

How Teachers Treat Pronunciation Errors in Young Learners' Class

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Abstract: To pronounce words correctly is one of the most important elements in language learning. Children can learn pronunciation more effectively when teachers provide sufficient modelling and correct their erroneous utterances properly. If children's erroneous pronunciations are left untreated, the errors will fossilize and be difficult to correct. Despite its vital role, research on how teachers treat young learners' pronunciation errors is still scant. Therefore, this study aims to investigate what corrective feedback teachers use to treat young learners' pronunciation errors and the reasons behind the decision. Case study is employed as the research method with two teachers differing in educational background and teaching experiences selected as participants. Lyster and Ranta's (1997) categorization of corrective feedback was employed in this research. The findings demonstrate that recast and explicit correction are predominantly used to treat young learners' erroneous pronunciation. The action mainly is unintended, but the secondary consideration is due to the characteristic pronunciation learning which, unlike grammar learning, is considered to be void of systematic thinking process. This study is expected to enrich the theories of corrective feedback and pronunciation teaching as well as to help teachers to decide what types of corrective feedback appropriate to treat their students' pronunciation errors.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Attaining accurate pronunciation is one of the main goals of English learning. According to Hughes (2011), there are two main components of speaking which need to be mastered by students, namely forms (grammar and vocabulary) and delivery (pronunciation and fluency). The failure of incorporating the two components in speaking can lead to communication breakdown. Among all factors causing misunderstanding in communication, pronunciation errors tend to trigger more breakdown compared to lexical or grammatical errors (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Levis, 2005). Hence, giving considerable time allotment to focus on students' pronunciation development should become a common endeavour for English teachers. However, the practical English learning situation is far-fetched from being ideal.

Despite uniformed curriculum, English classes in Indonesia tend to have various skills and contents

focused. Yet, most schools, especially during high-take testing preparation period, are commonly geared toward teaching reading and listening skills tested in the National Examination (*Ujian Nasional*) (Hamied, 2010; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). To make matter worse, the time allocation for English subject in schools is very limited. Learners have English class only four to six credit hours a week. These disadvantageous conditions tend to give teachers considerable pressure when teaching English. At this rate, enabling students to speak fluently and pronounce words accurately should be conducted by optimizing the limited amount of time they have. The optimization of pronunciation teaching specifically may not occur if corrective feedback is not given properly (Havranek & Cesnik, 2001; Havranek, 2002; Saito & Lyster, 2012).

1.2 Theoretical Review

Despite the criticisms from some experts (see for example Halliwell, 1992; Gordon, 2006; Harmer, 2007), many experts to some extent agree that oral corrective feedback is an effective tool for improving

learners' language proficiency (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Choi & Li, 2015). Sheen and Ellis (2011) suggest that oral corrective feedback draw learners and teachers' attention to the language features which have not been mastered completely. In other words, it serves both learners and teachers' importance. Learners are helped to understand which part of the lesson they have not mastered completely, while teachers are suggested which language features they need to teach more intensively (Lochtman, 2002; Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). Applying corrective feedback strategy can also help teachers to optimize their pronunciation teaching as it enables teachers to provide time for students to practice as well as giving necessary inputs in the middle of activities. Nevertheless, the giving of oral corrective feedback as a strategy to improve learners' pronunciation accuracy tends to be underrated. Rahimi and Zhang (2015) for instance, reported that compared to other aspects of teaching such as material development and teaching skills, reports on teachers' practice and understanding of corrective feedback are relatively scarce.

Children or young learners might get considerable drawbacks from the lack of oral corrective feedback in pronunciation teaching. Experts (see for example Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Gass & Selinker, 2008) state that young learners tend to learn pronunciation more quickly and precisely than adults. The best time for learning pronunciation is stated to be before adolescence (Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Gass & Selinker, 2008). The effective learning time which is also referred as the golden period (Gass & Selinker, 2008) may come in waste if teachers do not give sufficient modelling and correction for young learners. Lyster and Saito (2010) assert that children can benefit from oral corrective feedback when the types of corrective feedback given fit the contexts of learning and characteristics of learners. If teachers want to optimize the limited time allotment and maximize young learners' potency of learning pronunciation, they need to know how to treat young learners' pronunciation errors correctly by applying oral corrective feedback strategies in their class.

Corrective feedback usually is initiated by the noticing of errors. Then, the next correction process can be carried out 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 (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). If teachers decide to ignore the errors, then topic continuation may follow. Learners are expected to produce an uptake after the

correction has been given, but they may ignore the correction and continue the topic. When the utterance is still erroneous or needs repair, teachers may give more feedback or continue the topic. The sequence usually ends when repair uptake is provided by students and reinforcement is given by teachers (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

The most noteworthy categorization of corrective feedback strategies is proposed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). They categorize corrective feedback into six types, namely (1) recast (teachers' reformulation of all or part of learners' utterance without the errors) (2) explicit correction (giving additional information indicating the error) (3) clarification request (asking for reformulation) (4) error repetition (repeating the errors with emphasis or high intonation) (5) elicitation (eliciting the reformulation directly) and (6) metalinguistic feedback (comments, information, or question leading to reformation of learners' utterances). Additional types of corrective feedback, namely translation, proposed by Panova & Lyster (2002) and paralinguistic signal, proposed by Ellis (2009) can also be included as they may enrich and deepen the analysis of feedback types used by teachers. Among eight corrective feedback strategies mentioned above, recast and explicit correction are predominantly used to address pronunciation errors since they can serve as models (Choi & Li, 2012; Yang, 2016).

Research on oral corrective feedback tends to focus on general errors and adult English class (see for example Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2004; Yoshida, 2008), while research focused on corrective feedback on teachers' corrective feedback on young learners' pronunciation errors is relatively scarce. Brown (2014) and Yang (2016) reported that the types of error predominantly addressed by the teachers are grammar errors, while pronunciation errors were not seen as priorities by the teachers. Nevertheless, Yang (2016) suggests that despite its infrequent numbers, using explicit correction to address pronunciation errors tends to be effective. Choi and Li (2012) reported quite a distinctive finding as they found that various corrective feedback strategies were successfully used to address the students' pronunciation errors. Although the research reports might shed a light on the issues being discussed, the investigations mentioned above were not conducted in EFL young learners' classes. Hence, investigations on what corrective feedback strategies teachers use to address students pronunciation errors and reasons behind the consideration are still quite urgent.

This research endeavours to fill the lacuna by investigating what oral corrective feedback types that teachers use to address young learners' pronunciation errors and the reasons behind the selection. This research is expected to provide teachers with potential insights about oral corrective feedback strategies for young learners' class.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature as it aims to describe a phenomenon and understand a certain context deeply (Gay, et al, 2009; Alwasilah, 2014). Case study is employed in this research since it tries to reveal certain practices conducted by participants who are considered to possess distinctive qualities.

Two experienced teachers of English for young learners from a state university-funded English training centre in Bandung, Indonesia, are invited to participate in this study on voluntary basis. The participants are selected due to their teaching experiences and different educational background. Both teachers have been teaching English for young learners for more than two years. In terms of educational background, teacher A has bachelor of English education degree, while teacher B is currently pursuing his master of humanism degree. They were advised that their class would be observed for certain lengths and they would be invited to participate in an interview and member checking sessions on a voluntary basis.

The data collected in this study are teachers' oral corrective feedback and explanation. Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Lyster and Panova's (2002) types of corrective feedback theory categorizing corrective feedback into 1) explicit correction, 2) recast, 3) clarification request, 4) metalinguistic feedback, 5) elicitation, 6) repetition, 7) translation, and 8) paralinguistic signal were utilized to categorize the teachers' utterances when addressing their students' pronunciation errors. Students' errors and corrective feedback moves which do not relate to speaking activities were not proceeded to data analysis. Furthermore, the frequency of pronunciation errors and corrective feedback types used were calculated. To unearth the reasons behind the selection of corrective feedback types, semi-structured interview and member checking were conducted. The questions of the interview were about their understanding and perspectives towards students' pronunciation errors and error correction. Member checking was used to discuss the findings from the observation and the reasons behind the practices.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Teachers' Corrective Feedback

In general, the number of pronunciation errors found in the class was relatively low. The reason might due to the tendency of dividing the focus of the class into several skills (Nation & Newton, 2009). Furthermore, in the very limited time, the teachers also need to address other types of error such as grammar and vocabulary errors during the speaking session, making focusing on pronunciation becomes more limited. Four meetings of each teacher were observed to reveal the types of corrective feedback used by the teachers. The findings of the observation are as follows:

Table 1: corrective feedback used by teacher A.

| Corrective feedback types | Pronunciation errors | | Uptake (effectiveness of the feedback) |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------|--|
| | Occurred | Treated | |
| | 19 | 19 | |
| Recast | | 9 | 7 |
| Explicit correction | | 4 | 2 |
| Elicitation | | 4 | 4 |
| Metalinguistic Feedback | | 2 | 2 |

Table 2: corrective feedback used by teacher B.

| Corrective feedback types | Pronunciation errors addressed | | Uptake (effectiveness of the feedback) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|--|
| | Occurred | Treated | |
| | 14 | 9 | |
| Recast | | 8 | 0 |
| Metalinguistic Feedback | | 1 | 0 |

The number of pronunciation errors of teacher A's class is more than those in teacher B's class. In terms of error addressing, teacher A's treatments covered all students' pronunciation and were always followed by uptakes or students' follow up after the correction (Ellis, 2009). The types of corrective feedback used by teacher A were also more varied than teacher B's. On the other hand, despite having lower number of errors, teacher B did not address all the errors and used only two types of corrective feedback to treat the errors.

The predominant occurrence of recast to address students' pronunciation errors echoes many researchers (see for example Panova & Lyster, 2002; Nabei & Swain, 2002) stating that recast is the most frequently used corrective feedback to address students' errors. In terms of young learners' error correction, recast has also been favoured as it tends to be less face-threatening and inhibiting (Saito & Lyster, 2012; Saito, Kazuya, & Lyster, 2012; Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013; Tuan & Mai, 2015). This tendency might be due to the implicitness of recast which fits young learners' characteristic who prone to lose their motivation to learn English (Nikolov, 1999).

Another finding worth to note is the occurrences of some explicit corrective feedback types, namely explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback. Explicit corrective feedback is distinctive as it clearly shows that learners produce erroneous utterances in their speaking (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Ellis, 2009). According to some researchers (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2004; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006), this type of corrective feedback is less favoured by young and low-level learners. Moreover, metalinguistic explanation generally is used to address grammatical errors which can be corrected by explaining the underlying grammar concepts. In other words, to use explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback to address young learners' pronunciation errors are quite unusual due to the learners and errors' characteristics.

3.2 Reasons for the Corrective Feedback Types' Selection

The interview revealed that in general, the teachers were not really aware of the notion of corrective feedback. They explained that they could not recall learning about corrective feedback specifically during their teacher training and pre-service teaching programs. Even if they had learned about the notion before, they admitted that they forget about and do not apply the concepts consciously in their classroom. The use of corrective feedback found in the class is stated to be unintended and based on accumulation of experiences. The finding is in a similar vein with Rahimi and Zhang (2015) who reported that teachers tend to develop teaching strategies based on the reflection of experiences rather than knowledge acquired from their teacher education program. Nevertheless, the teachers still could give further explanation although the use of corrective feedback tend to be intuitive or unintentional.

The member checking of teacher A confirms that the giving of feedback to address all students errors is due to her believe that all errors need to be addressed, otherwise they will fossilize. This believe echoes (Ellis, 2009; Gebhard, 2009), who supports the giving of corrective feedback to errors produced by learners. When asked about the possibility of making learners feel inhibited, like what Ok and Ustact (2013) reported, teachers A explained that the learners are still motivated to learn when they are corrected, making her firmer to keep correcting learners' errors until followed by uptakes even if explicit correction, stating explicitly that learners make errors, needs to be used. As for the selection of corrective feedback type which is admitted to be new for her, she explained that the tendency of using recast is due to the characteristic of pronunciation which does not involve pattern and formula. While for other types of feedback, the possible reasons explained were the frequency of repeated errors and prior explanation of the contents. If the errors are about the contents which have been explained before, she assumed that the students just forgot about the contents, hence elicitation and metalinguistic feedback could serve as prompts or clues for the answer rather than recast which gives the answer directly.

Different insights were given by teacher B who confirmed that what was found from the observation is relevant. He explained that the low frequency of corrective feedback is in line with his believe that young learners should not be corrected frequently as it can lower their motivation to learn (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005). He believes that fluency should be prioritized, thus young learners should not be stopped and pointed out that they produced erroneous utterances. This finding is in similar vein with some experts (Halliwel, 1992; Gordon, 2006; Harmer, 2007) stating that correcting young learners' attempt to speak will discourage them to speak up. As for the use of corrective feedback types in his class and the low number of uptakes, he explained that the reason is still in line with his belief that learners should not be demotivated by corrections. Leaving some number of errors untreated or without uptakes tends to be intentional as he was concerned about learners' attitude toward the correction. The use of recast which is implicit is intended to blur the correction itself. As for the use of metalinguistic feedback in his attempt to address the error, the explanation was that the errors was about the content that learners have known or learned before.

4 CONCLUSION

Both teachers from educational and humanism backgrounds used recast the most frequently to address their students' pronunciation errors. Explicit correction, elicitation, and metalinguistic feedback follow the frequency of occurrence respectively.

In general, the teachers tend to be unaware of the notion of corrective feedback practiced. However, after a deeper questioning, teacher A explained that she considers using recast to address learners' errors due the characteristic of pronunciation errors which does not need step-by-step explanation, while teacher B uses the same type of corrective feedback to avoid threatening students' face. Moreover, both teachers use output-prompting corrective feedback when they consider the errors to be repetitive or have been discussed before.

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