Managing language errors in real-time: A microanalysis of teacher practices

Drew S. Fagan*

University of Maryland, 2311 Benjamin Building, College Park, MD 20742, USA

ABSTRACT

In addressing learners' language errors in classrooms, second language acquisition (SLA) scholars have formulated, examined, and categorized feedback types as having varied influences on language learning; not often accounted for in this line of inquiry, though, is the contingent nature of teachers' management of language errors in relation to the actions and activities within real-time classroom interactions. Rather than investigating such management vis-à-vis pre-conceived feedback types, the current paper utilizes the microanalytic lens of conversation analysis to document the emergence of teaching practices when learner errors arise and the reasons behind their usage as evidenced in the discourse itself. Based on 26 h of video-recorded data, two management practices surfaced: (1) foregrounding achievement and addressing correction, and (2) providing personal appreciation and addressing correction. The specific sequential environments in which they are found and their varied constructions are presented. As shown, teachers' management of language errors is multifaceted, performing simultaneous actions beyond solely doing error correction. The paper concludes with a discussion on the importance of using microanalytic lenses to provide fuller, more enriched understandings of how teachers' management of language errors surface in authentic classroom interactions, why such management is constructed as it is, and what it accomplishes.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Commonplace across language teacher education programs is learning the processes and theories of second language acquisition (SLA), where the intention of utilizing this research is to inform, if not altogether influence, teaching practices (Ellis, 2010). At odds, though, is the direct applicability of such research findings in authentic classroom interactions given that, moment-by-moment, teachers must maneuver through numerous and simultaneous factors not taken into account in this literature, e.g., curriculum mandates, local-, state-, and national-standards, number of learners in a classroom, their learning styles and educational backgrounds, and lesson progression (Allwright, 2005; Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005; Han, 2007; Tarone & Allwright, 2005). Exemplifying this is work examining teachers' management of learners' language errors, long documented in SLA studies as being an integral component for promoting learning within classroom contexts (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). Although there is consensus that such salient management enables learners to notice what language use needs correction and attempt modification of said language use (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Goo & Mackey,

* Tel.: +1 301 405 4416.
 E-mail address: dfagan@umd.edu.

2013; Long, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006), there remains minimal empirical research investigating these practices in ways that have "practical significance to teaching and … is transparently relevant to teachers" (Lyster & Ranta, 2013, p. 181).

Central to this issue of transparent relevancy is reconciling the superimposition of findings from quasi-experimental studies on teaching practices with the dynamic, ever-emergent nature of authentic classroom interactions. In the case of managing learners' language errors, SLA scholars have formulated, examined, and categorized feedback types as having varied influences on language learning, albeit in relation to research questions and hypotheses addressing specific learner linguistic patterns (Mackey & Goo, 2013). Not accounted for in this line of inquiry is the contingent nature of teachers' management of language errors as they surface in real-time discourse. Thus, rather than investigating such teacher management vis-à-vis pre-conceived feedback types categorized by other empirical studies, the current paper sets out to encapsulate the actions and activities teachers orient to when making in-the-moment decisions regarding learners' language errors. Here, I examine one English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher's systematic management of language errors through the microanalytic lens of conversation analysis, documenting the organic emergence of authentic classroom practices when learner errors arise, the varied constructions and uses of those practices, and the reasons behind their usage as evidenced in the discourse itself.

2. Background

To position the current study within broader scholarly inquiry, I bridge two fields of research: SLA studies examining management of learner errors in relation to corrective feedback types and classroom discourse studies examining teacher feedback turn construction.

2.1. Corrective feedback in SLA research

The notion of corrective feedback centers largely on work supporting and supported by the interaction hypothesis, which places primacy on the importance for learners to notice target features in the language (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Key to this hypothesis is "negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the [native speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, and output" (Long, 1996, pp. 451—452). The teacher, as a more competent interlocutor, can therefore be in part a catalyst to the acquisition process by triggering language adjustment for the learners through corrective feedback.

Varied feedback types found in this work include those that are input-providing such as recasts and explicit corrections, as well as those that are output-prompting like clarification requests, confirmation checks, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition of errors (Ellis, 2006; Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ranta & Lyster, 2007). Of these, recasts are the most commonly used in language classroom interaction (Lyster et al., 2013; Miller & Pan, 2012; Révész, 2012). Scholars have long examined the effectiveness of recasts on language learning, with contradictory results being found. While they are seen as an effective form of correction in the language classroom environment to minimize communication disruption (Chaudron, 1977, 1988), learners can also find them ambiguous if teachers do not make explicit their purpose (Lyster, 1998; Russell & Spada, 2006). Barring ambiguity, it remains unclear whether recasts affect long-term learning (e.g., Loewen & Philp, 2006) or whether this depends on factors such as the linguistic target, the characteristics of the recast, and individual learner differences (e.g., Ellis, 2007; Long, 2007; Mackey, Adams, Stafford, & Winke, 2010; Sheen, 2011). In contrast, output-prompting feedback has continually been shown to have positive longitudinal effects on language development (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2004), though as with the findings on recast use, research is now only beginning to show that it is not necessarily the type of corrective feedback that affects learning but rather which type is used in relation to, among other factors, the language focus (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical form, pronunciation) and the needs of the learners in the immediate context (Lyster & Saito, 2010; Yoshida, 2010).

While most of the corrective feedback literature has focused on the influence of these practices on learning, some researchers have investigated teachers' and learners' preferences for using different feedback types, albeit not necessarily what is actually used in the classroom. For some teachers, the decision on what corrective feedback type to use is based on learners' perceived anxiety when doing explicit correction, leaving many to opt for implicit forms of correction (e.g., recasts) or only doing correction with language errors that impede communication (e.g., Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Jean & Simard, 2011; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). In one of the few studies utilizing authentic classroom interaction, Yoshida (2008) noted that, in addition to taking into consideration learners' anxieties, teachers also chose to do recasts for practical purposes, allowing them to more smoothly continue with an activity without disruption. Conversely, learners have stated that they prefer explicit correction. Brown (2009) described how more advanced language learners wanted explicit forms of correction in order to notice their errors and be guided on how to correct them, while those in Yoshida's (2008) study requested opportunities for self-correction vis-à-vis elicitation or clarification requests as opposed to being given the correct answer. Schulz (2001) found that a learner's culture and language learning ideologies could influence their perceptions of corrective feedback use, with Colombian learners favoring explicit correction in grammar activities over American learners.

In sum, the corrective feedback literature can be categorized as either examining the direct effects of corrective feedback on language learning or examining teachers' and learners' perceptions of feedback use. The majority of this work, however, does not account for the emergence of feedback practices in naturally occurring classroom interactions;