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Embedded Correction in EFL Teachers' Feedback

ZHU Hongmei
Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing, China

Correction is an unavoidable action in classroom interaction. While explicit correction strategies have been extensively researched, implicit correction approaches have been less explored. This paper employs Conversation Analysis method to examine embedded correction, one form of implicit correction, observed in Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) high school classrooms. Our data aim to examine its sequential environment and action trajectory. It's found that embedded corrections occur within fluency and meaning contexts and textual contexts, mostly following a student's response to a teacher's initiating question. Its action trajectory often shows students make the errors, and teachers correct them in the second turns or in the following turns. However, the students have a few opportunities to display the corrected issues. The findings contribute to EFL teacher education and classroom practice by illuminating effective implicit correction strategies.

Keywords: embedded correction, context, feedback

Introduction

Correction means a replacement of an error (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) and is an essential and important action in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom interaction. In high schools in China, students are likely to make errors in English classes because they lack sufficient English knowledge. Teachers need use correction to clarify the referential answers, move the classroom teaching back to the right trail, help students grasp the targeted knowledge, and finally reach the contingent pedagogical aims. Correction has been a familiar and pervasive topic in the theories of second language acquisition and language teaching research. It is usually divided into two types: explicit correction and implicit correction. The latter is further divided into recast, repetition, clarification request, metalanguage feedback, elicitation, and so on. Some divisions merely clarified implicit correction into two types: recast and prompts (Lyster & Mori, 2006). Most of correction studies throw attention on recast (Sheen & Ellis, 2011). Recast includes embedded correction, but is not limited to it. Lyster (1998) thought recasts were less effective than other correction forms, while Shawn and Jenefer (2006) thought recasts were beneficial at least 50% of the time in the adult English L2 classroom. The reason these scholars took different attitudes towards recasts might be that they consider the correction action exists in the moves independently. Treating corrections in a conversation as actions that occur in isolation from the current context might lead to various interpretations. We think classroom interaction is a continuous pedagogical conversation. Based on this understanding, the present study will focus on embedded correction, the one less-noticed recast

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ZHU Hongmei, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing, China.

type, and investigate how it manifests within the sequential flow of classroom interaction. This research can contribute to a better understanding of classroom interaction dynamics.

Literature Review

There are two research directions of EFL correction: cognitive interaction perspective and social interaction perspective. The foundational difference between them is on how language learning achieves. The former regards language learning as a cognitive interaction process in the learners' mind, so these studies focus on the uptake after correction (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001) and mainly explore what the students reply to the teachers' correction (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 49). If the students noticed the teachers' correction action clearly, it is considered as an effective correction. In recent years, the majority of research on correction is grounded in the cognitive interaction perspective. However, Sheen and Ellis (2011) proposed that other varieties might affect the quality of correction, such as age, correction types, and the students' English level. Thus, academic field cannot decide the effect of correction. Firth and Wagner (1997) put forward that language learning occurs in social interaction, rather than in learners' minds. In light of the recent view shift of learning, the perspective of social interaction emerges, focusing on correction in Conversation Analysis. It focuses on how the social action correction carries on (Jefferson, 1974) and how, when, and why correction occurs among teachers and students.

Grounded in the sociological view and the studies on other-correction preference by Schegloff et al. (1977), Mchoul (1985) reported a preference of correction among teachers for next-turn other-initiation and among students for third-turn self-correction in a second high school classroom. He listed its three features: (1) Correction sequence is a recursive operation, which runs the triad of IRF(initiation-response-feedback) more and more; (2) other-correction is used as the last one; (3) the teacher withholds other-correction. Although other-correction is withheld by teachers, it is regarded as a device necessary for people to learn a system required (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Mchoul (1990) set reply-evaluation-correction as a prevailing classroom correction trajectory. This progression underscores the strengthening understanding of how corrections function as a collaborative, interactional accomplishment rather than a unilateral teacher intervention. Macbeth (2004) found that other-initiation and other-correction were more commonplace in the classroom than in ordinary conversation. Apart from the above mentioned, many other scholars focus on preferred correction type (e.g. Beshir & Yigzaw, 2022), or the correction organization in classrooms (e.g. Seedhouse, 2004).

Existing literature on embedded correction highlights Jefferson's (1974) seminal contribution, wherein correction is conceptualized as an interactional resource structured by "repair devices". Jefferson (1983) distinguished between exposed corrections and embedded corrections, the latter being a discreet form of correction that does not form a side sequence, thereby maintaining conversational flow. He defined embedded correction as "(it) can be a way of doing correction-and-only-correction; of keeping such issues as incompetence and/or impropriety off the conversational surface". Jefferson excerpted some examples of embedded correction to distinguish it from exposed correction. The following extract is one example.

Extract 1: Police-cop (cited from Jefferson, 1974, p. 93):

1	Ken:	Well-if you're gonna race, the police have said this to us.
2	Roger:	That makes it even better. The challenge of running from the cops!
3	Ken:	The cops say if you wanna race, uh go out at four or five in the morning
4		on the freeway...

In Extract 1, Roger uses "cops" in Line 2 to replace "police" Ken says in Line 1. Ken accepts Roger's correction in Line 3. This is an embedded correction, which displays two features: First, it is not the business of the conversation because Roger's response to Ken's turn in Line 1 is an assessment to continue the conversation flow. Ken's turn in Lines 3-4 is also to maintain the current conversation. Second, there is no room for "accountings" such as explaining, apologizing etc. in Line 2, which is often along with exposed correction.

Jefferson's example told us clearly the features of embedded correction: not influencing the conversation flow and have no "accountings". Seedhouse (2004) proposed that embedded correction is one prevalent correction in fluency—and—meaning contexts in language classrooms, but he did not dig out the details. Based on previous research on corrections, the study aims to explore how embedded correction occurs in English classrooms in one senior high school in China.

Research Design

Research Questions

The study aims to investigate how embedded corrections occur in EFL high school classrooms in China. To specific, what trigger the embedded corrections happen? How do they proceed? The former question is to explore its sequential environment while the latter is to explore its action trajectory.

Research Method

The study employs Conversation Analysis (CA) method to explore embedded corrections in English classrooms. CA is a qualitative approach, an efficient tool to explore the organization of naturally occurring conversation. It emphasizes "unmotivated observation" (Sacks et al., 1974) and requires the strictest transcription of the conversation. "Unmotivated observation" refers to a stance that refrains from assuming any phenomena. Empirical data and insider perspectives are essential for CA, and consequently, meticulous transcription plays a crucial role in the analytical process. It encompasses not only the text but also voice intonation, speech rate, pauses, and other detailed elements in conversations. The data in this study conform to Jefferson's transcription standard (2004).

Research Data and Procedure

The data are from video recordings of English classrooms in senior high schools in China. There are 18 recorded lessons. Three English teachers voluntarily joined in the study. Their personal basic information and lesson information are as in the following table.

Table 1

Teacher and Lesson Information

Name	Gender	Work period	Class	Lesson type
A	female	2	Grade one	Text reading and comprehension
B	male	5	Grade one	Text reading and comprehension
C	female	10	Grade two	Text reading and comprehension

Data Discussion of Embedded Corrections

Sequential Environment

Seedhouse (2004) has found that embedded correction occurs frequently in fluency—and—meaning contexts, which is consistent with our observation in our data.

Extract 2: Smartphone-smartphones:

1		A:	any other: wa::ys?
2		S:	last term, I would to-would share in a nursing home,
3			and I saw that many elder people don't know
4			how to use mobile phones, so I was thinking that if I can-
5	→		>I could teach them< how to use, can how to use smartphone. Uh::
6			they could (.) CALL: the people they miss in time in the future,
7			which will make their lives more (full) meaning.
8	→	A:	goo:d, oka:y. you talk about smartphones.
9			((take one student's smartphone))
10	→		all of us got smartphones, right?
11			((raise and show the smartphone to the class))
12			they-i:it is quite true for the elder people?
13	→		they had difficult problems with using the smartphones.=
14		S?:	= ye[s.
15		A:	[you, you are-you <TRY> to help them to use smartphones,
16			right?=
17		S:	=yes.
18		A:	OKAY:↓ when you help them,
19			any problems or difficulties, did you ha:ve?
20		S:	No problem.

In Extract 2, Teacher A asks students what ways are beneficial for the social solidarity and what the students can do contributes to it. The student voluntarily responds that she had taught the old people to use the smartphones in the nursing home. Apparently, the interaction goal in this extract is to push students to speak out more English. Although the error is in Line 5, the teacher does not correct it immediately, and instead let the student continue speaking, fostering fluency over accuracy, which aligns with the momentary interactional goal. When the student finishes her turn, the teacher acknowledges her efforts with "good" and changes to a new turn with "okay" and "you talk about smartphones" in which she is doing correction, correcting the singular form of "smartphone" to the plural form of "smartphones" in Line 8, also in Lines 10 and 13. Simultaneously, from Line 8 to Line 13, the teacher also does feedback to the student's response by extracting the topic of "smartphones" and expanding it into a broader discussion. She does not expose the grammatical error of "a smartphone" directly and does not cut off the conversation flow; instead, she employs "smartphones" to continue a second question in Line 18 and Line 19, which aims to promote the students to speak more English.

Aside from occurring in fluency and meaning contexts, embedded correction also occurs in textual contexts, where students need to look for the answers through text reading. The common points between the two contexts lie in the interactional goal: Students must actively engage in language output. The difference between them, however, lives in the epistemic stance. As for fluency and meaning contexts, teachers have less epistemic authority to guide students towards the target answer because their knowledge is less than the students' while in textual contexts, teachers possess clear epistemic authority because they have known the answer based on the texts in teaching material.

Extract 3. /'dɪstrɔɪ/-/dɪs'trɔɪ/; /ri'lɪks /-/'relɪks/:

1		B:	Very good. Okay? That's the purpose, right?
2			SO: since this brings so much benefits. (0.7)
3			Why don't they go on to do this.
4			Why don't they- Why don't they DO it (0.5) directly.
5			Why can't they just build the dam? (1.2) You mentioned it, right?
6			This is a purpose. (0.6) It bring—it brought >so many benefits.< (2.1)
7			Wha-what was the outcome of building the dam. (2.3)
8			What were the damage.
9			(1.2)
10		S:	Erh:: .h: (0.5) The water from the dam would likely damage a number of
11			tem tem erh::
12		B:	Temple.
13	→	S:	Temples and /'dɪstrɔɪ/ cultural /ri'lɪks/ (0.4) .h that were
14			an important part of Asia's cultural history.
15			(0.5)
16	→	B:	Erhm. very G↑OOD. Apparently, it would damage and /dɪs'trɔɪ/ the cultural
17	→		/'relɪks/ (0.2) /'relɪks/. okay. ↑SO: apparently, there was a conflict. Right?
18			((underlines the sentence on the text on the slide))
19			But actually the writer has us:ed one sentence from the first paragraph to
20			summarize the problem, what was the problem.
21			((passes the microphone to the other student))

In Extract 3, Teacher B poses a question "what was the outcome of the conflict?" in Line 7 to the students, and then self-repairs to "what were the damage" to guide the students to think about the consequence of the conflict. The two questions can be answered by seeking the text. After 1.2 minutes, a student responds in Line 10 and Line 11, but meets a pronouncing trouble of "temple". Then, the teacher reads it out for him. In Line 13, the student continues to answer the question. However, he makes two pronunciation errors: /'dɪstrɔɪ/ and /ri'lɪks/ in Line 13 and Line 14. After 0.5 seconds, Teacher B firstly delays the feedback, and then evaluates positively by saying "very good" and immediately reformulates the student's answer, correcting the stress position on the syllables to ensure precise pronunciation of "destroy" and "relic". Then, he uses "okay" with higher intonation to initiate a conclusion that "so, apparently, there was a conflict". Simultaneously, he underlines the sentence read by the student on the slide, which shows that the answer can be found in the text. Finally, in Line 20, he uses "But actually" to initiate another question. The teacher moves to a new question, which means he finished the previous sequence. The teacher uses the highly positive words to assess and employs embedded correction to rephrase the student's response, and then moves to the next sequence. His embedded correction of the two words does not cut off the conversation flow.

The two extracts of embedded correction in different contexts demonstrate their main agendas in the sequences do not focus on the points corrected, instead, on the amount of English output and accurate location of the criteria answer in the text.

Action Trajectory

Exposed correction usually has a clear trajectory in classrooms: Students reply in which the error emerges, the teachers evaluate and initiate the error and the students correct (Mchoul, 1990). The action trajectory of embedded correction also follows the first two actions in this linear sequence, but teachers correct the errors and

students have no chance to repeat the corrected answers. Mchoul (1985) proposed that IRF is where correction sequences lie, so does embedded correction. It occurs in the second turn at times, that is, the teacher's feedback. In Extracts 2, 3, and 4, the teachers do corrections, seamlessly woven. On most occasions the students rarely get chance to display that they are aware of the correction. However, there is one exceptional case in which the student grasps an opportunity to display that she acknowledges the error and reformulates it.

Extract 4. He-she:

1		S:	Then:: .h: (0.8) he erh. then he:: .hh: hh.: mcht. s:: =
2		C:	= Don't worry. =
3		S:	= .hh s:: =
4		C:	= Take it easy. (1.1) Where did she go ↑NEXT.
5			(1.2)
6	→	S:	HE:: headed to a local mu—museum.
7			(0.6)
8		C:	Right = WHEN.(1.4) WHEN. What time. =
9		S:	= Oh, In the afternoon. =
10	→	C:	= Ok. Right. In the afternoon she: (0.5) ↑VIsited a local museum, right?
11			(0.6) Then >did she do anything in the morning?< (2.5) Anything.
12			(0.8)
13	→	S:	.hh t. She had known that (1.0) t. the culture of the: San Francisco. =

In Extract 4, the student responds to the teacher C's question "where did she go next" in Line 4 with a subject error in "he headed to a local museum" in Line 6. In Line 8, the teacher evaluates it positively with "right", and continues to ask "when" and repair it into "what time". In Line 9, the student responds with "oh, in the afternoon". In Line 10, the teacher immediately evaluates it positively with "ok. Right", and then reformulates the student's utterance as "In the afternoon she visited a local museum, right?", in which the teacher corrects the subject from "he" to "she". Then, she moves to the next question, "Did she do anything in the morning?", in which she repeats the correct subject. In Line 13, the student replies, "She had known that the culture of the San Francisco". It is obvious that the student accepts the teacher's correction in Line 13. So in this extract, the action trajectory is: The student makes an error, the teacher corrects it implicitly through reformulation, and the student accepts it implicitly.

This student acquires the opportunity to display her acceptance of the corrected because the teacher lets her continue answering the following question around the same topic. In other cases in our data, the students do not get such an opportunity. The action trajectory of embedded correction usually involves two steps: The student makes an error, and then the teacher corrects it implicitly. Taking Extract 2 for an example, the teacher invites the other student to answer the new question in Line 10 after doing the embedded correction. Therefore, the student loses an opportunity to display whether he acknowledges his error in Line 13. Next, the teacher's next question is a polar question that requires only a yes-or-no response in Lines 15 and 16; the student's brief answer does not confirm whether she accepts the correction. The same occurs in Lines 18 and 19, the student responds with "no problem", thereby terminating the sequence. Up to the final question, the student still has not had the opportunity to use the corrected answer.

The temporal distances between trouble source and teachers' correction are different. Some are very close, such as Extracts 2, 3, and 4. The student's turn the trouble source lies in is immediately followed by the teacher's

correction. Some are far, such as Extract 4, where the correction occurs two turns after the trouble source. The reason is that the teacher has a follow-up question, "what time" in Line 8, which is closely relevant to the student's turn with the trouble source. After the student responds, the teacher then evaluates the student's whole performance and delivers the correction. Thus, the distance between trouble source and correction is based on whether the teacher finishes the task.

In Extract 5, the student has the chance to reuse the right pronunciation in the second response, but he loses it.

Extract 5. /'vɪnɪdʒə(r)/-/'vɪnɪgə(r)/:

1		A:	And keep going Shandong?
2			(0.2)
3	→	S:	Erhm. Boiled dumplings served with /'vɪnɪdʒə(r)/.
4	→	A:	Right. boiled dumplings served with /'vɪnɪgə(r)/.
5	→		Do you know what is /'vɪnɪgə(r)/.
6		S:	cù.
7		A:	Right, so it's also a kind of sauce and it's very sour, right?
8			Again, it put more (.) more flavor
9			into the dumplings and keep going.

In Extract 5, pronunciation errors are frequently found in the students' oral expression in classrooms. The teachers use repetition to correct such errors subtly. The student responds to Teacher A's requirement, to describe the delicious food in Shandong. The student's pronunciation of /'vɪnɪdʒə(r)/ is an error in his answer in Line 3. In Line 4, the teacher corrects it with /'vɪnɪgə(r)/ by repeating his entire response and then asks a new question "what is vinegar". The student uses a Chinese translation "cù" to respond. Actually, he can respond by using the correct pronunciation of vinegar like this: "vinegar is cù", but he does not. So he lost the chance to consolidate the correct pronunciation of vinegar.

Conclusion

Our data reveal that embedded correction is closely oriented to the specific contexts and momentary interactional goals. Although most cases of embedded correction occur in the sequential environment of promoting students to produce more English, such as fluent-and- meaningful context and textual context, which enriches Seedhouse's findings (2004), the interactional goal is to promote students to produce accurate English. In the three contexts, the teachers usually evaluate the students' performance on the main agenda first, and then shift to do embedded correction, and then quickly return to the previous agenda.

All the embedded corrections occur in teachers' feedback in our data. Jefferson (1974) noted that embedded corrections do not disturb the conversation flow, as they are seamlessly woven into the speaker's new turn or utterance. However, classroom conversation differs from routine conversation because teachers should balance pedagogical objectives and interactional coherence. Therefore, when doing embedded correction, the teacher always initially gives students feedback and finishes the prior sequence, and then quickly moves to the next turn or utterance. In this way, embedded corrections mostly lie in teachers' feedback. The other feature of "no accounting" in Jefferson's findings (1974) of embedded correction is also found in our data and the teachers do embedded correction purely and quickly. Moreover, teachers transition smoothly to the next turn or utterance immediately after the embedded correction.

In addition, all the error types in the data are about accuracy, such as pronunciation accuracy and grammatical accuracy. This suggests that embedded correction often serves the function of modelling standard English in EFL classrooms. It also reflects that high school EFL learners' English knowledge is a bit weak. As for the grammatical errors, most are related to Chinese language interference, such as plural expressions in English, as in Extract 2 and the position of adverbs of degree in English sentence in Extract 4. This shows that EFL learners in China are heavily affected by their native language. Our data also find out some pedagogical tensions: How do EFL teachers correct the errors and maintain the main interactional goal simultaneously? How do EFL teachers balance the two basic EFL teaching objectives, language accuracy, and communicative fluency? These questions are not discussed in this paper, but very worthy of further exploration.

The findings in this paper conclude the sequential environment and action trajectory of embedded correction in high school EFL classrooms, revealing how teachers implicitly guide accuracy and lead to the main interactive goal. The findings can contribute to English teachers' interactional competence development and professional development.

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