Direct Corrections and Power in Lab Hour Interactions: Nonnative Teaching Assistants and Native Students

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1. Background and Purposes of the Study

The lab hour, a major instructional setting of engineering and science departments of many U.S. universities, provides a special conversational event in which nonnative teaching assistants (NNS TAs) teach native English-speaking (NS) students. The NNS TAs are frequently engaged in one-on-one interactions with NS students answering questions and/or helping to complete projects or assignments. While possessed of more knowledge of content areas, NNS TAs' L2 competence hardly reaches the native level. This study focuses on how their lack of L2 competence affects their dealings in communication problems, or repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Specifically this study examines a sequential realization of repair given that NS students other-correct their TAs' turns in a direct manner.

In any conversational encounters, the conversationalists deal with two types of contingency in an everyday encounter: (a) a preference of self-correction over other-correction; (b) an avoidance of the face-threatening act involved in directly correcting one's conversational partner. The dispreferred status of other-correction has been observed in many studies of conversational interactions (e.g., Schegloff et al., 1977; Mchoul, 1990; Gaskill, 1980). When they occur, other-corrections are frequently preceded by a pause to elicit self-corrections and are often modulated in form (e.g., using hedging devices such as "You mean XXX"). When not modulated, other-corrections occur in specific environments, i.e., following a modulated other-correction or questions used to check understanding of what has been said or what will be said next.

Studies of NS-NNS interaction (e.g., Schegloff, et al., 1977; McHoul, 1990) have focused on direct corrections performed by NS speakers, or NS teachers, upon the problematic utterances of NNS speakers, or NNS students. Their findings, therefore, are rather constrained to the settings where NS speakers assume more powerful positions due to their knowledge of the language used as the medium of communication. By turning attention to the lab hour to which NNS speakers, as instructors, bring more content knowledge to the conversational encounter than their NS students, this study purposes to study the dynamics of the negotiation process when NS students do repair in an overt way.

With a special focus on the target of the corrective actions, I will discuss the sequential environments of the overt corrective moves of NS students, and the effects of the negotiation moves on participant alignment.

2. Data Collection and Method of Analysis

The data came from spontaneous one-on-one interactions between five Korean TAs and twelve NS undergraduate students during lab hours in engineering/science departments of a large research-oriented university in the U.S. They constituted six hours of videotaped data. For a contrastive examination, four NS TAs interacting with nine NS students were videotaped which provided another five hours of data.

As this study aimed to examine closely how meaning negotiation was realized in the sequence of repair and what effects it would have on the participant alignment, the videotaped data were analyzed from a microscopic perspective, that is, microethnography. The microethnographic approach enables researchers to look at how context is addressed and co-constructed by describing interactions with enormous attention to the multimodal dimensions of such interactions. While microethnography shares its methods with conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), there is a systematic difference in studying human interactions between the two methods. Conversation analysis concentrates on recorded interactions, usually disregarding both the participants' judgments and the contextual elements of the interactions. Microethnography, in contrast, investigates the foundations of social organization, culture, and interaction at the "micro-level" of the moment-by-moment development of human activities (Streeck & Mehus, 2004). Using this qualitative method of analysis, I attempted to understand what the significant elements of the lab hour, including language and objects, are, and more importantly, how they are coordinated to reach a shared understanding between the native and nonnative participants.

3. Results and Discussion

I found that the NS students' direct other-corrections target both the linguistic and propositional elements of the NNS TAs' utterances. Occurrence of direct correction was not as frequent as other types of repair,[1] which seems to be mainly due to the face-threatening factor in doing direct correction of others. Added to this factor, this study found a lab-hour specific constraint for the direct correction. In this highly goal/content-oriented interactional event, nonnative speakers' deviancy from the English language norms was often tolerated or ignored so as not to interfere with the meaning. The interactants have redundant resources that were to assist their understanding in this context, e.g., hand-outs, data displayed on the computer monitors, etc. These resources contributed to the limited occurrences of the overt corrective actions on the NNS TAs' problematic L2 production.

3.1. *Corrections of Linguistic Elements*

Three types of linguistic problems were found to cause NS students' direct corrective actions: NNS TAs' nonnative-like pronunciation, problematic lexical choices, and sentence construction. It was noteworthy that the participants, NS or NNS, dealt with

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[1] See Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) for repair typology.

linguistic troubles in a rather embedded manner, so that conversational breaks would be minimal. The examples that follow show how the embedded workings of other-repair contribute to enhancing participants' understanding. The first example illustrates a NS student's performance of other-correction on nonnative-like pronunciation. A Korean TA is conversing with a NS student about the student's final project. Her project is constructing a transfer system that converts human muscular movement to a vehicle controller. They are looking into drawings of human muscle systems in a textbook.

(1) TA (O) and S1 (F) in an electrical engineering lab[2]

1.   TA: so (- -) if we (-) sit [in <u>here</u>
2.   S1:   [yeah 'cause (.) like (.) it's like this one↑
3.   I think it's easy to [(   )
4.   TA: [this one looks like this one?
5.   S1: yeah (-) [an' then
6.   TA: [bestas (-) midia::rlas
7.   S1: midi<u>a</u>les (-) vestes medi<u>a</u>les
8.   TA: yea:h↑
9.   S1: this one↑ an' then this part here↑ (.) which I think is like <u>this </u>muscle
10. TA: al:right↑

While trying to examine how the student's system functions in relation to certain muscles in human legs, the TA takes a chair to sit in keeping with his utterance in line 1, " if we (-) sit in <u>here</u>." During the talk with the TA, as shown in lines 2-6, the student mentions muscle parts on a picture of the book in reference to their bodies. In line 6, the TA, in overlap with his student's turn, reads the name of the muscle, Vastus Medialis. The TA's pronunciation of the term, "bestas (-) midia::rlas", is far from being correct. The problem in articulating the term is revealed in his hesitation marked by a pause and the stretched pronunciation. The TA then turns his eye-gaze to his knees, when the student produces the term in a more English-like way. She rereads the name, uttering "midi<u>a</u>les **(-)** vestes medi<u>a</u>les." Although the TA's response in the next turn, "yeah", indicates his acknowledgement of the pronunciation, he does not incorporate it into his production. The side sequence of other-repair ends at this point, as the student goes on to explain what she has been researching for her project.

Two aspects of the contingent lab-hour interaction appear to be relevant to the occurrences of the repair in this instance. First, the words being corrected are not commonly used in the everyday conversation between native speakers. Therefore mispronunciation of the words would not be as face threatening. Second, the phonological problem does not interfere with understating because the words are available in the visual codes in the text. The native-speaking student simply produces a correct pronunciation of the words in the next turn. The TA does not overtly recognize the correction as he neither incorporates it into his own utterance nor comments on his student's corrective action. The correction thus becomes embedded rather than exposed in the speakers' turns.

In other instances, NS students' other corrective actions were found to target certain lexical or syntactic elements of the NNS TA's sentences. In both of the cases, corrections were done in an embedded manner. Doing other-correction, the students produced their own understanding or knowledge on a specific content, thus succeeded in eliciting from

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[2] See appendix A for transcription notation

their TAs better-turned input or positive evaluation of their class performances. In the following excerpt, the NS student corrects the TA's object referent, as the student performs the required action by the TA. The TA is advising step-by-step how to solve the errors in his student's program.

(2) TA (H) and S1 (V) in an electrical engineering lab

1. TA: take this routine away
2. **S1: okay take this keystroke away**
3. TA: this whole thing oh no this (.) only this

The TA asks S1 to remove a certain part of S1's program which is displayed on the computer monitor, saying, "that this routine away." "Routine" refers to a specific part of a program (J. Kim, personal communication, March, 2003). While taking an other-initiating action, S1 reformulates his TA's utterance and says, "take this keystroke away." By saying this, S1 recasts the TA's utterance by replacing "this routine" with "this keystroke." The correction is embedded into the on-going talk, and not exposed. The embedded correction, however, reveals the student has understood what the TA said; removing the indicated routine in the program will remove keystroke function in his system. Given the response, the TA realizes discrepancy in understanding of "this routine" between himself and his student. In line 3, the TA also performs other-correction by correcting the student's utterance by replacing "key stroke" with "this whole thing." The referent is now made clear to both participants.

This example clearly shows how embedded correction will function in this type of goal-oriented academic setting. The student's reformulated sentence delivers his own understanding of what the TA has said, which is effective in eliciting better input from the TA. Intersubjectivity is successfully reached through the corrective actions.

The next example shows the functional aspect of other-correction of syntactic elements of NNS TAs' turns. In this segment, a NS student is explaining to his Korean TA some of the problems that he has detected in his circuit system.

(3) TA (J) and S1 (S) in an electrical engineering lab

1. S1: this is supposed to transmit data to the first micro controller here↑
2. TA: yes↑=
3. S1: =through my hardwa: (-) hardware encoder↑ (.) [an' <u>tha:t</u>
4. TA: [ah: so you: (.)
5.   you succeeded in encoding
6. (-)
7. **S1: yeah (.) we have succeeded in encoding it↑=**
8. TA: =I see

As the student is sitting facing the microcontroller on his desk, he uses pointing gestures to signify different referents. While saying "this", he points to the computer on his right side. Then he moves his body to the left and points to the system, saying "the first micro controller here." In line 2, the TA begins his turn and provides his comment on S1's description of the hardware in lines 4-5, saying, "ah: so you: you succeeded in encoding." This evaluative remark is not grammatically correct with no object following "encoding", although its interference with meaning is minor. S1's gesture is sustained at the place of the cable when he listens to his TA. He then withdraws his gesture, and nods his head

confirming the TA's comment. He says, "yeah (.) we have succeeded in encoding it↑" In uttering the sentence, he reformulates the TA's sentence so that an object follows "encoding" in the present perfect tense instead of the past. This correction serves a function other than linguistic modification. By reproducing the sentence in the correct form, the student reconfirms the TAs' positive evaluation, which is an important communicative goal that the student aims to achieve. Other-correction of linguistic troubles, thus, is not simply about the forms, but extends to the lab-hour specific communicative goals.

In sum, corrective actions on linguistic troubles significantly contributed to enhancing understanding between the NS and NNS participants. The specification made in the corrective turn helped the NNS TA recognize the NS student's current state of content knowledge, so that he could adjust optimal level of his input. Other-correction also performed the function of confirmation alongside linguistic correction itself. The NS student showed his confirmation of the TA's proposition that had been produced in a nonnative-like sentence construction, while at the same time displaying his understanding of the topic.

3.2. *Corrections of Meaning*

Specificities of the lab hour context included the effects of NS students' content knowledge of their own projects on defining the target of repair. They were able to correct the TAs' proposition, either implicitly or explicitly, based upon their understanding.

3.2.1. Implicit Correction of Meaning

The following example provides an interesting case of a NS student's other-correction upon the idea proposed by a NNS TA. Here, the NNS TA is explaining to his student how a certain input will affect the routine, or the setup of the program. They are sitting facing the computer monitor while reviewing the student's program on the monitor (figure 1).

(4) TA (H) and S1 (V) in an electrical engineering lab

1. TA: If there (-) If the data is like uh (-) let's say (.) if (.) if tha:r is ten
2. S1: mm-hm
3. TA: then this routine will (-) freeze (.) right?
4. **S1: uh-huh (.) until I keep swiping it**
5. TA: yeah
6. **S1: until I fill it up**
7. TA: mm-hm (-) that makes sense (- -) u:m

In lines 1 and 3, the TA delineates the result from a data incoming condition, when he says, "if (.) if tha:r is ten then this routine will (-) freeze." To the TA's understanding check question, "right?" S1 responds in affirmation with "uh-huh", and continues to add another sentential element, "until I keep swiping it", to the TA's utterance. While saying this, S1 moves his right hand up and down to conceptualize the action of swiping (figure 1). This additional concept displayed on the verbal and the non-verbal dimensions functions to present clearly the TA's meaning. The TA acknowledges S1's correction with "yeah" in line 5. S1 takes another turn to emphasize his meaning, when he says, "until I fill it up." He keeps moving his hand up and down while uttering this phrase. S1's other-

correction complements his TA's proposition in order to better explain the condition. The TA recognizes the correction and says, "mm-hm."

Figure 1. S1's gesture of swiping

It is important to note that S1's complementary remarks eventually function to correct the TA's proposition rather than simply complement the proposition. The TA acknowledges his student's utterances by saying, "that makes sense", which reveals that the additional condition produced by S1 is the point that the TA had not been aware of. He now fully understands how the program works in the suggested condition. By performing the other-repair in two modalities, verbal and non-verbal, he implicitly removes the problem. On the verbal dimension, he simply adds a phrase to the TA's utterance, which he rephrases in the later turn, into "until you fill it up." In the gesture dimension, he conceptualizes the motion of swiping by moving his hand up and down, so that his utterances are visually available and his meaning is more effectively delivered.

3.2.2. Rejection of TAs' suggestions

The analysis revealed that there were cases in which NS students would other-correct propositional components in order to reject the suggested proposition of the TAs. Other-correction was frequently associated with disagreement (e.g., Gaskill, 1980), and the current data corpus showed that NS students' corrective actions targeted displaying their opposing/disagreeing stance against their TAs' actions in general rather than enhancing effective communication of contents between the participants per se. Given the explicit disagreeing actions, it was important for TAs to react to their students' turns of correction because the students' actions affected turn organization and participant alignment to a significant degree.

Two examples that follow represent two different types of dyad, i.e., NS TA vs. NS student and NNS TA vs. NS student, each of which illustrates how NS and NNS TAs deal with their students' explicit actions of disagreement. The segment that follows is extracted from the data video-taped in a biology lab. A NS TA is interacting with three students, S1, S2, and S3 while helping them to complete a problem-solving assignment on the computer. He is looking at the problems displayed on the computer along with the students (figure 2).

Figure 2. The interactants in the biology lab

(5) NS TA (S), S1, S2, S3, and S4 in a biology lab

1.   TA: yeah so aldosterone is what sort of hor:mone↓
2.   (-)
3.   S1: oh it's steroid
4.   TA: m: <u>no</u> (-) what (-) what sort of steroid?
5.   S1: like antibiotic?
6.   TA: it's mineral corticoid (- -) you know mineralized corticoid?
7.   (.)
8.   S1: we don' have to know about that
9.   S2: yeah
10. TA: yeah
11. (-)
12. S2: it's unrelated
13. (- -)
14. TA: uh:: I'm just try'n feel smart (.) so:
15. (- -) ((all laughing))
16. S2: you're try'n (-) try'n to be (*   )=
17. TA: =basically mineral corticoid is called mineral corticoid because sodiums
18.   are mineral (-) okay? (.)

In line 1, the NS TA, is asking a question about "aldosterone", a type of hormone secreted by the adrenal cortex, to his students. One of the students, S1, answers, "oh it's steroid." The TA rejects her response with "no" in the next turn in line 4. He then asks a question about exactly "what sort of steroid" the student meant. S1 says, "like antibiotic?" with rising intonation. The TA receives the turn by presenting the correct referent, "it's mineral corticoid." S1's response to this question, "we don' have to know about that" not only directly corrects the TA's turn, but also nullifies the discussion of the specific subject or the term, "mineral corticoid." The following acknowledgement from S2 adds the explicit action of other-correction. The TA receives the students' turns with "yeah." While he does not produce a subsequent sentence to cope with this overt correction, S2, utters, "it's unrelated", to support her teammate's overt correction.

It is interesting to note that this other-correction is performed collectively by the students. The interaction sequence is now in break because of this collective overt repair and of the TA's seemingly receptive responses to the repair. The relationship between the TA and the students is disrupted at this point. The TA does not immediately deal with this overt correction in the next turn. Rather, after a pause, smiling at S1, he tells a joke, by saying "uh: I'm just try'n feel smart (.) so:" in line 14. All the students laugh at their TA's

jocular response. This joke provides a transition point to the disrupted participant alignment. It is interesting to note that this transition is also marked by his change in body posture. While the students are laughing, the TA turns away and walks a step to his left. Ignoring S2's response (line 16), the TA turns to the students and begins to explain why the material is called "mineral corticoid" in line 17. His coordination of jocular talk and repositioning of his body contributes to the restoration of the participant relationship. The realignment is represented by S1's movement to the desk (figure 3).

Figure 3. S1's bodily reorientation to the study materials on the desk

This example clearly shows how vulnerable participant alignment is in the lab-hour TA-student interaction. In this specific instance, the students' other-correction momentarily disrupts the TA's powerful position as the students explicitly reject the TA's proposition and, moreover, the validity of the subject that the TA has introduced. The NS TA coordinates his verbal and non-verbal resources to readjust the disrupted power relationship. His joke and repositioning of his body both work functional to restore the participant alignment, and to validate his proposition.

The following excerpt from NNS-NS interactions reveals how differently a NNS TA deals with a NS student's rejection, and the effects of the different handlings of the turns of other-repair on turn organization and participant alignment. In this incidence, a NNS TA is interacting with two NS students, S1 and S2. S1 has had a problem in understanding the term "adder" which the TA has suggested to insert into their circuit system. At the moment of the interaction, there is a discrepancy in the knowledge of the term between the participants. While the TA and a NS student, S2, do know what an "adder", if included in the system, would do, S1 does not understand the term. In the following segment, S1 introduces a new term "mixer" that replaces the troublesome term "adder", and thus rejects the TA's evaluation of S1's understanding.

(6) TA (O), S1 (P), and S2 (L) in an electrical engineering lab

1. S2: I don' think S1 looks at those (-)
2. TA: I (-) I think=
3. **S1: =I mean uh:: I know what you're talkin' about (- -) it's a (- - - -)**
4. **   it's a <u>mixer</u>**
5. (- -)
6. TA: mixer?
7. S1: mixer↓
8. TA: y[eah it could]

9.   S1:   [we have (-)] we have like um: two different (-) yeah it's like
10.   bulking out (- -) bulking out
11.   TA: m:::
12.   :
13.   S1: 'cause these will (-) these will <u>add </u>these two signals together (- -) an'
14.   create the current(--) we can (-) make this (-) a larger current↑ (-)
15.   but this one stays the same (-) so that (- - -) it changes this (-) so this one
16.   has the signal (-) so like this (- -) this one has DC signal
17.   (- -)
18.   TA: yeah right I think it's right
19.   S1: that's it
20.   TA: mm-hm

At the beginning of the sequence, S1's understanding is explicitly examined and evaluated by his teammate S2. In line 1, S2 says, "I don't think S1 looks at those", having witnessed the repeated failures of the process of meaning negotiation in the previous turns. However, S1 disagrees with this evaluation and attempts to redisplay his state of understanding about the term "adder." In lines 3-4, S1 rejects S2's evaluation, and reclaims his knowledge with a supposedly authoritative term "mixer." Saying "I mean uh:: I know what you're talkin' about (- -) it's a (- - -) it's a mixer", he corrects S2's evaluation and at the same time rejects the term "adder" suggested by the TA. The TA utters, "mixer?" to asks what it is. S1 recycles the term in the next turn with falling intonation, "mixer." As the TA responds to S1's turn, "yeah it could", S1 interrupts the TA's utterance, and describes the mixer.

The TA's understanding of the term "mixer" is necessary to ensure his powerful position in the participant relationship in the latter turns of interaction. When there is a perceived difference in knowledge levels, the knowledgeable conversationalist becomes the more powerful speaker. A linguistic tool of authority and value affects the social relationship of conversationalists such as power, such that participant alignment is (re)defined throughout the participants' handlings of linguistic tools (e.g., Wertsch, 1991). In this example, S1 introduces the new term "mixer" to disapprove of his two interactants' evaluation of his non-understanding. He now becomes the more knowledgeable speaker about the new term, which is reflected in his extended speakership in the subsequent turns. The participant alignment is redefined, so that the TA does not act on the student's extended speakership but remains as a listener.

It is important to note that S1's description of the workings of the mixer is appropriately coordinated by his orchestration of two different semantic resources. On the non-verbal dimension, he utilizes a drawing to clearly represent the workings of the mixer in their circuit design. This use of the material environment is crucial for him to transfer his meaning to the TA, and to hold the floor over the next several turns. On the verbal dimension, he deliberately resuscitates the problematic term "adder" in his utterance. The terms such as "DC signal", "add", and "change" have been reproduced in S1's own verbal and non-verbal illustrations of the mixer. His coordination of the two modes turns out to be successful in drawing the TA's acknowledgement about the term "mixer."

Although the degree and target of the rejection was not exactly homogeneous, the two examples revealed specific differences between a NS TA and a NNS TA in dealing with NS students' act of disagreement, and momentary disruption of power relationship. During the break due to his students' rejection of the quality of his proposition, the NS TA coordinated two different modalities of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, to deal with the

two tasks, and to resume the on-going talk. The NS TA's joke in response to the challenging situation was functional to restore the participant alignment, and the validity of his proposition in the subsequent turns. He also moved his body from the students and did not respond to the students' remarks following his joke. When he returned his body to the original position and realigned with the students, he also returned to the rejected proposition, and resumed the talk. In contrast, the NNS TA was shown to be more receptive of his student's rejection and the following extended speakership. While his student, S1, utilized diverse resources, such as a drawing and an authoritative term to replace the TA's term, the TA remained as a listener, and acknowledged S1's utterances. The side sequence of repair was extended and the disrupted power relationship was not adjusted.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Although infrequently found in the data corpus, NS students' other-corrective actions added another dimension to the dynamics of problem-solving interactions in this institutional setting between NS and NNS speakers. On the one hand, the empirical examination of NS students' behavior of direct other-correction confirmed that other-correction was not limited to adult-child interaction, but extended to other settings where there was disparity in knowledge between the participants (e.g., McHoul, 1990). On the other hand, the analysis revealed what kinds of contingencies in the lab-hour setting NS students dealt with in correcting their TAs. What the corrective actions achieved was beyond the simple matters of correcting linguistic errors or resolving understanding problems. By means of other-correction upon linguistic items, the NS students focused more on the actions of confirmation and demonstration of their knowledge on content areas. They also showed disagreement with their TAs doing other-correction.

I have excerpted and discussed a few examples of one NS TA and two NNS TAs in this paper because of the spatial constraint. However, the differences between the native speakers and the nonnative speakers in coordinating the turns following other-correction clearly presented specifically which aspects of interactional competence needed to be instructed to the NNS TAs during teacher training. The temporary moments of tension due to the explicit rejection of an utterance required the effective coordination of available resources. TAs' responses to the students' rejection were critical to bringing the interaction back to the problem-solving process. In order to efficiently cope with this task, they needed to display their stance on both the verbal and the non-verbal dimensions. Whereas the NS TA aptly used meaningful resources to resume the talk and more importantly his instructorship, the Korean TA was receptive to his student's rejection, thus handed over his speakership to the student. The striking differences punctuated the needs to view L2 competence in terms of how to enact a certain role using diverse meaningful resources appropriately in a given context. If we, as language educators, are to incorporate this aspect of L2 competence into L2 education, it is important to scrutinize the lab hour setting that is significant to the lives of international graduate students. They are learning how to play an instructor role for their future professions, and thus need to receive systematic training at TA workshops and seminars. Their knowledge of how to manage L2 in this academic setting will contribute to better learning of many undergraduate students in the U.S. whose higher education oftentimes cannot be separated from nonnative English-speaking instructors.

Appendix A. Transcription Notation[3]

1. Intonation
 Rising intonation: ↑
 Falling intonation: ↓
 Stress: <u>text</u>
2. Temporal features
 Pause: (tenths of a second)
 Short untimed pause: - - -
 Spoken slowly: <text>
 Spoken rapidly: >text<
 Lengthened syllable: :
 Word cutoff: -
 Latched talk: =
 Overlapping speech: []
3. Intensity
 Spoken softly: °text°
 Spoken loudly: TEXT
4. Breathing
 Audible breathing: H
 In-breath: .h
 Out-breath: h
5. Transcriber's comments
 Paralinguistic behavior: ((behavior))
6. Unclear or unintelligible speech: ()

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[3] This transcription notation was developed and refined by Jefferson (in Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

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