This occurs when learners make predictions which are wrong. For example, add 's' to every noun for plural. The application of this rule to 'ox' or 'men' would produce 'oxs' or mens' which is wrong.
2. Transfer- This occurs when learners use knowledge of their native language to make predictions above the target language. For example, using affirmative for negative intent to a simple negative question.
3. Omission/ Redundancy Reduction- This occurs when learners omit certain parts of speech which are not necessary to the overall goal of communication.
4. Learners are forced to use telegraphic speech to communicate in any ad hoc manner when there are no items available for them to express themselves fluently.
5. Performance errors- Errors cause by nervousness which results to lapses.
6. Bad teaching- Learners become confuse by faulty teaching or generalization of certain rules without observing the exceptions to such rules.
7. Fossilization- Errors which never disappear due to many possible reasons.

Error Treatment

Second language teaching aims at the learners' proficiency in the target language. Errors by language learners in second language learning are inevitable. Until 1967, errors by learners were seen as a sign of failure.

Corder in 1967 established the field of Error Analysis (EA). EA is a linguistic study that focuses on the errors learners make through an analysis of the errors made in the target language. The linguistic study of errors serves two purposes: diagnostic and prognostic. By the diagnostic function of EA, the learners' grasp of a language during the learning process is shown. By the prognostic function of EA, learning materials are modified to meet the learners identified linguistic problems.

Allwright (1988, p.199) explains that errors by language learners can be seen as an indicator of 'crisis points'. He explains that error is typically seen as evidence of failure of some sort rather than evidence of deliberate hypothesis-testing, a kind of evidence of teacher failure or learner failure. This failure indicates that the learner needs a remedial action and for the teacher, the provision of satisfactory treatment of the error.

In view of this, Weireesh (1991) considers learners' errors as a device the learners use to gain from a reliable feedback. Error analysis as a design for remedial teaching identifies and explains the difficulties of the learner.

The designed remedial teaching which is based on error analysis serves the following purposes. First, it indicates the level of the learners' proficiency in the target language. Second, it provides information about the difficulties the learners have in language learning. Third, it shows that second language learners' errors are potentially important for the understanding of the processes of second language acquisition (Candling, 2001, p.69).

In view of the foregoing learners errors should be viewed positively as it is part of the natural process of language learning and provides a picture of the hypothesis testing of the language learner and so, it is part of cognition.

Corrective Feedback

The acquisition of a language is subject to input. Carroll (2006, p.1) detects two approaches to input in the broad range of current SLA research. One, input to language acquisition based on universal grammar in the form of mental representation which 'may just have been computed de novo at the instant of acquisition or may have been activated from long term memory to be internally altered in some way'. Two, input refers to 'purely environmentally available stimuli- sounds in the speech stream, marks on a page, or pixels on a computer screen etc'.

The input to language acquisition is termed either positive or negative evidence. Positive evidence provides what is acceptable in the target language while negative evidence does not.

Corrective feedback is kind of negative evidence, provides information. Kim (2005, p.1) quotes Long and Robinson who note that negative evidence can serve two purposes- preemptive strategy and reactive strategy. Negative evidence as a preemptive strategy provides information through rule presentation before incorrect use of language occurs. As a reactive strategy, negative evidence indicates and/or correct non-target like forms in learners output.

A piece of corrective feedback is a response from an addressee likely a teacher to learners where the teachers. Intention is to correct the learners' erroneous utterance (Basiron, 2008, p.192). Here lies error treatment which refers to 'any teacher behaviour following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error (Chandron, 1988, p.150).

Corrective feedback could be in the form of implicit or explicit feedback occurring in both natural conversational and instructional setting (Sheen, 2004, p.264). Basiron (2008, p.192) quotes Ellis and Elam who note that corrective feedback is a response to a learner's error by;

1.   indicating where the error has occurred,
2.   providing the correct structure of the erroneous utterance or
3.   providing metalinguistic information describing the nature of the error, or any combination of these.

Corrective feedback in explicit form provides an overt error correction while the implicit form does not. The following are types of corrective feedback identified in literature.

a)   Explicit Correction: Teacher overtly corrects a learner by providing the feedback. For example;
     Student: She do go to school.
     Teacher: She does not go to school.
b)   Metalinguistic Feedback: Teacher corrects learner's error by providing explanation of the error without providing the correct answer. For example:
     Student: Yesterday, she walk to school.
     Teacher: Add 'ed' to the verb to mark past tense for an action that was done before the time of discourse.
c)   Elicitation: Teacher asks questions to obtain the correct form of an erroneous utterance.
     Student: Yesterday, she walk to school.
     Teacher: What do you do to the form of the verb when it refers to an action that was done before the time of discourse?
     Implicit Feedback
d)   Recast: teacher reformulates a learner's erroneous utterance in the correct form either wholly or partly.
e)   Clarification Request: Teacher asks the learner to rephrase the erroneous utterance.
f)   Repetition: Teacher raises her voice to highlight an error by repeating a learner's erroneous utterance.

g) Translation: Teacher translates a learner's native utterance into the target language to correct the erroneous utterance.

h) Paralinguistic Sign: Teacher uses facial expressions, gesture cues or a high voice intonation to provide a non verbal corrective feedback.

Uptake

The essence of corrective feedback is the elimination of errors from learners' interlanguage. This is possible if learners are able to comprehend the input, notice the mismatch between the input and their interlanguage system. The response of the learner to the input of the teacher refers to uptake. The corrective feedback provided by the teacher results in uptake which manifest in an utterance that does not require repair or an utterance that require repair.

The successful treatment of error shows that the learner has noticed the corrective feedback provided by the teacher. According to Schmidt Noticing Hypothesis, 'input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed. That is, consciously registered' (Schmidt, 2010, p.1). He further explains that' people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to'. Corder (1967, p.23) explains that intake is the part of input that is integrated into the learner's knowledge and becomes part of his interlanguage. In precise terms, uptake shows what and how students use feedback (Tedick and Gortari, 1998, p.3).

The noticing hypothesis implies that learners have to adopt an effective learning strategy in order to learn the target language. This is in line with Chaudron (1988, p.134) views that learners must use the information available in feedback to confirm, disconfirm and modify the hypothetical rules of their target language. Ellis (1991) shares this view by stating that the acquisition of a language includes the steps of 'noticing, comparing and integrating'.

Based on the noticing hypothesis, input only becomes intake in second language learning when noticing occurs. Corrective feedback sets learners to notice gaps between their interlanguage and the target norms. This 'noticing' subsequently leads to restructuring. Cross (2002, p.3) lists the following as factors that influences noticing in the input:

1. Instruction – Instruction provides structured, differentiated input that assists noticing by focusing attention on and enhancing awareness of language features.

2. Frequency – A language feature may become frequent due to repeated instruction or by way of teacher talk.

3. Perceptual Salience- The more prominent a language, the greater the chance it will be noticed.

4. Skill level – Skill level includes how well individuals are able to routinize previously met structures. The processing ability in turn determines how ready learners are to notice new forms in the input.

5. Task Demands- Refers to the way in which an instructional task causes learners to notice particular features that are necessary in order to carry out the task.

6. Comparing- Noticing alone is not enough for input to become intake. Rather it requires learners to make a comparison between their observed input and typical output based on their existing interlanguage system.

Corrective feedback could be ineffective if there is a mismatch between the teacher's intention and the learners' interpretation. Kim (2005, p.14) explains that there could be a mismatch if the teacher's feedback on learners' nontargetlike form is misconstrued; it apparently leads to no congruence between the teacher's intended pedagogical focus and students' actual attentional focus. According to Kim (2005, p.16), a mismatch could be any of the following;

i.   A mismatch between the teacher's correction and the real nature of the learning problem.
ii.   Mismatch between the teacher's intent and the student's perception.
iii. A mismatch between the teacher's understanding of the problem and its real nature.

Methodology

This study is a classroom centred research. According to Salami-Nodoushan (2006, p.1), research on 'classroom language learning is basically done by either observation or introspection, or even combination of both'.

The data presented in this study is got from the record of students activities in the classroom. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are used for the analysis of the data got from the classroom. The data is a record of students performance in two tests; pretest and post tests. A pretest was given before corrective feedback and a posttest after corrective feedback.

A class (mixed ability) of forty seven students is used for this study. A pretest is given after an instructional lesson. One week later, teacher negotiates with the students to provide corrective feedback. Two weeks later, a post test is given based on the correction made after the pretest.

Data Presentation

Table 1: *Students' Pretest Scores*

Scores	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Frequency	1	11	4	10	12	7	2
Mode	5						
Median	4						
Mean	4.06						

Table 2: *Students' Post test Scores*

Scores	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Frequency	4	4	7	9	9	7	7
Mode	6, 7						
Median	6						
Mean	6.36						

Data Analysis

The test scores presented above shows the students' uptake of the teacher's corrective feedback. The first test shows that the students are 5.94 away from the target of 10. The post test shows 57% increment with the students 3.64 away from the target of 10. The increase in scores shows that 8 students out of the 26 students below the fair line of score 5 are yet to optimally benefit from the feedback provided in the class. This is in congruence with the fact that feedback informs, regulates, strengthens, sustains and eliminates error in language learning (Han, 2000, p.6).

The test scores are in line with Askland (2010, pp.85-86) conviction that competent students are more likely to benefit from instruction and feedback because they will take notice of salient features of language items presented to them. This means that language teachers should

encourage less competent students to focus on the salient features of language forms. This would greatly enhance communicative competence.

The test scores corroborate Schmidt Noticing Hypothesis. According to Schmidt(1990, p.131) input and noticing result to intake. The whole of this is related to his position that consciousness plays a significant role in second language learning. The fact that some students are yet to notice or take in the correction provided by the teacher explains the possible failure of the students to notice the correction provided by the teacher.

The test scores show the different response of the students to corrective feedback. Jin (2011, p.134) explains that 'attention and awareness can be connected to the study of individual differences and consideration of formal instruction in language learning'.

If possible teachers should adopt the communicative language teaching method. This method is accepted as the dominant paradigm in language teaching (Alcon, 2004, p.175). Communicative language teaching is based on integrative learning activities which are intrinsically motivating for learners (Norbert, 2007, p.18).

Tatawy (2006, p.14) notes that there are conditions that determine the efficacy of corrective feedback. These conditions are listed below;

a. Fine tuning of corrective feedback to be at congruence with the level of students understanding and ability.
b. Provision of individualized attention to the learners.
c. Consistent focus upon one type of error at a time over a period of time.

Apart from the teacher's style, the instructional setting also can affect the efficacy of corrective feedback. Time constraints and overpopulated classrooms make it difficult for language teachers to provide effective corrective feedback that would lead to positive uptake on the part of the learners. It is difficult for a teacher to fine tune corrective feedback, consistently focus on a type of error or provide individualized attention to forty seven students within limited time.

Pedagogical Implications

The aim of corrective feedback is to increase the proficiency of a learner in a target language. Unless a learner's interlanguage has fossilized, a learner is supposed to respond to corrective feedback. The improvement that comes with corrective feedback is learning (Reigel, 2005, p.14). The response of learners to corrective feedback is uptake. Uptake is possible when students are actively involved in the learning process. For instance, the noticing hypothesis is based on the response of the learner to input which may be corrective feedback. Where the students are not actively involved in language learning, they may not notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language.

Language teachers need to enhance their knowledge of the target language. Corrective feedback demands that a teacher treats error by being preemptive and diagnostic. This is not possible if the competence of the language teacher in the target language is in doubt.

It is severally noted in literature that some mismatches occur between teachers' corrective feedback and students' interpretations of corrective feedback. Sometimes, teachers are inconsistent in their treatment of error and this leads to potential confusion which may manifest as errors in the students interlanguage (Allwright, 1988, pp. 200-201). Mismatches can be reduced by the application of joint attention cue. This refers to a condition where a teacher makes conscious effort to ensure that the students understand the intended feedback (Dominey and Dodane, 2004, p.136). This would reduce indeterminacy or referential ambiguity which is responsible for mismatches.

Tatawy (2006, p.15) notes that certain conditions would bring about positive uptake after corrective feedback. These conditions are listed below;

(i)   Teachers need to be systematic and consistent in their provision of feedback.
(ii)   Corrective feedback when provided should be clear enough to be perceived as such.
(iii) The techniques employed for feedback should allow for time and opportunity for self- and paired-repair and modified output.
(iv) The feedback given should be fine-tuned in the sense that there should be close a match as possible between the teacher's intent, the targeted error and learners' perception of the given feedback.
(v)   The learners' developmental readiness to process the feedback provided should be taken into consideration.

Recommendation

Based on the importance of the use of language in the society, a three prong approach is recommended thus:

1.   Government should create a conducive environment for teaching and learning. The adoption of communicative language teaching in public schools in Nigeria would only be possible by the instructional setting of schools which is dictated by government provisions in schools.
2.   Teachers should adopt practices that showcase professionalism by keeping themselves abreast of current teaching methods.
3.   Students should pay attention to the input provided language teachers if they must gain competence in a target lang

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