Error Correction in the EFL Classroom:
The Views of Japanese Senior High School Students

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Abstract
Error Correction (E.C.) is defined by Lightbown and Spada (1999) as, 'Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language was incorrect'. A number of studies attest to the positive impact E.C. plays in developing learner accuracy. Despite this, teachers are often concerned over the negative psychological impact E.C. can have on their learners, and as a result, they may underuse it in their practice (Mendez and Cruz, 2012). Researchers have noted that teachers' self-image and perceived credibility may suffer where learner attitudes are not recognized and validated in the process of class teaching. In light of these concerns, a study was undertaken to explore two key questions related to learner attitudes toward E.C. The research used a survey to obtain quantitative data, and two key findings emerged from the study. First, a substantial majority of learners feel that E.C. is important as it will help them to use the language more accurately. Further, a majority of respondents stated that student-led rather than teacher-led correction will likely have a more significant impact on their grammatical accuracy. This is a noteworthy finding since it impacts teacher praxis, and prompts further research questions regarding the extent to which learner beliefs should influence lesson planning and review.

Keywords: Error Correction, Grammatical Accuracy, Affective Damage, Student Led, Teacher-Led, Quantitative

Introduction

Error correction (EC) is, according to Ellis (2009), a form of negative feedback. It was defined by Lightbown and Spada (1999) as, 'Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language was incorrect'. Russell (2009) writes that error correction remains a contentious issue in second language learning. However, it is now generally accepted that it plays an important role in improving learner outcomes.

One of the key debates in error correction is the choice of corrector. This was a question raised by Hendrickson in his seminal paper published back in 1978. The author stated that while many teachers assumed that error correction was their responsibility, a more student-centred approach might be more effective. Empirical evidence from studies on the impact of error correction suggests that student-led correction can be more effective than teacher-led correction.

The importance of taking into account students' beliefs and preferences was described by Cheng et al (1999), who stated that teachers need to know about learners' beliefs to foster more effective learning strategies. Further, the author asserts that where student beliefs and teacher behavior is at variance, language acquisition will be impeded. This paper shall, therefore, research the views of Japanese senior high school students with respect to their attitudes to the choice of corrector in error correction.

Significance of the Study

The significance of learner beliefs in the process of learning was described by Dornyei and Ryan (cited in Kartchava, 2016: 19) who see them as, 'significant learner characteristics to take into account when explaining learning outcomes. A number of studies have been conducted looking at students' attitudes to teacher and student-led correction. The results have been inconclusive. Further, this particular cohort – Japanese senior high school students – has received scant attention. It is hoped that this study shall, therefore, add to the available literature on error correction and help teachers to make informed choices in this important field of language learning.

Structure of the Study

The paper will start with a literature review, which will look at some of the keys debates related to the question of student versus teacher led error correction. There shall also be a definition of some of the key terms as well as a broader discussion on the impact of error correction. This shall be followed by an overview of the current study, looking at the research questions, the site, the sample and the data collection instrument. In the next section, the data will be presented. To conclude the research questions will be answered and there shall be a discussion on how the evidence might impact on teacher praxis and finally suggested areas for further research.

Literature Review

Looking first at what an error is in the context of EFL, Edge (1997) understood them as being of three distinct types: slips, errors and attempts. Slips can be understood as occurring when the student who produced the deviant utterance would be able to self-correct. Errors, on the other hand, can be regarded as a deviant utterance that could not be self-corrected by the

learner, even when the error is pointed out. Attempts occur when the learner has not yet learned the language necessary to convey the speaker's intended meaning. The distinction between errors and mistakes has, however, been called into question. Botley (2015), for example writes that it is neither feasible nor desirable to maintain tis dichotomy from a corpus based empirical perspective.

Ellis (2009) writes that error correction (EC) is a form of negative feedback. It was defined by James as 'a reactive second move of an adjacency pair to a first speaker's … utterance by someone who has made the judgement that all or part of that utterance is linguistically or factually wrong' (1998: 235). The importance of error correction for teachers of English was well-described by Pawlack who writes that, 'the need to respond to learners' errors can be regarded as part and parcel of their jobs … and the ability to handle it [inaccurate spoken and written output] in the most beneficial way is without doubt an important teaching skill' (Pawlack, 2014: ix).

The theoretical justifications for EC were set out by Lyster (2018), who wrote that the 'cognitive-interactionist perspective of second language acquisition attributes a role not only to positive evidence but also to negative evidence in the form of feedback that triggers noticing of nontarget output'.

A number of analyses attest to the value of CF. Lyster and Saito (2010) concluded that EC has 'significant and durable effects on target language development' (2010: 266). This conclusion is supported by Li (2010) and Russell and Spada (2006), in their meta-analyses of studies looking at the impact of EC. Faqeih (2012), in his classroom experiment on the impact of error correction, found that it had a significant impact on learners' grammatical accuracy. Finally, Lee (2017: 582) writes that when used effectively, CF can, 'play a critical role in eliminating [learner] errors'.

The value of error correction can also be located in the expectations that students have of their teachers. The significance of learner beliefs in the process of learning was described by Dornyei and Ryan (cited in Kartchava, 2016: 19) who see them as, 'significant learner characteristics to take into account when explaining learning outcomes'. While many teachers are reluctant to engage in error correction (Bartran and Walton, 1991), Bartram and Walton (1991) assert that the vast majority of learners expect teachers to provide oral correction during classes. Fukuda (2004) investigated teachers' and students' opinions of error correction in Japanese high school oral communication classes. He found that students actually wanted more error treatment than their teachers believed necessary.

One of the key debates in error correction is the choice of corrector. This was a question raised by Hendrickson in his seminal paper published back in 1978. The author stated that while many teachers assumed that error correction was their responsibility, a more student-centred approach might be more effective.

Student-led approaches have a number of advantages. In terms of self-correction, Edge writes it is easier to remember because, 'someone has put something right in his or her own head' (1997: 24). Edge identifies four reasons for the efficacy of peer correction: it involves learners in listening to and thinking about language; the teacher can gain valuable information on the language knowledge of other students; students become less dependent on teachers; finally, students will be better able to assist each other during pair and group work.

Pawlack (2014) writes peer correction can be used when the speaker is unable to repair his or her own mistake.

Empirical evidence from studies on the impact of CF suggest that student-led correction can be more effective than teacher-led correction. Lyster and Ranta (1997) write elicitation has an uptake rate of 100% and clarification requests 88%. To quote Allwright and Bailey, 'no matter how hard a teacher tries to correct errors, only the learner can do the learning necessary to improve performance, regardless of how much treatment is provided' (Pawlack, 2014: 150).

The veracity of these conclusions have, however, been called into question. Connor and Asenavage (1994) also concluded that teacher feedback had a much more significant effect than peer feedback, although it is important to note that this was found in respect of students' writing. Miao, Badger and Zhen (2006) cast further doubt on the usefulness of a student-led approach. The authors asserted that '"the research broadly indicates that teacher feedback has a much greater impact than peer feedback, though with considerable variation, but that peer feedback can contribute to learning development".

Pawlack (2014), writes that teacher-led correction continues to be the form that is most frequently practiced. The author suggests that this is a result of the better TL knowledge that teachers have; the responsibility that teachers have to ensure accurate learner output; and the methodological knowledge teachers have.

Looking at students' attitudes regarding the choice of corrector, Pawlack argues many students see EC as being something that should be done by teachers. This reasoning follows Chaudron (1986), who asserted that the position of the teacher provides 'an imbalance in expectations as to who provides feedback,'. This will often result in teachers being expected to correct errors.

Katayama (2007), however, writes that learners preferred a more student-centered approach. According to the author, students' preferred form of correction was for the teacher to hint at the mistake and to then allow the students to correct it. This conclusion is supported by Yoshida (2008), who found that learners wanted to have the chance to self-correct before being given the correct form through a recast.

Kartchava (2016) gives a more complex picture of student preferences finding that on the one hand students expect teachers to provide the correct form, on the other they recognize the positive role that self-correction can play. Interestingly, the author found that learners' backgrounds influence their views on error correction.

According to Zembytska et al (2022) the choice of error correction method and corrector will depend on the ability level of the students. The results of their experiment suggest that more proficient students have a preference for teacher-led techniques, while student-led techniques are favoured by less proficient learners.

Research Design

Objective

The objective of this study is to provide quantitative data on the views of Japanese high school students, first, in terms of their attitudes to error correction in general and second, with regards to their preference for student or teacher led correction. It is hoped that this research will prove to be valuable for other teachers who work with this cohort of students and that this study will add to the available literature in this exciting area of English language teaching.

Research Questions

The four research questions that the paper shall answer are:
1. Do students want to have their errors corrected?
2. To what extent do students see error correction as helping them to achieve grammatical accuracy?
3. Do students favor a student or a teacher led approach?

Site and Sample

The site where the study was conducted is a private senior high school in Tokyo, which is affiliated to one of Japan's leading universities. The school is part of an escalator system. According to NIER (undated), in the escalator system 'a school corporation' provides education from pre-school all the way through to university.

The sample is a non-probability convenience sample. Such a sample was defined by Andrade as a sample that is drawn from a source that is conveniently accessible to the researcher. While such samples are very commonly used in educational research, they have been criticized as they might not be representative of the general population.

The participants were grade 2 students, aged between 16 and 17 years' old. Their level tends to be around A2 or B1 as defined by the CEFR. 70 students took part in the study.

Data Collection Instrument

The instrument has 18 items and it took roughly ten minutes to complete. The survey was comparatively short in order to avoid respondent fatigue. This is defined by Ben-Nun (2008) as a' phenomenon that occurs when survey participants become tired of the survey task and the quality of the data they provide begins to deteriorate.

The survey was first written in English and it was then translated into Japanese using DeepL. The translations were then checked to ensure their accuracy. Japanese translations of the items were included to ensure that respondents would be able to accurately respond to the items. Additionally, it was felt that this could help to prevent respondent fatigue.

When the instrument was piloted it had a Cronbach alpha of 0.715, which is an acceptable value for internal consistency.

Results (Quantitative Data)

Attitudes to Error Correction

The following tables clearly show that the majority of students expect their errors to be corrected and that they see error correction as playing an important role in the development of grammatical accuracy.

Figure 1 presents students responses to the statement 'I think it is important that my grammar mistakes are corrected'. 23% of students agreed strongly that it was important, with a further 58% agreeing. Only 3% of students disagreed with the statement.
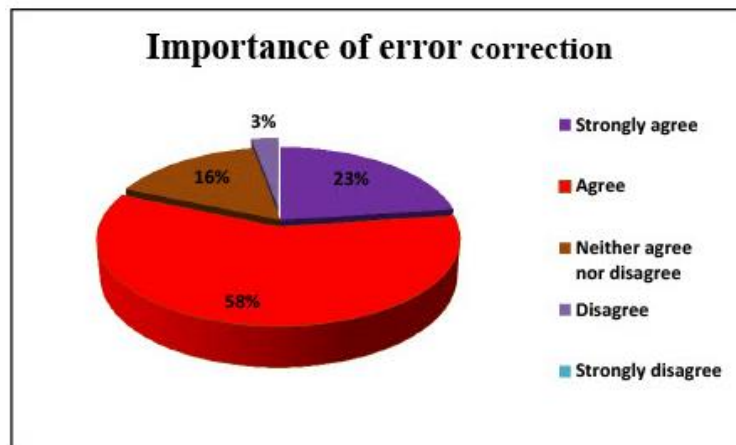
Figure 1: The Importance of error correction

Figure 2 below shows that a slight majority of students would like to have more of their errors corrected than is currently the case. 51% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'I want more of the grammatical errors I make when speaking corrected', with only 12% disagreeing.
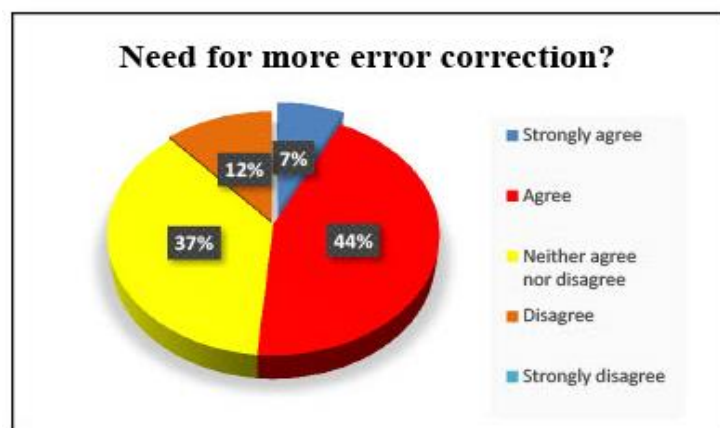

Figure 2: Desire for more error correction

Finally, we can see how students feel that error correction has a positive impact on the development of their English language proficiency. In response to the statement 'Correcting grammar mistakes helps me to speak more accurately', a little under 63% of respondents agreed that it did, with only 5% disagreeing (see figure 3).
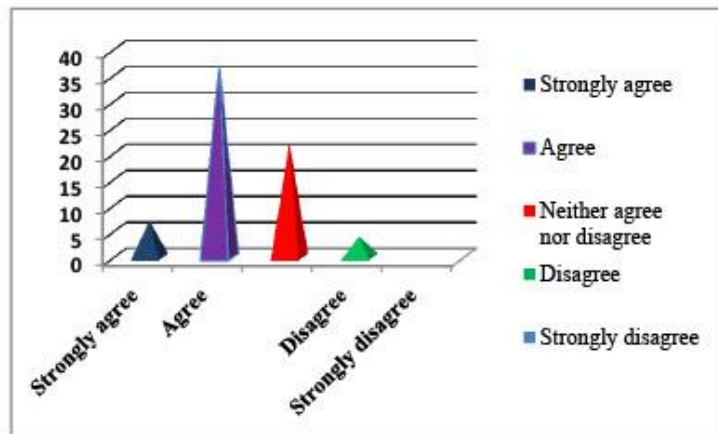
Figure 3: The impact of error correction

Self-Correction

The data shows that, on the whole, students have a positive attitude to self-correction. A majority of students (66%) agreed with the statement, 'I want to have the chance to correct my mistakes before the teacher corrects me'.

Figure 4 indicates that students thought self-correction to be more effective, as they felt that they were better able to recall correct grammar forms when they had corrected their own mistakes. A total of 45 students responded positively to the statement, 'I remember the grammar better if I correct my own mistakes', with only 8 respondents disagreeing.
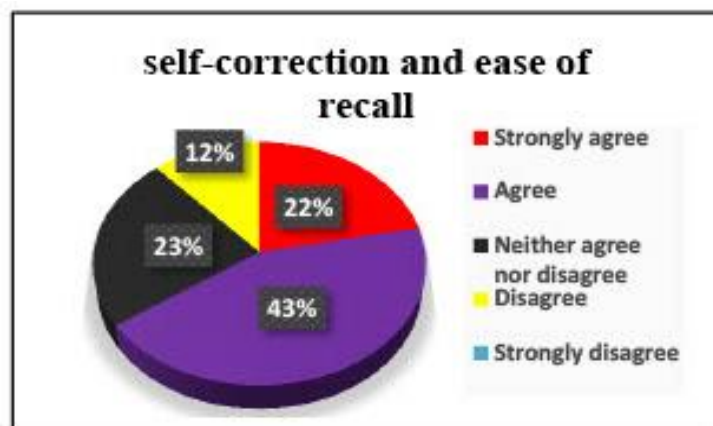

Figure 4: Self-correction and improved recall of grammar

Finally, as can be seen in figure 5, self-correction also appears to have a positive impact on students' motivation. Here roughly 60% of respondents said that successful self-correction has a positive effect on motivation, with only 16% saying that it did not.
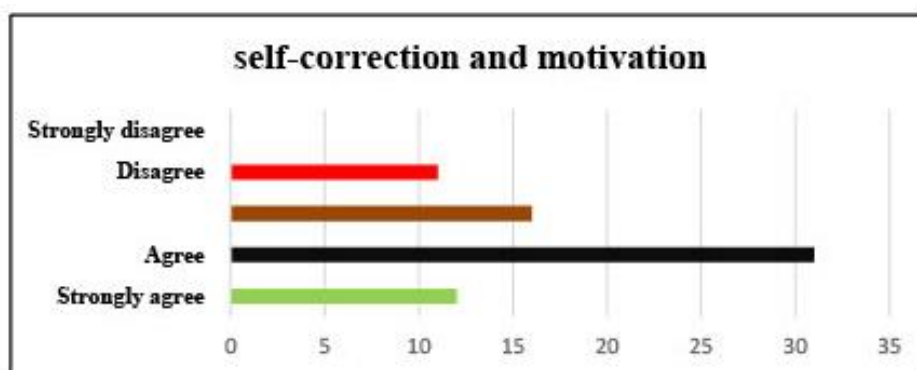
Figure 5: Self-correction and improved motivation

Peer Correction

The picture that emerges from the data is that students enjoy working with their peers, both in pairs and with the whole class to correct grammar mistakes, although this is not without caveats. A little over half of the respondents (54%) stated that they enjoyed working with their partners to correct their mistakes, as against 13% of students who said that they did not. Further, when respondents were asked about their attitude toward peer correction, where the whole class was involved, half of the students said that they liked this correction method, while 14% said that they did not.

As can be seen in figure 6, respondents feel that peer correction is an effective way of involving other students in the learning process and that it will help other students to learn.
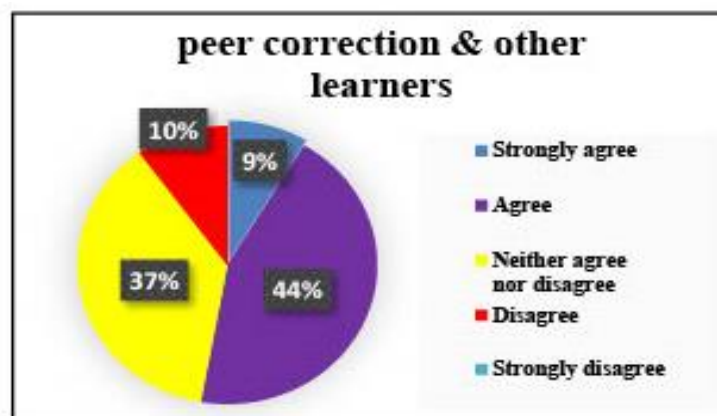

Figure 6: Peer correction involving other learners

As noted above, however, peer correction is not without its difficulties. These relate to both emotional factors and to the ability of peers to provide corrections that are accurate. The graphs below present data to the following two statements respectively: 'Sometimes I am embarrassed when other students see my mistakes;' (figure 7) and 'My classmates sometimes make mistakes when they are correcting my grammar'. 60% of respondents agreed with the first statement and 51% agreed with the second (figure 8).
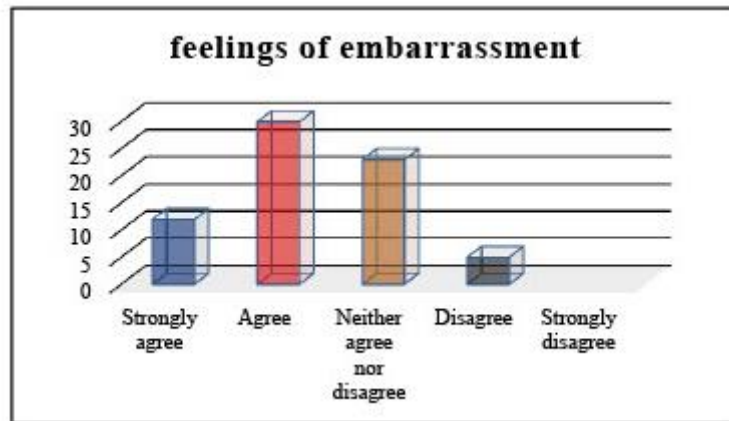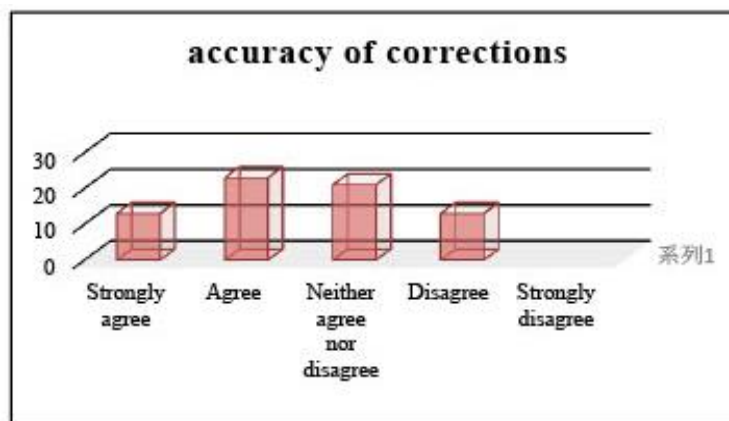
Figure 7: Peer correction causing embarrassment

Figure 8: Accuracy of peer correction

Teacher-Led Correction

From the data it can be seen that students expect teachers to take an active role in the error correction process. In response to the statement, 'I want the teacher to explain the necessary grammar to me', 78% of respondents agreed with 26% agreeing strongly.

Further, the respondents felt that the grammar explanations - or the meta linguistic feedback - that teachers offer help the students to become more accurate. Figure 9 below shows students' responses to the statement, 'The teacher's explanations of grammar help me to communicate more accurately.' 56% of respondents agreed, and only 13% disagreed.
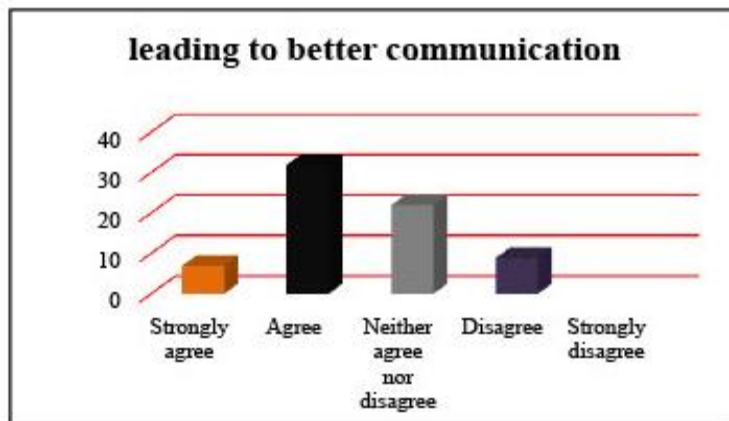
Figure 9: The impact of teacher correction

Having said this though, a significant number of students also find the explanations that teachers give to be difficult to understand (figure10).
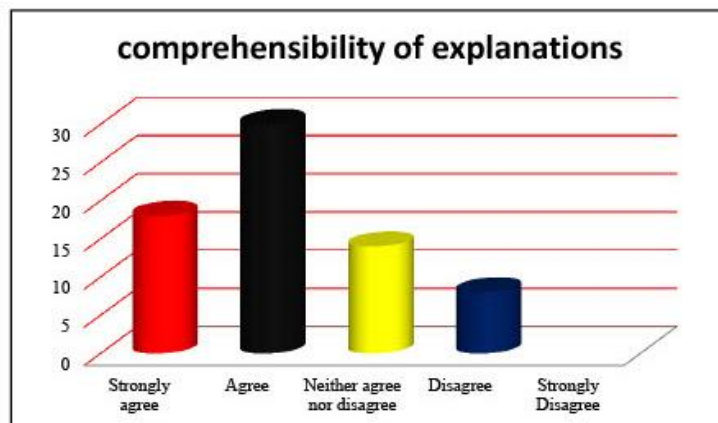

Figure 10: Comprehensibility of teacher's explanations

Conclusions

In answer to research question 1, the data indicates that students do want to have their oral grammar mistakes corrected. Only three percent of students said that it was not important for grammar mistakes to be corrected. Moving on to research question 2 from the data we can see that students view error correction as being an important means to develop grammatical accuracy.

As Mitchell asserts, although there has been an effort by MEXT to redirect English language education to adopting a more communicative approach, the grammar translation method is still very much in use, this being one of the consequences of the rigid testing system, so an emphasis on grammatical accuracy and a belief in the value of correction are to be expected. Tokunaga (2021) asserts, however, that grammar teaching should play an important role in EFL as students who received focus on form treatment with explicit grammar instruction outperformed those students who did not receive explicit grammar explanation and practice.

With regards to the 3rd research question, the picture is more complex. Students like student centred approaches to error correction. They see it as being more effective to develop their ability to use grammar correctly and it is more motivating.

Students also like peer correction - both with their partners and with the whole group. Peer correction does however have its disadvantages. First it can lead to feelings of embarrassment, which will lead to a raising of the affective filter. The Affective filter hypothesis was described by Krashen (who writes that it, 'captures the relationship between affective variables and second language acquisition' (1982: 31). According to this theory, inducing feelings of anxiety among students will inhibit their ability to learn a language.

Finally, teacher led correction obviously plays a significant role for students. Respondents generally saw error correction as the responsibility of the teacher and as being of use. Kawabata and Barling (2020) assert that schools continue to adhere to a strict hierarchy and so it is natural that students will look to their teachers for guidance on their language. This echoes Chaudron, who wrote of the 'imbalance in expectations as to who provides feedback'.

Limitations

As noted above, the sample for this study was a non-probability convenience sample. While such samples are commonly used in education research they have also been strongly criticized. Among the criticisms, Noor et al (2022) write that convenience samples are subject to sample biases, that they are insufficiently representative and that they should be not be taken as a basis for generalising to a broader population.

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