Error Treatment in a Japanese language classroom

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The process of learning a language is a long and arduous one. The spoken word is only a part of communication, and socio-pragmatics is increasingly recognized as a key element in language learning. More and more Americans are becoming aware of the gap between grammatical proficiency and cultural fluency as they strive to do business in our global economy. This research project examines the educational practices employed to prepare business students at the University of Pennsylvania to operate effectively in the Japanese business world.

Recently the number of foreigners learning Japanese and working in Japan is increasing. In Japan, we have noticed that American business people often become successful due to their competence in Japanese. On the other hand, there are cases when American business people are not successful even though they speak grammatically perfect Japanese. We suspect, therefore, that there are other elements which influence the communication process. To better understand the factors which influence how Americans communicate in Japanese, we decided to look at a Japanese language classroom taught by a native Japanese teacher at the University of Pennsylvania. When looking at this classroom, we will focused on how the teacher conveyed social and cultural aspects of language to her students. Specifically, we concentrated on how the teacher handled sociolinguistic errors to assist students in strengthening their sociolinguistic competence.

Sociolinguistic competence is an important component of communicative competence (Holmes, 1978:134 and Paulston, 1974). Wolfson, however, suggests that there are some difficulties in acquiring sociolinguistic competence (Wolfson, 1989). Allwright (1975) points out that in a language classroom the teacher's role is to be a source of information about the target language and to react to errors whenever it seems appropriate. Therefore, we would like to examine the teacher's role in class, especially the effect of teacher feedback through error corrections.

Through an informal interview with the Japanese teachers in the "Language and Cultural Perspectives Program" at the Joseph H. Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, we learned that their language program is aimed at advanced learners who explore different topics in class, including Japanese business management and cultural content. For these reasons, it is crucial for them to be sensitive to social and cultural appropriateness. Hence, the role of the teacher should be directed toward facilitating the acquisition of language skills while exposing her students to social and cultural features of the language.

Considering the above assumption, our research questions will be as follows: (a) Does the teacher place emphasis on sociolinguistic competence? and (b) if students give sociolinguistically inappropriate responses, does the teacher provide correction? If she does, how? (c) if the teacher does not use corrections, what is the range of ways that the teacher treats inappropriate student responses? In this paper, we will examine Japanese language classroom management with a focus on the teacher's treatment of sociolinguistic errors.

Since Hymes brought the idea of "communicative competence" into language teaching, many researchers have supported the introduction of communicative competence as a goal of language teaching (Hymes, 1967, 1972 in Wolfson, 1989: 45). According to Canale and Swain (1980: 28), three components are included in the theoretical framework of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Among these three components of communicative competence, Holmes (1978:134) and Paulston emphasize the importance of sociolinguistic competence. Paulston argues, "I have come to think that it is every bit as important that we teach the appropriate forms of social usage as the linguistic forms themselves" (Paulston, 1974 in Wolfson, 1989:45).

Although many researchers have emphasized the importance of sociolinguistic competence, it is difficult to teach these cultural-linguistic norms for several reasons. First, many of the rules of speaking and the norms of interaction are both culture-specific and largely unconscious. We are not even aware of the patterned nature of our own speech behavior (Wolfson, 1989:37). Second, native speakers' perception of their speech behavior does not necessarily coincide with speech behavior which is actually observed and recorded. Also speakers' well-formed ideas about what they should say are often different from what they actually say (Wolfson, 1989:37-38). Finally, since too little research on sociolinguistic rules has been done, we are still far from a systematic description of the cultural assumptions behind speech behavior (Pica, 1990:406; and Wolfson, 1989:45). Thus, when we teach these sociolinguistic rules to language learners,

it is inevitable that we rely on our native speaker intuitions to judge what is and is not appropriate in a given situation (Wolfson, 1989:45).

In addition to general instruction, language teachers also provide learners with feedback, which includes error correction, or negative feedback, and approval of learners' production, or positive feedback (Allwright, 1975:104, Chaudron, 1988:132). With feedback, teachers can inform learners about the accuracy of both their formal target language production and their other classroom behavior and knowledge. Learners can use feedback as the powerful source of improvement in both target language development and other subject matter knowledge (Chaudron 1988:133).

Chaudron divides negative feedback into two categories. One is "modeling of the correct response," and the other is "explanation of error." Modeling usually assumes that learners can recognize the difference between the model and their error (1988:133). Chaudron describes nine components of feedback (p.144):

1. Fact of error indicated
2. Blame indicated
3. Location indicated, model provided
4. Error type indicated, model provided
5. Error type indicated
6. Remedy indicated
7. Improvement indicated
8. Praise indicated
9. Opportunity for new attempt given

Teachers should utilize these types of feedback to minimize anxiety and to reduce students' perception of corrections as failures (MacFarlane, 1975 in Chaudron, 1988:134).

There is some controversy over whether teachers should interrupt communication for error correction or leave errors untreated in order to further the communicative goals of classroom interaction (Chaudron, 1988:135). One survey on college students' attitudes toward error correction revealed that the students not only wanted to be corrected, but also that they wished to be corrected more than teachers felt it necessary (Cathcart and Olsen, 1976:45). A more recent survey by Chenoweth, et al. (1983, in Chaudron, 1988:135-136) also found that adult ESL learners had a strong preference for error correction in the context of social encounters. Error correction is especially useful to adult second language learners because it helps them to learn the exact environment in which to apply rules and to discover the precise semantic range of lexical items (Krashen and Seliger, 1975:181). Chaudron, however, states that whether learners' errors should be corrected may not depend entirely on their preferences. The decision should come primarily from evidence of the

effectiveness of error correction, a distinctly difficult phenomenon to demonstrate (Chaudron, 1988:136).

Method

Subjects

This research took place in a Japanese language classroom at the Lauder Institute. According to the course description, students met weekly for three hours during each of their four semesters at the University of Pennsylvania. The course was conducted in the target language, Japanese, and it was taught by a teacher who is a native speaker of Japanese. Class activities gave students ample opportunity to acquire and practice the language skills they will need to operate effectively in a Japanese business setting. The course was also designed to incorporate cultural content perspectives. The program included an emphasis on sociolinguistic perspectives. This can be seen in the mission statement of the program, "which is to provide future business leaders with a superior international management education and prepare them to operate effectively and comfortably in the global economy through their skills in foreign languages and their knowledge of diverse cultural environments" (Lauder Institute Brochure, 1989).

We observed one of the two Advanced Japanese classes three times. The class, with four American students, met twice per week with a seminar about a specific subject on Monday and language instruction on Wednesday. Each day had its own teacher. We planned to observe the class on Wednesday since that day appeared to provide more opportunities to see interaction between the teacher and the students. The instructor had been teaching Japanese to American undergraduate and graduate students for seven years. She was pursuing a doctorate degree in applied linguistics. The four students were Caucasian men in their late twenties, who had previously experienced Japanese culture by either having lived in Japan or by having worked with Japanese people for at least a year. Their linguistic backgrounds must have been strong because the program requires a high level of language proficiency. Their academic backgrounds were similar. Their bachelor degrees were earned in the areas of East Asian Studies/Economics, Applied Economics/Labor Relations, Political Economics, and International Political Economics. They had varied past employment experience. Some of their jobs were in the field of securities, insurance, consulting, and trade. Considering the goal of the class and students' backgrounds, it was expected that various opportunities to strengthen the students' sociolinguistic competence would be provided by the teacher in the class.

The focus of this research was to examine the emphasis the teacher placed on sociolinguistic competence. First, we intended to compare grammatical errors to

sociolinguistic errors in terms of frequency. Second, we intended to examine the teacher's treatment of sociolinguistic errors with a focus on social and cultural aspects. Thus, our research was conducted in a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Procedure

Data collection methods included the following procedure: (a) observation with field notes of three classes, (b) tape recording and transcription of the teacher's error corrections on exclusively socially inappropriate answers, and (c) interviews with the teacher about her intention of error correction and the goal of the class.

These data were collected and used to answer the research questions. Field notes on the variety of ways the teacher corrected errors allowed us to examine the extent to which the teacher emphasized sociolinguistic competence. Audio tapes and transcriptions for the three classes supported the field notes and also provided a guide to identify how the teacher notified the students of their errors. Finally, interviews with the teacher of the course assisted us in analyzing the data from a different perspective.

Data analyses was done with the following procedure:

1. Identifying students' sociolinguistic and grammatical errors. Because the two researchers were native speakers , this was done by the researchers' agreement. In order to make this procedure less arbitrary, we employed a two-fold safety gauge. First, we independently looked at all the utterances and decided if each was appropriate and explained our reasoning. Second, we compared one another's results. We used only the errors which we both believed to be socially or culturally inappropriate.

2. Examining the teacher's emphasis on sociolinguistic competence by comparing the teacher's error correction of grammatical errors to her correction of cultural errors.

3. Identifying, describing, and categorizing the teacher's manner of error correction. We used Chaudron's framework of nine types of feedback (Chaudron, 1988:144).

The classes we observed were divided into two lessons. The first lesson required students to prepare presentations to be given at the end of the semester as an examination. For this assignment, each student chose a current topic such as "gun control" or "the problem in Bosnia", and prepared a half-hour presentation. The second lesson focused on negotiation in Japanese business settings. This portion of the class was comprised mainly of the teacher's lecture. Additionally, the teacher used video tapes and magazine articles to introduce the distinctive characteristics involved in negotiating in Japanese.

Results

The teacher corrected students' grammatical errors more than their sociolinguistic errors (see Table). However, we cannot reliably say that the teacher did not emphasize sociolinguistic competence for several reasons. First, the number of sociolinguistic errors identified in the classroom was considerably smaller than the number of grammatical errors. Thus, the correction of these two sets of errors cannot be compared simply based on the absolute number of corrections. Second, in order to fully examine the teacher's emphasis on sociolinguistic competence, the manner in which the teacher treated these errors should be taken into consideration along with the number of corrections. Finally, in order to further examine the teacher's emphasis on sociolinguistic competence, we must also consider the types of learning situations which the teacher provided to enhance the students' understanding of sociolinguistic norms.

Table: Frequency of Teacher's Correction toward Grammatical Errors and Sociolinguistic Errors

	grammatical errors	teacher's correction	sociolinguistic errors	teacher's correction
numbers	60	42	9	5
ratio (%)		70		56

As described above, the teacher provided corrections for students' sociolinguistically inappropriate responses. These teacher corrections could be classified roughly into two categories, "modeling of the correct response" and "explanation of error" (Chaudron, 1988:133). The teacher treated sociolinguistic violations mainly with explanations. This was because the teacher believed that if only modeling was provided, the students would not recognize the inappropriateness of their utterances. Since the judgment of sociolinguistic appropriateness has to be based largely on native speaker intuitions (Wolfson, 1989:45), explanations are necessary for a non-native student.

To uncover the teacher's intention in correcting students' socially inappropriate responses, we categorized the teacher's manner of correction by using Allwright's (1975) framework of type of feedback (in Chaudron, 1988: 144).

<u>No feedback</u>

Among nine sociolinguistic errors, the teacher did not give any feedback for four of them. According to the interview with the instructor, this was due to two factors. First, the teacher did not consider these errors to be serious violations. Second, the teacher did not notice their inappropriateness (personal communication, 1994). The following are examples:

(S=student, T=teacher, O=observer)

Ex.1 S: Saikin eigo   no   shinbun   demo yonde inai
    recently English of newspaper even   read   not
    I haven't even read an English newspaper recently.

    T: ....

Ex.2 S: Kousa   no sa wa chousa   no sa to   onaji?
    inspection 's "sa" is   investigation 's "sa" with same
    Is [the Chinese character of] "sa" for inspection the same as "sa" for investigation?

    T: ....

In these two cases, the students used the informal form in communicating with the teacher. In Japanese, formality and politeness are expressed in the ending of the sentence. In this case, *yondeinai* should be *yondeimasen*, and *onaji?* should be *onajidesuka?* However, the teacher did not regard these errors as serious violations and left them untreated.

Ex.3 S: Daitouryou to daitouryou no oksan no shita koto wa
    president and president 's wife 's activity was
    I think that the thing the President and his wife did was

    hijouni taisetsuna kotodato omoimasuga.......
    very important   thing   I think, but......
    very important, but........

    T: ....

Ex.4 S: Kore wa anata no sukina   kotoba deshou?
    this is your   favorite phrase isn't it?
    This is your favorite phrase, isn't it?

    T: Sou?
    so?
    Is it?

In these two examples, there are problems with vocabulary items. In Ex.3, *okusan* is a colloquial form for wife in Japanese. In a formal presentation, *fujin* is more appropriate. Also, in Ex.4, the student used "you" to address the teacher. Since in Japanese conversation, it is appropriate to address a teacher with *sensei* which means "teacher", *anatano* (your) should be *senseino* (teacher's). However, these violations are unnoticeable unless the teacher is excessively alert to students' errors.

Model or remedy provided, fact of error indicated

Among nine sociolinguistic errors, the teacher provided models or remedies for three of them. Furthermore, before providing models for two of them, the teacher indicated the fact of error.

Ex.5 S: ....minasan   wakarimasu   ka
                 ....everyone   understand   question
                 ....Do you understand everybody?

   T: "owakarininarimasu ka"   no hou   ga iidesu ne?
        understand   question the one is better isn't it?
        "Do you understand?" is better, isn't it?

Although *wakarimasu* and *owakarininarimasu* are exactly the same in English, the latter is much more polite and appropriate for a formal setting in Japanese. In this case, the teacher assumed that the students could recognize the difference between the model and the student's expression, and only provided the model (personal communication, 1994).

Ex.6 After Mr. A's presentation

   T: A san   wa "eeto"   ga ooi desu ne.
        Mr. A   "well"   many
        Mr. A, you use a lot of "well"s.

        foomaruna basho dewa amari "eeto" wa
        formal   setting   very   "well"
        in a formal setting

        tsukawanai houga   iidesu ne.
        not use   rather better.
        it is better to avoid using "well".

Ex.7 S: (pointing at picture)
             kono e   wa kireidesu ne.
             this picture is   beautiful isn't it?
             This picture is beautiful, isn't it?

T: "Kirei" ja   nai desho.
       beautiful not is it?
       It's not "beautiful," is it?

       souiu toki wa   kawaii tte   iundesu.
       this case   pretty   you should say
       In this case, you should say it's "pretty".

In these two cases, the teacher assumed that the students could not surmise the inappropriateness of their speech. Thus, the teacher indicated the fact of error before providing a model or remedy (personal communication, 1994).

Blame indicated

The teacher corrected errors which could lead to a serious misunderstandings, such as evoking contempt or anger in listeners, with blaming.

Ex.8 S: Purezenteishion no mae nisyuukan mo   matte ite
               presentation   before two weeks   be waiting
               Since I have been waiting for two weeks before giving

               wasurete shimaimashita.
               forget   already gone
               the presentation, I have already forgotten.

       T: Sore wa amari ii   iiwake   dewa arimasen ne.
               this is not so good   excuse   not
               It is not a good excuse.

In a formal situation, giving an excuse is taboo in Japanese culture, and if the students were to do it in a business setting, they could lose their credibility. It is assumed, therefore, the teacher used blaming to warn students.

Opportunity for new attempt given

The teacher gave students an opportunity to try again when the teacher thought the students could come up with the right answer by themselves.

EX.9 O: Tsumaranai mono desu ga   kore minasan de   douzo.
               trivial   thing   though this for you all please
               I'm afraid this is a trivial thing, but I brought it for you.

       S: haa
               Oh!
               Oh!

> T: hai   kouiu toki wa   donoyouni iimasu ka?
>   okay this situation how   say
>   Okay. How would you respond in this situation?
>
>   hontouni tsumaranai mono desu ka?
>   really   trivial   thing is
>   Do you really think it is a trivial thing?
>
> S: (Silence. Some students shaking heads)
>
> T: Kouiu   hyougen   shitte imasu ka?
>   like this expression know do you
>   Do you know the expression like this?
>
>   "sonna koto nai to omoimasu yo kitto oishii to omoimasu."
>   so   not think   surely delicious think
>   "Oh, I don't think so (it is trivial.) I am sure we will enjoy it."

In Japanese culture, when people present a gift, they must describe their gift as trivial no matter how valuable it is. In contrast, the recipient of the gift must always express pleasure. Since this is a very common Japanese custom, the teacher expected students to know how to respond, and gave them an opportunity to try (personal communication, 1994).

In addition to error correction, the teacher used other methods to treat students' sociolinguistically inappropriate responses. First, the teacher introduced the norms of Japanese culture relevant to business settings by showing videotapes and magazine articles. This method was utilized to provide the students with models of socially appropriate behavior before they were asked to practice it. Second, with these study aids, the teacher introduced Japanese culture during her lectures.

Discussion

There were far fewer sociolinguistic violations in the class than we expected. This may be due to the following reasons. First, the students were accustomed to the formality of a Japanese classroom setting. Therefore, there were fewer occurrences of socially inappropriate responses. Second, since the content of the class was to give a prepared presentation, there were not many opportunities for sociolinguistic violations to occur. The presentation became their routine and the students were expected to follow the protocol in the class. We assumed there would be more sociolinguistic violations of rules in an informal setting where social and cultural knowledge are not given explicitly by the teacher. Third, as described above, the teacher began by providing information regarding Japanese

cultural norms in order to avoid occurrences of violations of protocol. Finally, since native speakers tend to have lower expectations of second language learners' sociolinguistic competence, it is difficult to identify the students' socially inappropriate responses unless they are serious violations.

The teacher corrected both grammatically and sociolinguistically inappropriate responses. Additionally, the teacher commented on students' socially inappropriate behavior, such as eating and drinking in the classroom. However, according to our observations, the teacher primarily transmitted Japanese culture by lecturing and showing videotapes rather than correcting sociolinguistic errors. According to findings in the field of second language acquisition, students can learn more when opportunities to make mistakes are provided, and these errors are treated immediately (Tomasello and Herron, 1989). Although these findings relate to learners' acquisition of grammar skills, we hypothesized that we can still apply their findings to acquiring sociolinguistic competence.

Through observation and data analysis, we found that the teacher placed emphasis on sociolinguistic competence. However, we also found that it is difficult to transmit cultural aspects of language through error corrections because it is challenging to provide students with opportunities to commit violations in a classroom, and it is difficult for teachers to identify students' socially inappropriate responses. Our findings reveal two applications for the classroom. First, as language teachers, we have to be extremely aware of cultural appropriateness when we listen to students' responses. Second, in order to convey culture through error corrections in sociolinguistic usage, we need to do further research on the effectiveness of error corrections for learning a cultural norm. If it is effective, how can we best provide students with opportunities to commit errors? We believe that for students to acquire sociolinguistic competence, they need to be given opportunities to compare their assumptions of sociolinguistic rules to the teacher corrections based on the Japanese cultural norms.

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