

# Self-correction Strategies Employed in Spoken English by Chinese First-year College EFL

- Zhou Nan
- Janpanit Surasin
- Prapart Brudhiprabha

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to examine whether first-year Chinese college students correct their oral English, how they show their performance or behavior of error recognition and self-correction in their English speaking, and how they correct their speaking errors. Mixed research methods were used in this research and English language samples were recorded and transcribed from 17 samples at Yunnan Agriculture University in China. The quantitative data were used to display the results of the English speaking to answer research question one; the qualitative data from content analysis was used to answer question two and three. The data collection methods are missing*

*The signs of error recognition and self-correction in the language samples were identified, counted, analyzed, and interpreted. The findings reveal that firstly, most informants demonstrated their signs of error recognition with three physical types of productions: repetiti=on before correction, immediate correction, and meaningless utterances before correcting. Secondly, the informants not only corrected linguistic errors, but also tried to increase their speaking contents' comprehensibility. These results indicate that most Chinese college students can be identified as "Monitor over-users". Consequently, in order to improve their speaking English, focusing on students' behaviors of error recognition and self-correction by English teachers, as well as learning more about the students' needs are necessary.*

**Keywords:** English speaking, error recognition, self-correction, Chinese college

## Background of the study

The English language learners in China start learning this foreign language at quite a young age, either in kindergarten or primary school. Through the years of learning, most Chinese students are good in English reading and writing tests with difficult grammar and vocabulary because they need to pass many English written tests for the higher education or career promotion (Shufen & Lei, 2011). However, using English for face-to-face communication in a real situation is different from having a writing test in class. Chinese students would rather keep silent than answer any questions in English (Zhihong, 2008).

Opportunities to practice English for Chinese students are limited as the country is a non-English speaking country. With few opportunities to practice speaking, the only way to learn English is studying in English classes at school. However, the generally accepted method of teaching English in China pays much more attention to accuracy than fluency because getting a high score on a test is the goal of English language education. As a result,

both English teachers and learners spend much time on writing and reading skills, or the skills of taking tests in order to be accurate without lexical and grammatical errors on English writing tests.

In traditional culture, Asian learners tend to be shy about speaking in public, and they always listen and follow the teachers' instructions more than expressing their opinions or arguing as a way of showing their respect to the teacher (Ho & Crookall, 1995). Chinese students are no different; they are afraid of expressing themselves and also making mistakes because they do not want to "lose face" in front of their peers (Brown, 2003). As a result, when the fear of losing face is combined with the pressure of focusing on accuracy in language production, Chinese students are suffering from speaking anxiety whenever they try to speak in English.

### **Statement of the problem**

Linguistically, the sounds and forms of Chinese are so different from those of English; even Chinese learners with a high level of English proficiency have problems with articles (a/an/the), plural "s", and gender pronouns (he/she) in general (Jing, Tindall and Nisbet, 2006). This may be due to the fact that these linguistic features are unclear or nonexistent in their first language. With unfamiliar sounds and rules, it is difficult for Chinese students to produce long and smooth English utterances in an appropriate pace with few pauses, and also keep the messages coherent. Chinese students pause and end up with repetition of short meaningless utterances; therefore, their speaking is hard to follow or the content is incomprehensible.

Speaking English neither fluently nor accurately, reduces Chinese students' confidence and the less confident to speak, the lower motivation they have in practicing English (Shufen and Lei, 2011). In this condition, the students stop talking to avoid making mistakes, or speak with incomprehensible English without monitoring or paying attention to their language output; both of these conditions show that they might not know what to do with the speaking mistakes.

In natural speech, speaking errors or mistakes can be corrected, and long pauses could be filled with fillers (Levelt, 1983). The self-initiated correction or self-repair by the speaker is a skill that takes place in speaking to improve the language accuracy; people correct themselves not only for the produced errors, but also to express the message correctly when they are speaking (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). For this reason, English language learners can and should employ self-correction to handle the speaking mistakes in English.

In a real situation, when an English learner has an ability to monitor and identify the mistakes based on the language knowledge while speaking, self-correction could happen. However, this rarely happens to a Chinese EFL learner, even with Chinese students who get high scores and are expected to be able to speak accurate English, still generally cannot correct themselves appropriately. Therefore, whether these Chinese students could recognize their mistakes, and whether their self-correction is correct and appropriate, more understanding and evidence need to be explored and discussed.

## Purposes of the study

There were three purposes in this study. The first one was to explore whether Chinese college students monitor their language production by recognizing errors when they are speaking in English. Secondly, if these students could monitor their language while speaking, how they demonstrate their recognition of errors was discovered. Last but not least, when they were aware of the speaking errors, how they correct themselves have been investigated. These three purposes were aimed to identify Chinese students' production process of English speaking and their foreign language monitoring ability.

## Research questions

1. Do first-year Chinese college students self-correct when speaking English?
2. What is the existing performance of error recognition when speaking English among Chinese college students?
3. How do Chinese college students correct their speaking errors in English?

## Significance of the problem

Realizing oral English is a critical problem confronting Chinese EFL learners, the researcher is interested in an investigation of the present existing speaking error recognition behavior among Chinese students, and examination of the effect of their self-correction behavior in English speaking.

Theoretically, this research tested the second language acquisition hypotheses among Chinese college students. Practically, the findings of this study could help both teachers and students to be aware of the gap between speaking fluency and accuracy, and also could provide insight into current Chinese students' English speaking competence and habits for better understanding of the teachers, so that more appropriate speaking preparation could be provided in class. As for the students, they would be encouraged to produce more accurate output in English, and handle their speaking mistakes by self-correction.

## Conceptual framework

EFL learners are able to correct their own mistakes when speaking in English, if they have time to focus on the form of their output (Krashen, 1982). The reason is that once the learners have acquired the language, and understand the input, they are ready to produce the language. When they produce the spoken language, they can assess or edit their output due to sufficient acquisition and knowledge gained from learning. Therefore, the learners are able to recognize the speaking patterns with rules that they have used, and the language rules will help them to modify the output for better performance.

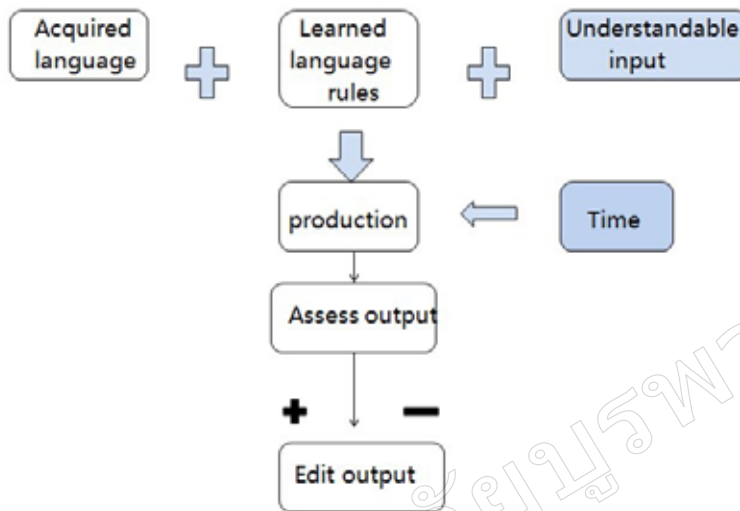


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of this Study.

### Scope of the study

This study was conducted at a medium-sized college in southern China in February 2014, and only with the English majors of this college as informants.

This study investigated Chinese students’ behaviors whether they notice and recognize their own errors when speaking in English, in both given and free context, but not focusing on their English speaking proficiency. In this case, the informants’ speaking content was not evaluated, just monitoring and correcting was focused on for analysis.

### Limitations of the study

Only twenty first-year English majors from Yunnan Agricultural University were the informants, and language samples were collected from a few days visit to the university. Consequently, the results can not be generalized in a broad view for Chinese English majors.

### Research design

Mixed methods were employed in this research. The quantitative method was used to present the results of language samples. In another word, in order to find evidence of error recognition and self-correction, the frequency of error recognition and self-correction was counted. In addition, content analysis was used to categorize the qualitative outcome of the language samples made from informants, and the interpretation and discussion were explained.

## Population and samples

The population of this research was one hundred and twenty first year English college students at Yunnan Agricultural University in China.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate the behavior among both high, mid, and low English speaking proficiency students, **twenty students were selected from this population as the samples in the quantitative part, and also as the informants in the qualitative part of this research purposively.**

**Table 1 Sample (Informant) selection**

Levels	High level	Mid-level	Low level
Numbers of students	6	8	6

The twenty samples or informants were purposively chosen from various groups according to their speaking performance in their English classes by their English teachers with six high proficiency students, eight from the mid-level, and six students from the low proficiency. The reason of selecting eight students from mid-level group is that the student number in this level is larger than high and low levels'. In this sample (informant) selection, both males and females were proportionally chosen.

### **Educational background of the samples (Informants)**

It is generally understood that all the students studying at Yunnan Agriculture University have above average scores on the Chinese National College Entrance Examination; moreover, after the first semester of college study, these first-year English majors have been specifically trained by both Chinese and foreign teachers in English reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Consequently, it was possible to ask these first-year students to join the data collection progress of this research without prior preparation. In addition, most of the students appeared to have positive outlooks on their prospective futures. The motivation to study among these students was high. However, the problem of these students was that they were afraid to communicate verbally in English since they were not confident with their speaking.

## Research instrument

An English speaking practice was the instrument for the data collection of this research. In order to get clear samples of oral language production, there were two types of tasks in this speaking practice: story retelling and free-talk on familiar topics. The following is the layout of the development of the research instrument for this study.

### **Preliminary trial and pilot test: speaking practice preparation**

The objective of the preliminary trial was to explore a low-anxiety task or activity for students to perform in the practice.

In November 2012, the researcher asked a Chinese friend studying in a college in Thailand to read and retell a 50-word story in English to explore the feasibility of retelling. The outcome of the preliminary test showed that it was possible to collect clear monologue

speaking samples by retelling a story. However, more material for the speaking practice was needed to be developed, and it was essential to make certain that the selected material was comprehensible to the informants. This led to a pilot test with some test takers who had similar backgrounds with the research informants.

The pilot test takers were three first-year students from Yunnan Normal University who had similar backgrounds with the informants. All three students joined the pilot test voluntarily, but one of them quit during the second trial. In order to find the best retelling material for intermediate level students, the pilot test was conducted twice with different materials for the retelling in a classroom at Yunnan Normal University in December 2012.

Initially, the stories used for retelling were selected from various sites on the Internet with an approximate length of 100-130 words. In order to avoid that the Chinese students might repeat the original story by using their memory, the length of stories was expanded. Moreover, the level of the stories was below the intermediate level, and the stories were incomplete in order to inspire the pilot test takers to add the ending in their own words. In the second trial, complete 80-110 word stories were chosen from *New Interchange English for International Communication* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2007), which is a textbook used for EFL learners at the intermediate level in China (Ming, 2011). The purpose of using complete stories was to give the students complete content as retelling information, in order to reduce their speaking anxiety.

Based on the outcome of the pilot test and experts' suggestions, the genre of the retelling material was folk tales and fables. All seven stories were 250-300 words long and found online, and the readability of each story was tested online (readability-score.com) with one classified as difficult, three as mid level of difficulty, and two as easy.

Another type of task to motivate the informants to produce as many language samples as possible was the free-talking topics. Each informant picked out one topic randomly, and there was no time limit for this activity.

### **Data collection at the research site**

In a real situation, the students of the English Department were divided into classes based on their English proficiency when they first came to this college; 34 students in one class, combining those of high, mid and low levels of proficiency, were assigned to the researcher. For the process of selection, the class leader assisted the Chinese English teacher in identifying 20 informants in this study.

During the data collecting procedure, it was not favorable and convenient because three of the informants were recorded while being in the dormitory without privacy, and the environment and time for recording were different from those of the other 17 language samples. Consequently, these three language samples could not be used for the data analysis, and only 17 complete sets of language samples were used.

**Table 2.** Data collection procedure

Time	First day	Second day		Third day
	19:00	16:30	19:00	19:00
<b>Student number</b>	Nos. 1-5	Nos. 6-8	Nos. 9-15	Nos. 16-20
<b>Retelling</b>	10 minutes for reading 250-300-word-story, 3-5 minutes for retelling			
<b>Free-talk</b>	A few minutes for preparation, no time limit for talking			

## Data analysis and findings

### 1. Quantitative part

In this research, in order to find the signs of error recognition and self-correction, and also present and compare the quality of each informant, every single sound produced by each informant were transcribed as a word. The number of words of each language sample was counted by using the word count tool in Microsoft Word 2007. Furthermore, each informant's speaking time was listed, and the identified self-correction was counted.

To find the signs of error recognition and self-correction among language samples, only the mistakes which were clearly corrected by the informants were included and identified as evidence of error-recognition and self-correction. On the contrary, the error recognition, which did not follow any clear self-correction, was not counted.

**Table 3.** Outcome of English practice

Sample number	Retelling		Free-talk	
	Number of words	Error recognition/ Self-correction frequency	Number of words	Error recognition/ nFrequency
1 female	133	1	154	2
2 male	206	3	107	0
3 male	143	2	69	0
4 female	243	6	136	2
5 female	103	5	68	0
6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
7	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
9 male	66	1	74	1
10 female	136	4	157	3
11 female	147	1	55	1
12 female	204	1	51	0
13 female	111	2	126	1

Sample number	Retelling		Free-talk	
	Number of words	Error recognition/ Self-correction frequency	Number of words	Error recognition/ nFrequency
14 female	333	4	139	1
15 male	154	1	91	1
16 female	246	3	108	0
17 male	204	3	58	1
18 female	140	2	40	0
19 female	226	0	417	1
20 female	113	0	41	0
<b>Total</b>	2908	39	1891	14
<b>Rate of correction%</b>		1.3		0.7

### Response to research question one

The first question of this research is “Do first-year Chinese college students self-correct when speaking English?” The answer is first-year Chinese college students monitor their English while speaking by error recognition and self-correction.

## 2. Qualitative part

### Response to research question two

Among language samples, the sentences containing signs of error recognition and self-correction were grouped together, based on the demonstration of similar physical patterns. First of all, in each group, the three patterns most frequently used by informants were categorized as the physical production of error recognition. Secondly, only clear error recognition and self-correction were categorized. Some errors were recognized and corrected for increasing the linguistic accuracy and others for the comprehensibility of the speech. During the coding and categorizing process, long pauses without any error recognition or self-correction would not be considered as error recognition.

The second research question is “What is the existing performance of error recognition when speaking English among Chinese college students?” In responding to this research question an explanation of terms is needed. As for error recognition, this refers to the informants’ physical production or expression prior to the attempts in making corrections of the mistakes or errors in the language samples. The existing performance and frequently used patterns of error recognition among the informants can be divided into three types of physical productions: repetition before correction, immediate correction, and meaningless utterances before correction.



### (1) Repetition before correction

Repetition before correction means when the informants recognized a mistake, they repeated a word, and then corrected the mistake. From the language samples, the “repeated” element of this error recognition has two different characteristics, as in A and B.

- a. The informants recognized the mistake and repaired by repeating the word following the mistake and made a correction, as the example below.  
*With with he, with their mon donkey.*
- b. The informants recognized the mistake and repaired by repeating the mistake before corrections, as the example.  
*The rabbit felt felt found a way.*

### (2) Immediate correction

Immediate correction means that the informants recognized the mistakes and corrected it immediately, as the example:

*The man thin (think) thought later.*

### (3) Meaningless utterances before correction

Meaningless utterances before correction means the informants recognized the mistake and repaired by producing meaningless utterance(s) (for example, er..., em...) to probably stall for more time to correct the mistake. The following example demonstrate this type of clear error recognition:

*The big fish has er had, the big fish had a long tug (tongue).*

The following table demonstrates the frequency that informants used in each type of error recognition physical production.

**Table 4** Frequency of each type of physical production of error recognition

Physical productions of error recognition	Frequency	%
Repetition before correction	27	52.9
Immediate correction	16	31.4
Meaningless utterances before correction	8	16.4

Based on Table 4, the repetition before correction was used most frequently by informants' English speaking, and the least frequently used was the use of meaningless utterances. This clearly demonstrate the informant's intention to correct their mistakes.

## Response to research question three

When analyzing each corrected mistake's characteristic from the language samples, each self-correction's function was classified. Consequently, the classification depended on the linguistic function and comprehensibility of the self-correction or self-repairs.

### Linguistic error repair

Linguistic error repair means the informants recognized and repaired the errors of morphology, syntax, and phonology in their English speaking.

### A. Morphology error repairs

- a. Pronoun and possessive pronoun  
*There was a poor man, she he met a, he met a...*
- b. Word Form (from verb to noun)  
*The begin, the em beginning...*
- c. Word order (the position of adjective and adverbial word or phrase)  
*...always she, er, she always h h help others.*
- d. Word choice for content accuracy  
*Before, after after graduate er found a good job.*

### B. Syntax error repairs

- a. Tense  
*(The king) break the true, tell told Mamad about his plang (plan).*
- b. Collocation  
*Through a some some of, a lot of trouble er he meet a old man.*
- c. "Positive" to "Negative"  
*Mamad tell lie, he is not, never lied, 不对 (no), the queen respond that Mamad never lie.*
- d. Active voice to passive voice  
*It can only use, it can be only used once.*
- e. Subjunctive mood

### C. Phonology error repairs

Among all types of self-correction or self-repair only the correction for phonology was not found in any language samples. Even though some informants showed that they checked their produced multi-syllable words, like "significant", by repeating, but their mistakes in phonology were not corrected at all. This phenomenon is discussed later in Chapter Five.

#### (2) Repair for comprehensibility

Repair for comprehensibility means the self-repair is produced to increase the comprehensibility of the output. In other words, this type of repair is concerned with whether an idea is expressed properly, clearly, unambiguously, and cohesively by the participant. In addition, there might not be any clear mistakes, but the participant repaired without changing the content of the sentence, or their original message. In this case, the informants who self-repaired for comprehensibility could use their English language knowledge to modify and clarify their ideas with new expressions by either adding or deleting words, phrases, restart the sentence, or both. However, repair for comprehensibility is more difficult than linguistic error repair, so, in the examples, some repairs or corrections might change a correct sentence into an incorrect one.

**Ambiguity repair:** The participant realized what s/he had produced was ambiguous and might cause misunderstanding, and then s/he repaired the sentence.

*He prepare something em some food.*

**Insertion repair:** adding a word (adj. or conj.), a phrase, or a clause to clarify the message.

*Once there was a young, once there was a poor young man.*

**Deletion repair:** deleting redundant and incorrect elements of the sentence to produce the correct version, or change another structure to express the idea.

*Whether it's em lucky, and, it's, or unlucky.*

The following table demonstrates the different types of informants' self-repair and the classification of the repairs. Among all types of self-correction or self-repair only the correction for phonology was not found in all language samples.

**Table 5** Different types of self-correction

Classification	Types of self-correction	
Linguistic error repair	Morphology (word)	Pronoun and possessive pronoun
		Word form
	Syntax (phrase, sentence)	Word order (adverbial word and phrase)
		Word choice
Phonology	Tense	
	Collocation	
	Positive & negative	
	Active voice and passive voice	
	Subjunctive mood	
Repair for comprehensibility	Ambiguity	
	Insertion	
	Deletion	

Based on the findings, the third question in this research is “How do Chinese college students correct their speaking errors in English?” The answer reveals that Chinese college students both focused on the linguistic errors and the comprehensibility of their English speaking.

## Discussion and conclusion

### Discussion of research site context

This research study employed mixed methods research but the dominant method was qualitative which follows a more naturalistic inquiry. The physical setting of the site, the social environment, and the background information of the informants is presented to build the background knowledge of this research enquiry for better discussion.

### Physical setting

Yunnan Agriculture University is a big university located in the north of Kunming City. Since this university is far away from the downtown area, there are few chances to meet with foreigners who come to visit Kunming. The only chance for the students to use English is in their English classes or participating in activities with their English teachers.

## Social environment

The social environment here was observed to be rather unfriendly to English communication due to three factors: 1) there were no extra-curricular activities in English arranged for the Chinese and foreign students; 2) the students were observed to keep to themselves; and 3) both the foreign teachers and foreign students did not seem to fit in as part of the community in this college. This led to an assumption that the English majors' habits of using English out of class might not be promoted.

Based on the answers for the research question, the findings of the research, and the background knowledge the research site, the following conclusions were reflected:

1. Based on Table 3, it is obvious that most first-year Chinese informants corrected their English speaking, but not all of them. As shown in the table, there was one informant that did not self-correct.

2. Based on the language samples and researcher's observations, some of the informants' speaking proficiency was comparatively higher than their peers, and they were successful in avoiding the use of unfamiliar expressions and produced no error corrections. On the other hand, some informants, whose English speaking proficiency appeared to be lower among all informants, did not attempt to correct any mistakes as well. In this case, these informants also did not produce any error recognition.

3. When answering the third research question, the evidence shows that any clear self-correction for pronunciation was not found in all language samples. This factor indicates that the informants' English language acquisition system in pronunciation might not be sufficiently strong enough.

4. Based on the language samples, for the informants who recognized their speaking errors, repetition was frequent (see Table 4) when they recognized errors. In addition, some informants also corrected their speaking errors immediately, which did not reduce speaking fluency.

5. In this research, most informants could be identified as the Monitor Over-users\* since they repeated themselves very often, and their self-repetitions and corrections reduced speaking fluency. However, out of the Over-user informants, there were some informants who did not exhibit any signs of error recognition and could be identified as the Monitor Under-users\*\*.

6. According to the findings of this research, story retelling and familiar topic free-talk are appropriate activities for investigating English learners' behavior of error recognition or self-correction. Another factor found from Table 1 was that different informants were good at different activities, so the use of these two activities to collect language samples could help balance the difficulty of the tasks.

## Recommendations

---

\* **Monitor Over-users** are people who attempt to monitor all the time, performers who are constantly checking their output with their conscious knowledge of the second language (Krashen, 1982).

\*\* **Monitor Under-users** are the performers who have not learned, or if they have learned, prefer not to use their conscious knowledge, even when conditions allow it (Krashen, 1982).

According to the results of this study, recording and listening to oral output is a way to learn the speaking habits, so as to find an appropriate method like using “immediate correction” as a strategy to improve English speaking. For further studies, recommendations are to consider the limitation of time, limitation of language samples, and being an English non-native speaker. Finally, other instruments like semi-structural interviews should be increased to help the researcher gain more insights from the informants, and higher levels of informants should be selected in order to collect more quality language samples to discover different findings of error recognition and self-correction.

\*Zhou Nan, *Faculty of Education, Burapha University, Thailand,*  
*E-mail: 445091595@qq.com*

\*Janpanit Surasin, *Faculty of Education, Burapha University, Thailand,*  
*E-mail: janpanit.s@gmail.com*

\*Prapart Brudhiprabha, *Faculty of Education, Burapha University, Thailand,*  
*Tel. 66 3810 2046*

## References

- Brown, J. D. (2003). Promoting fluency in EFL classrooms. *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference*. Kyoto: Kyoto Institute of Technology
- Ho, J., & Crookal, D. (1995). Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching. *System*, 23(2), 235-243.
- Jing, L., Tindall, E., & Nisbet, D. (2006). Chinese learners and English plural forms. *Linguistics*, 1, 127-147.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon press.
- Levelt, W. J. M. (1983). Monitoring and self-repair in speech. *Cognition*, 14(1), 41-104.
- Richards, J. C. (2007). *New interchange: English for international communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, E. A., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for selfcorrection in the organization of repair in conversation. *Language*, 53, 361-382.
- Shufen, Z., & Lei, Y. (2011). English learning impediment and solution by college freshmen. *Journal of Hubei University of Economics (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 8(9), 195-196.