Factors affecting teacher feedback

Iwai, Chiaki Hiroshima City University Julia Kawamoto Himeji Dokkyo University

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Teacher feedback on form-related errors by second language learners is considered to play an important role in acquiring L2, and research into form-focused instruction (FFI) has been promoted in the last two decades. Although some researchers strongly object to FFI (e.g., Truscott, 1999), its effects have been verified through comprehensive meta-analyses of empirical studies examining FFI effects. Despite their positive evidence, it is by no means clear what conditions need to be met for FFI when L2 teachers apply it to actual classroom instruction. Thus, we will ask in this study whether FFI is an instruction method applicable for any teachers under any conditions. By limiting our observation targets to two teacher factors (English as a native or non-native language for teachers and their teaching experience), the study attempts to answer this question empirically.

第二言語(L2)習得研究では、学習者の言い間違い(errors)に対する教師からのフィードバックがL2習得に重要な役割を果 たすとされ、言語形式(form)に学習者の注意を引きつける form-focused instruction (FFI)の研究が進められてきた。FFIに 強く反対する研究者(例えばTruscott, 1999)もいるが、FFI効果については、数多くの実証研究を包括的にメタ分析したいく つかの研究から効果が認められている。実証的な検証結果とは裏腹に、実際の授業への応用となると、FFIの実施にどのよう な準備が必要なのか、教師側には何が求められるのかなどについては、必ずしも明らかではない。本研究は、FFI は誰でも実 行可能かどうかを問うもので、多くの教師要因のうち、2つの教師要因(英語が母語であるかと英語の指導経験)に的を絞り、 実証的にこの問いについて考察している。

T HE PRESENT study is about teachers' *corrective feedback* [this term is adopted in this study although other terms such as *negative evidence* (Schwartz, 1993) or *grammar correction* (Truscott, 1999) have also been used], which plays a crucial role in form-focused instruction (FFI). FFI fundamentally differs from traditional grammar-centered instruction in that learners' attention should be directed to the well-formedness of utterances, i.e., *accuracy*, without sacrificing communicative intention, i.e., *meaning*, while they engage in natural communicative interactions (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). What is presumed in FFI is that corrective feedback given to L2 learners by a language expert (usually a native speaker or a teacher) promotes learners' effective noticing of their form-errors so that their interlanguage development will be facilitated.

Testing the validity of FFI as an instruction method is not a central concern of this study since this has already been verified by many researchers as shown in the literature review

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section below. Instead, the study will discuss its feasibility in relation to specific teacher factors. The discussions below are based on the outcomes of qualitative analysis of the interactive data collected for this study.

Literature review

Many empirical studies have been conducted with respect to FFI effects. For a quick grasp of their results, three meta-analytic studies are cited here. The first is a study by Norris and Ortega (2000, 2001). Analyzing 49 empirical studies examining different types of L2 instruction, Norris and Ortega concluded that most of the studies they examined proved the effectiveness of FFI, especially when it is employed in an explicit manner. The second is a study by Russell and Spada (2006). In this study, they investigated 56 studies on corrective feedback. The results showed that corrective feedback is effective for L2 learning, but their effectiveness varies according to instructional purposes (e.g., speaking vs. writing), types of feedback (recasts vs. prompts; see below for more about them), and classroom settings (e.g., classroom vs. laboratory). The third is a study by Mackey and Goo (2007), which examined 28 studies and found that the effects of classroom interaction worked better for lexical learning than grammatical learning, that recast was the most helpful teachers' feedback for L2 learners among different types of feedback they examined, and that feedback on a specific form was more effective than feedback on any randomly attended forms.

The highly reliable empirical evidence of these studies seems to be robust enough for us to approve FFI effects. Based on such evidence, Spada and Lightbown (2008) made a strong claim that "the most engaging questions and debate in L2 pedagogy are no longer about whether CLT [Communicative Language Teaching] should include FFI but rather how and when it is most effective" (184) [cf. a straightforward rejection of FFI by Schwartz (1993) and Truscott (1999) and a counterargument to Truscott

by Lyster, Lightbown, & Spada (1999)]. Based on such empirical evidence, this study presupposes the instructional value of FFI.

Even so, FFI does not seem to be without problems regarding its employment in actual teaching. As expressed by Spada and Lightbown above, methodological improvement, i.e., how and when FFI is most effective, may be an urgent matter; however, we argue in this study that the *feasibility* of FFI for teachers ("feasibility issue" hereafter) is no less important than the methodological issue. More precisely, we will ask in this study whether FFI is a teaching method for every language teacher, by which we mean whether it can be easily and unconditionally employed by any L2 teachers regardless of, for example, their experience of using it.

Among the very few FFI studies dealing with the feasibility issue, two are exceptional. The first is a study conducted by Pica and Long (1986), in which they questioned whether teachers naturally possess the ability to modify input to the learners as part of their competence or whether they can develop such competence through their actual experience of teaching over time. Pica and Long infer from their findings that L2 teachers would naturally possess the modifying competence but their actual modification depends largely on factors of classroom contexts.

The second is a study by Mackey, Polio, and McDonough (2004), which actually became a partial model for our study. Systematically and intensively investigating teachers' feedback, Mackey et al. examined whether the way teachers gave feedback differed in its frequency and types according to their experience of teaching, and whether the way inexperienced teachers offered feedback could be affected by training. The results of their study showed that feedback frequency, but not types, differed between the experienced and inexperienced teachers, and training (an 8-week workshop) did not change very much the way inexperienced teachers gave feedback even though the degrees of their awareness toward learners' errors became acute. Beyond these results, this study appears important in the sense that it implies that certain teacher factors affect the success of FFI, and furthermore, substantial training is necessary for teachers to acquire teaching skills to employ FFI effectively.

These exceptional studies are highly insightful in considering teachers' roles in FFI; however, both of them were conducted in an ESL context so that it is still unclear whether their findings can be extended to other teaching contexts, including an EFL setting of direct relevance to the authors of the present study. Moreover, both studies dealt with learners' errors in general (mixture of pronunciation, morphosyntax, and lexicon) so that it is not clear whether their findings can be generalized in a more restricted sense of FFI, which was first advocated by Long (1991) as focus-on-form (FonF) instruction. FonF instruction requires targeting a selected learners' error or errors rather than errors in general (FonFs, hereafter).

Research questions

Taking into consideration the lack of past FFI studies examining teacher factors and other areas cited above, we decided to examine how different types of teachers (teacher factors, hereafter) would provide EFL learners with corrective feedback under a FonFs condition (any form-errors) and a FonF condition (a specific form-error) and if the types and frequency of teachers' giving feedback differ among them. The study is highly exploratory since the number of participants, both teachers and students, is limited, and the data collection was conducted under quasi-experimental conditions as explained later. The targets of FonFs in this study are any morphosyntactic and lexical errors that students made during their interaction with their teachers (pronunciation errors are not included), while the target of FonF was limited only to verb-tense errors (past tense and past participial forms).

Teacher factors investigated in this study include two: whether the teachers are native English speakers (NS teachers) or non-native speakers (NNS teachers); and whether they are experienced or inexperienced teachers. The former was examined in neither Pica and Long's study nor Mackey et al.'s one; however, it is considered extremely important in our EFL context since in practice many Japanese NNS instructors teach English in Japan.

Regarding these two teacher factors, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1. Can teachers change their interaction styles under different instructional conditions?
- 2. Do teachers change the way they give feedback when they are requested to pay attention to a certain form or forms while they engage in meaning-based interaction?
- 3. If they change the way they give feedback, are there any differences in its frequency and types between NS teachers and NNS teachers on one hand, and between experienced and inexperienced teachers on the other?

Method of data collection

Participants

Participants in the study are six English teachers: two NS teachers (one male and one female) with over 5 years' experience of teaching English in ESL/EFL contexts, 2 NNS teachers (one male and one female) also with over 5 years' experience of teaching it in EFL contexts, and two inexperienced NNS teachers (both Japanese females; one an MA student and the other a part-time instructor who just started teaching at a Japanese junior high school). The following pseudonyms are used for them throughout this study: John and Mary for the NS teachers, Taro and Hana for the experienced NNS teachers, and Fumi and Kayo for the novice NNS teachers. Each of these teachers engaged in classroom interaction with four students (first and second year students belonging to the university where the first author of this study is affiliated), so in total 24 students (4 students x 6 teachers) were recruited and assigned to one of the six teachers' classes by matching the students' schedules with those of teachers. Although their proficiency levels were not balanced among the six classes due to a practical reason (i.e., difficulty matching 24 students' convenience with six teachers' schedules), these students' proficiency levels can be regarded as pre-intermediate to intermediate (approximately 450 to 650 in TOEIC scores). Since our observation targets were the teachers rather than the students, the unbalanced students' allotment to these classes was assumed not to distort the teacher-student interaction unduly.

Tasks and experimental conditions

Figure 1 below depicts the two tasks conducted in this study. They are a Photo Description task and a Picture Narrative task. These two tasks were given to examine task influence on teachers' feedback. However, the oral data obtained from these two tasks are combined below since the task factor is not a research question in this paper.

In either task, each student engaged in two activities. The first is an explanation activity (Explanation), in which students described either a photo that they brought to the class (a sample photo in Appendix 1) or a series of story pictures (also in Appendix 1) that the researchers prepared in advance. The teachers were directed to feel free to interact with the students as they liked.



Figure 1. Flow of data collection activities

Following the Explanation activity, each teacher was requested to ask six questions to the student (Q/A activity). These questions consisted of a set of three questions predetermined by the researchers (preset questions) and three additional questions created by the teachers during the Q/A activity (open-ended questions). Some teachers, however, asked more than three open-ended questions. Such extra questions are discarded from the analysis below in order to compare teachers' performance under the same conditions (i.e., three preset questions and three open-ended questions). The analysis in the next session is, therefore, based on the interactive data in the Explanation activity and the Q/A activity between the teacher and the four students in each class.

The teacher-student interaction was conducted under three separate experimental conditions: Natural, General, and Specific. Differences among these sessions are as follows:

- 1. Natural session: No experimental condition was set, and the teacher and students interacted freely.
- 2. General session: Teachers were requested to correct any form-related problems that they noticed during the Explanation or Q/A activity. A larger amount of teacher feedback was expected in this session than in the next Specific

session since the total number of learners' errors attended to in this session is larger than that in the Specific session. This session deals with any types of learner errors, so the instruction format is regarded as that of FonFs.

3. Specific session: The teachers were requested to focus only on verb-tense problems in this session. Due to the narrow focus on one kind of error, the total amount of teachers' feedback was expected to be smaller than in the General session. Because of the limited focusing manner, the instruction format is regarded as FonF.

To make sure that the request in the General and Special sessions would be understood thoroughly by the teachers, it was printed on a piece of paper, handed to them, and explained orally prior to their interaction activities.

For each teacher, the total number of Explanation activity is, therefore, eight (4 students x 2 tasks) for each session and the total number of questions in Q/A activity is 48 [4 students x 2 tasks x (3 preset Qs + 3 open-ended Qs)]. All teacher feedback given during these task activities was identified and analyzed in this study.

Each session lasted for about 80 minutes, and thus, there were 240 minutes in total for each teacher. The entire sessions were audio- and video-recorded, and all utterances during the Explanation and Q/A activities were transcribed verbatim. Once the transcript was prepared, the two researchers of this study encoded utterance features separately and the inter-rater agreement rates were checked for each one of them (although detailed results are omitted due to space restrictions, agreement rates were beyond 85% and were considered high enough). Disagreed segments were adjusted by the two researchers upon a follow-up discussion.

Summary of analysis codes

The following represent part of main codes used in this study (see Appendix 2 for a sample of an encoded transcript.)

- 1. Adjacency pair (AP): A sequence of utterances by Speakers A and B as one set, typically a sequence like a question and an answer (Schiffrin, 1994: p. 16). Simple backchannels before the completion of either A or B's turn, e.g., *uh-huh* and *OK*, were excluded in counting the frequency of APs.
- 2. Types of meaning-focused feedback (MFF; adapted from Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; only a few typical subcategories of the MFF taxonomy are shown below since the types of MFF are not analyzed in this study).
 - (a) Confirmation check (CC): (e.g.) Oh so you mean "abc"?
 - (b) Clarification request (CR) : (e.g.) What do you mean by "xyz"?
 - (d) Continuation signal (CON): (e.g.) Go on, go on ...
 - (f) Signal of non-understanding (UN): (e.g.) I don't really understand that.
- 3. Types of form-focused feedback (FFF; Lyster & Ranta, 1997)
 - (a) Recast: A correct form for a student's error is offered directly by the teacher.
 - (f) Prompt: An error is pointed out in an explicit or inexplicit manner by the teacher, but a correct form itself is not given.

Results

The following three outcomes of the analysis are presented below: total frequency counts of adjacency pairs, total frequency counts of MFF and FFF, and types of FFF.

Frequency counts of adjacency pairs (APs)

Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the mean frequency counts of APs for all the six teachers in each activity. For ease of understanding, these frequency counts are altered to the means representing AP counts for one picture explanation per student in the right end column of Table 1, and AP counts for one question for each student in that of Table 2. Overall, the largest number of APs was used in the General session in both activities, which is followed by the Specific session, and then the Natural session.

These mean AP counts were tested by a nonparametric Friedman test (due to the small sample size and unlikelihood of a normal data distribution) to examine if there is any difference across sessions. As a result, the means of the Explanation activity were found to be significantly different among the 3 sessions (p < .05), and a follow-up Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test revealed that the significant difference was due to a difference between the Natural session and the other two sessions (both p < .05) but not due to the difference between the General and Specific sessions (details of the statistical tests are omitted due to space restrictions). Likewise, the means of the Q/A activity were also significantly different (p < .05), but the significant difference in this activity was only due to the difference between the Natural and General sessions (p < .05).

Table. I Mean AP counts per teacher by session in the Explanation activity

Sessions	M	SD	APs per explanation for each student
Natural	18.33	20.61	2.29
General	68.83	71.10	8.60
Specific	51.67	48.39	6.46

Table 2. Mean AP counts per teacher by session in the \$Q/A\$ activity

Sessions	М	SD	APs per question for each student
Natural	123.50	24.24	2.57
General	147.00	59.33	3.06
Specific	139.83	47.09	2.91

Next, Figures 2 and 3 below show how each teacher performed the two activities.



Figure 2. Mean AP counts in Explanation activity



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Among the six teachers, the most frequent interactant was apparently Taro, whose AP counts outnumbered the other teachers' in all sessions. John differed from the other two experienced female teachers (Mary and Hana) in that his total AP counts increased from Natural to Specific, and from Specific to General, which was also the case of Taro, even though John's total counts were far fewer than Taro's. The two experienced female teachers were somewhat alike in either one of the two activities. Finally, the two inexperienced teachers (especially Fumi) were somewhat less active in their interaction with students than the experienced teachers.

Frequency counts of meaning-focused feedback (MFF) and form-focused feedback (FFF)

Next, the total frequency of MFF and that of FFF were counted, and their descriptive statistics are displayed in Tables 3 and 5 (MFF counts) and Tables 4 and 6 (FFF counts) for each activity. It turns out that MFF was far more frequent than the FFF (at least 1.9 times more frequent in the Explanation activity and 4.6 times more in the Q/A activity), which indicates that meaning-based negotiation was done far more often than form-based negotiation.

Table 3. Mean MFF counts by session in the Explanation activity

Sessions	М	SD	MFF counts per explana- tion for each student
Natural	12.67	19.85	2.48
General	57.83	65.81	8.23
Specific	36.33	41.62	5.20
<u> </u>			

Table 4. Mean FFF counts by session in theExplanation activity

Sessions	М	SD	FFF counts per explanation for each student
Natural	3.33	5.75	0.48
General	19.17	18.33	1.53
Specific	19.50	11.41	0.95

Table 5. Mean MFF counts by session in the Q/A activity

Sessions	М	SD	MFF counts per question for each student
Natural	90.17	34.86	0.73
General	101.33	51.60	1.08
Specific	90.83	54.40	1.13

Table 6. Mean FFF counts by session in the Q/A activity

Sessions	М	SD	FFF counts per question for each student
Natural	11.50	9.20	0.19
General	21.83	17.69	0.37
Specific	18.33	13.17	0.27

Statistical difference was also tested by a nonparametric Friedman test and by a Wilcoxon Signed Ranked test, and the following results were obtained.

• MFF counts in the Explanation activity: *p* < .05, Natural < General and Specific



- FFF counts in the Explanation activity: *p* < .01, Natural < General and Specific
- MFF counts in the Q/A activity: *n.s.* FFF counts in the Q/A activity: *n.s.*

These results indicate that the teachers differentiated their frequency of feedback either in MFF or FFF in the Explanation activity more clearly than in the Q/A activity. This was probably because teachers were cognitively loaded more heavily in the Q/A activity since they had to listen to learners' utterances and think about questions at the same time, and consequently they could not detect learners' problems, both in meaning and forms, as they could in the Explanation activity, where the teachers did not have to think about what to ask the students.

Regarding individual differences with respect to MFF and FFF, several features can be identified from Figures 4 to 7 below.



Figure 4. MFF counts per student by teacher in Explanation activity



Figure 5. FFF counts per student by teacher in Explanation activity



Figure 6. MFF counts per student by teacher in Q/A



Figure 7. FFF counts per student by teacher in Q/A activity

First, regarding the Explanation activity (Figures 4 and 5), the six teachers' frequency patterns of MFF and FFF are similar, which indicates that, despite the researchers' request to focus on learners' form-related errors in General and Specific sessions, most teachers did not intensively focus only on such errors in these sessions. Next, the two male teachers, Taro and John, presented the expected feedback patterns, i.e., more feedback in the General session than in the Specific session (see the explanation of these sessions in the methodology section above), but again this was the case not only in FFF but also in MFF. Kayo, one of the inexperienced teachers, acted in a fairly similar manner to these two male teachers. Somewhat peculiar was Mary's and Hana's more frequent FFF feedback in the Specific session than in the General session. Finally, Fumi, an inexperienced teacher, was least active in giving feedback in either MFF or in FFF.

Next, regarding the Q/A activity, the three lines in Figures 6 and 7 become narrower than those in Figures 4 and 5, which indicates that the difference in teachers' feedback became less salient. In this activity, both Taro and John presented the expected feedback patterns, i.e., more frequent feedback in the General session than in the Specific session. In contrast, Mary and Hana exhibited patterns opposite to them. Finally, the two inexperienced teachers gave fewer instances of feedback in both MFF and FFF than the experienced teachers, and, moreover, they provided almost the same amount of feedback in all the three sessions.

Types of FFF: Recast vs. prompt

Some researchers (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997) argue that prompts are more effective for L2 acquisition than recasts since prompts facilitate learners' noticing of their errors and require learners to make more efforts to seek correct forms than recasts do. Thus, these two types of feedback were compared, and the results are displayed in Figure 8 and Figure 9, where frequency counts

of the three sessions are combined since the occurrences of prompts were very few or not identified at all for some teachers.







Figure 9. Total recasts and prompts in Q/A activity (3 sessions combined)



Of the six teachers, only John and Taro offered a sizable number of prompts. The use of prompts by the other teachers was scarce. Prompts tend to require more negotiation of forms between a teacher and a student since a correct form is not offered directly by a teacher; thus, eventually prompts often cause a deviation from the main flow of a conversation. Actually, this was witnessed quite often in Taro's interaction with his students. The fact that all female teachers in this study employed recasts in their interactions indicate that they tried to minimize the risk of communicative interruption when their students committed errors, even though it is unknown whether they did so consciously or unconsciously.

Discussion and implications

On the basis of the analysis outcomes presented above, we would like to answer the three research questions (RQ) formulated in this study. The first RQ was concerned with teachers' ability to change their interaction styles according to different instruction conditions, and this was measured by the shifts in AP counts across the three experimental conditions (i.e., Natural, General, and Specific sessions). The answer to this RQ is affirmative since the six teachers interacted statistically more often in the General (FonFs) and Specific (FonF) sessions than the Natural session, although the degree of shift differed largely among the teachers, i.e., Taro outperformed the other teachers, and experienced teachers shifted more noticeably than the inexperienced teachers. In addition, their AP shift was more salient in the Explanation activity than in the Q/A activity, which probably means that teachers' interaction manner is affected by contextual factors.

The second RQ asked if the teachers would change the way they give feedback according to the experimental conditions. The answer to this RQ is also positive. However, this answer should be treated with some caution since the amount of feedback in this study became larger not only in FFF but also in MFF, even though the experimental condition given to the teachers was only concerned with form-related errors. The fact that the teachers, regardless of the teacher factors tested in this study, did not restrict their feedback only to form-related errors would imply that it was not easy for them to focus attention only on such errors (i.e., the difficulty of selective attention, especially to forms, while being engaged in meaning-prioritized interaction). This is in line with our general sense that we focus on meaning rather than on forms while we are involved in conversation. Furthermore, the teachers' difficulty in controlling selective attention to forms may indicate that such ability is not something that we possess naturally but something that can be acquired by training.

The third RQ inquires about the difference between NS-NNS teachers and between the experienced and inexperienced teachers in the frequency and types of feedback. First, regarding the NS-NNS comparison, there was no evidence to confirm any difference. In fact, more similarities were identified between John and Taro on one hand, and between Mary and Hana on the other hand. For example, both male teachers raised the total counts of APs and feedback from the Natural session to the Specific session, and from the Specific session to the General session. Furthermore, both of the male teachers employed prompts noticeably often, which was not the case for the two female teachers, even though we cannot determine from the outcomes of this study alone if these differences are attributable to the gender difference.

Regarding the other factor, i.e., experienced vs. inexperienced teachers, there appears to be a somewhat large difference, at least in the frequency of APs and that of both MFF and FFF. There appear to be two possible causes for this. One is that inexperienced teachers' unfamiliarity with teacher-learner interaction made their actual interaction rather simple so that their



feedback became surface and monotonous (in fact, their questions included more yes/no questions than wh-questions even though the details of this analysis is not presented in this study due to restrictions on space. Another plausible cause would be their failure to understand learners' error-rich utterances and lack of the skill or knowledge to deal with them.

As stated already, this study is exploratory, so that these findings are by no means conclusive and further investigation is undoubtedly necessary to confirm them. Even so, there are some important implications from the study. First, compared with the number of MFF, that of FFF was not very large despite the researchers' request to the teachers, and this may be due to the difficulty of paying attention to meaning and form simultaneously, just as this dual conscious loading is not easy for learners (Van Patten, 1990). Furthermore, this difficulty may be shared by NS and NNS teachers as well as experienced and inexperienced teachers, and some kind of training may be necessary if this is truly the case.

Second, as some FFI studies point out (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997), the bulk of teachers' feedback in this study also consisted mainly of recasts. In contrast, the relatively infrequent occurrence of prompts would indicate that they are not the type of feedback that every teacher can use unconditionally. If this is truly the case, training is the key to their appropriate use.

Finally, since the ways of giving feedback differ so largely among teachers, as shown in this study, it is natural for us to assume that the effect of FFI instruction would differ largely according to teachers' focusing skills and feedback providing skills. This further implies that its effectiveness may not be assumed unconditionally, even if FFI is an effective teaching method, as many FFI studies have clarified in the past.

Conclusion

This study aimed at discussing the feasibility of FFI instruction. For this purpose, it presented several pieces of empirical evidence showing how teachers differed in their ways of interacting with learners. One paramount implication of such evidence is that FFI cannot be considered teacher-free, although the teacher factors tested in this study are only a small portion among various factors. To make FFI a genuinely useful teaching method for every teacher, its conditional restrictions need to be clarified more in addition to the claims for its effects.

Chiaki Iwai, PhD, is a professor at Hiroshima City University. For more than 15 years, he has been examining how L2 learners use and develop strategic competence. He is also interested in the issues of interlanguage pragmatics and of English as an international lingua franca. Contact email address: <iwai@intl. hiroshima-cu.ac.jp>

Julia M. Kawamoto is teaching full time at Himeji Dokkyo University. She has a Master's of Education degree from the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom and is currently working on her PhD at Hiroshima City University. Her main research interests are methodology, error feedback, code-switching, and learner development. Contact email address: <kawamotojulia@hotmail.com>

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Appendix I A sample photo and story pictures



Story pictures borrowed from: Dumicich, J. (Ed.). (1981). *Picture it! Sequences for conversation*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc

Appendix 2 Sample transcript

<T = Teacher, S = Student (Taro), Explanation activity in Session 2 (General)>

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- S: The first, he <u>count</u> the paper and he... <Underline for an error>
- T: Sorry, what did you say? he? <MFF-CR; FFF-Prompt>
- S: He counted
- T: Ah, counted, OK <UN>
- S: The paper (Uh huh) and he opened the his trunk case and he put the paper into his trunk case
- T: Ah ha, you mean, briefcase. brief <MFF-CC; FFF-Recast>
- S: Briefcase
- T: Briefcase
- S: Sorry
- T: Um, no, | that's OK | <others>
- S: |Briefcase| (Uh huh) he put hi, he put the paper
- T: OK, good.
- (5 Adjacency pairs)

