

Corrective Feedback in the Communicative ESL/EFL Classroom

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Corrective feedback for second language learners is a critical notion in the fields of TESOL and Applied Linguistics, impacting the manner in which students' errors are noticed and addressed by both instructors and the learners themselves. This paper will provide an overview of the L2 corrective feedback. In addition, it will detail the characteristics of effective corrective feedback. Such characteristics include the following: a) noticing the gap; b) learner self-correction; c) linguistic output as a continuum; d) ample time to self-correct; e) selective and judicious feedback; and, f) teacher self-evaluation of practices. Lastly, the paper will address the types of corrective feedback methods, including: a) recasts; b) explicit correction; c) clarification requests; d) metalinguistic feedback; e) elicitation; and, f) repetition.

An overview of L2 corrective feedback

In second language classrooms, students regularly produce oral output marked by errors. These errors are natural products of learners' language acquisition and are indicative of the patterns of their developing interlanguage systems. Instructors' responses to learners' incorrect utterances in an attempt to address and/or

correct them are known as *corrective feedback*. Through such feedback, teachers provide indications to the second language (L2) learners about the correctness of their utterances (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Thus, corrective feedback refers to "any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance" (Lyster & Panova, 2002, p. 575).

For years, researchers (Doughty & Varela, 2000; Ellis, 1989) have looked at the nature and role that corrective feedback plays in second language teaching and learning. Proponents (Annett, 1969; Corder, 1974; Chaudron, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) of corrective feedback have long argued that such feedback plays a vital role in students' L2 acquisition. Corder (1974) claimed that corrective feedback allows learners to judge the correctness of their linguistic hypotheses, while Chaudron (1977) remarked that the feedback that learners receive from their instructors and/or target language speakers may impact the manner and rate of L2 acquisition. Schachter (1981) claimed that the feedback provided to learners allows them to know whether they have succeeded in their linguistic attempts or not. Additionally, corrective feedback in the form of meaning negotiation can assist language learners to notice their errors and foster form-meaning connections, thus facilitating language acquisition.

Characteristics of effective corrective feedback

There are a number of characteristics which mark effective corrective feedback and which may help foster overall second language acquisition. As highlighted by Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006), corrective feedback is optimized when the following

conditions are met: a) learners' primary attention is focused on meaning in the context of uttering and comprehending messages in communication; b) learners are provided with feedback that they recognize as corrective; c) the feedback causes learners to take note of the errors they have committed; d) learners are provided with ample opportunities for uptake (i.e., learners' utterances that immediately follow the teacher's feedback); e) learners alter their original utterance by correcting the error; and, f) the corrected form of the utterance is ultimately incorporated into the learners' interlanguage depending, in part, on their readiness to do so. The following section details the characteristics of effective corrective feedback.

Corrective feedback should help learners notice the gap

Ultimately, the goal of corrective feedback is to create situations in which learners notice and correct their errors (i.e., self-repair). Lyster and Ranta (1997) argued that corrective feedback cannot be effective unless it is noticed by the learners. Lyster (1998) added that instructors must attempt to encourage the learners to provide self-correction measures by highlighting the types of corrective feedback strategies that elicit responses from them. Comparing students' incorrect language output with those of more proficient speakers is a vital component of the corrective feedback process. Zamil (1981) highlighted the importance of clarifying the difference between what was uttered and what should have been uttered, stating, "Feedback which points out the disparity between erroneous utterances and correct forms transmits new information" (p.144). One of EFL/ESL educators' most important roles is to raise learners' levels of language learning awareness and noticing in language learning (Ellis, 2006; Mosbah,

2007; Schmidt, 1993). Ellis (1993) claimed that intake occurs and learning is optimized when the most salient points in the input are noticed by the learners and the connections between the forms and the meanings are established (Mosbah, 2007). Conversely, when learners do not actively notice the language, language acquisition may be hindered.

Corrective feedback should foster self-correction

Numerous researchers (Allwright, 1975; Allwright & Bailey, 1996; Corder, 1974; Ellis, 1997) have argued that a critical purpose of the corrective feedback process is to enable language learners to locate errors, and through a process of linguistic discovery, correct them (Chaudron, 1988; van Lier, 1988). Thus, the importance of corrective feedback lies in providing learners with opportunities to examine the hypotheses they make about the target language (Mosbah, 2007). Corder (1974) argued that the "simple provision of the correct form may not always be the only, or indeed, the most effective form of correction since it bars the way to the learner testing alternative hypotheses" (p. 97). Teaching that emphasizes learner self-correction will likely provide opportunities for learners to examine their own target language output, thus enhancing the likelihood that L2 learning will take place.

Linguistic output should be seen as a continuum

Students' utterances must not be construed as dichotomous (i.e., right or wrong). Rather, they should be viewed on a continuum of linguistic development whereby learners' capacities to attend to their incorrect utterances are fostered through the consistent, continual, and judicious use of corrective feedback. This feedback must be designed so that the new information assists learners in the dual process of revising old and forming new

linguistic categories and notions, making discriminations, and examining and testing hypotheses regarding the target language (Mosbah, 2007).

Learners should be given ample time to self-correct

Frequently, teachers' first inclination is to provide instantaneous assistance to students when they fail to respond immediately and/or correctly to a particular prompt. However, by providing learners' with sufficient time to process the input as well as cues for self-repair, learners will frequently be able to respond appropriately. Increasing wait time may foster language learning and enhance the overall effectiveness of corrective feedback (Allwright & Bailey, 1996). Researchers (Holley & King, 1974) found that providing the students with more time to respond had a considerable impact on the overall quality of the learners' responses. It was reported that corrective measures initiated by the educators were not needed in 50% of errors noticed when the learners were given sufficient time to self-correct. Merely providing the students with the correct form of the response without providing them with adequate wait time to respond may be the least effective manner to address learners' language output.

Corrective feedback should be provided selectively

Regarding the degree to which learner errors should be addressed, it is neither possible nor advisable for teachers to correct all the errors that students make in the class. When learners are overcorrected, they may become confused and discouraged regarding their L2 output. Additionally, correcting students on each error may hinder their language egos, thus exacerbating their reticence to communicate in class (Allan, 1991; Hendrickson, 1978). As such, in the communicative classroom, teachers should

address student errors thoughtfully, demonstrating more tolerance for errors which do not impede communication or meaning.

Teachers should evaluate their corrective feedback methods

Through the continual evaluation of their current corrective feedback practices, teachers have the opportunity to strengthen their own classroom pedagogy. Such evaluation can facilitate teachers' understanding of their current practices, which may lead to a more proper and well thought-out use of the various corrective feedback methods. These evaluations can take place through audio- or video-taping a particular lesson or asking a peer to conduct an observation. Critical reflection regarding the results accomplished by an individual teacher's corrective feedback may further assist other educators in selecting the most promising types of feedback.

Types of corrective feedback methods

For EFL/ESL instructors, the decision as to which corrective feedback method(s) to incorporate in the classroom is a complex pedagogical choice, dependent on a number of socio-educational factors including but not limited to the level(s), learning need(s), and motivation of the learner(s). In order to individualize instruction and account for the needs of all students, it may be most suitable for instructors to implement a measured variety of the feedback methods. By doing so, teachers might be better able to identify and address individual learner differences.

According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), teachers incorporate six principal corrective feedback methods: a) recast; b) explicit correction; c) clarification request; d) metalinguistic clues; e)

repetition; and, f) elicitation. The methods, detailed below, can be distinguished between those in which the teacher provides the input for the students (i.e., recasting and explicit correction) and those strategies in which the teacher attempts to prompt the learners' output (i.e., repetition, clarification request, metalinguistic explanation, and elicitation).

Input providing methods

Recast

In recasts, the most common form of corrective feedback, the teacher implicitly reformulates the learner's error, or provides the correction, without directly indicating that the learner's utterance was wrong. It can serve as a clarification request, acknowledgment of understanding, and/or a correction of semantic errors. Such a method is relatively unobtrusive, as it usually does not interrupt the flow of communication. With recasts, the instructor may model the correct form, but he/she does not focus on the error. As such, the limitation of such an approach is that due to its implicitness, the learner might not always recognize that an attempt to correct an error has been made (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Learners may mistake the teacher's recast as a confirmation that what they have uttered is correct. Additionally, since recasts do not result in any learner self-repair, the degree of uptake may be limited (Dubourdiieu, 2009).

Student: "He went to the park, and he saw many *trees green*."

Teacher: "Oh, he went to the park, and he saw many *green trees*."

Explicit correction

In explicit correction, the instructor provides the correct form of the utterance, clearly indicating that the learner's initial output was not correct. As such, the teacher's aim is to draw learners'

attention to the target forms without sacrificing a focus on meaning. In this method, the instructor might provide details regarding the learner's error, while highlighting the correct form of the utterance. However, with explicit correction, the flow of communication is often interrupted. Additionally, with this form of correction, the learner does not have to self-correct. Thus, explicit correction does not result in student-generated repair; the learners are deprived of testing their hypotheses regarding how the target language system functions. As a result, the degree of uptake in explicit correction might be restricted (Scott, 2008).

Student: "Yesterday, I go to the store."

Teacher: "You should say, 'I *went* to the store.'"

Output prompting methods*Clarification request*

With a clarification request, the instructor indicates that the learner's utterance has not been fully understood or it contains an error that necessitates a reformulation or repetition. The purpose of this method is to draw the learner's attention to the possible error. The clarification request is done through the use of phrases such as "Excuse me?" or "I don't understand." Because repetition or reformulation is required, the result is often student-generated repair.

Student: "And my mother. She is work yesterday."

Teacher: "I'm sorry. Your mother...what?"

Metalinguistic feedback

Metalinguistic feedback contains "either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the students' utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 11). As such, it incorporates grammatical metalanguage that refers to the nature of the error. In such feedback, the learner is asked to investigate an utterance linguistically, rather than investigating it in terms of meaning. The goal in this method is to have the learner provide the correction, even though the instructor gives the clues regarding the nature of the error (Dubourdiieu, 2009).

Student: "I go to the store yesterday."

Teacher: "You said *go*, which is the simple present form of the verb. You need to use the past tense form of the verb."

Elicitation or prompting

Elicitation is defined as the "techniques teachers use to elicit the correct form from the students" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 48).

As such, the process of elicitation permits the educators to take the learners through a process of linguistic investigation, whereby the error is highlighted and subsequently addressed. In this approach, the instructor may elicit the correct form from the learner by asking questions (“How do we say that in Spanish?”), by pausing to permit the learner to finish the instructor’s utterance (“That’s called a....”), or by asking the learner to reformulate the specified utterance (“How else can we say that?”). By asking the students to reformulate their utterance, the teacher provides the learners the opportunity to become more active participants in the corrective feedback process.

Teacher: “So, what’s another word for *shy*?”

Repetition

Repetition refers to an instructor’s re-utterance of a learner’s error with an adjusted tone in an effort to focus attention on the specific error. Repetition might be useful when practicing or reviewing a specific grammatical feature. However, due to the ambiguity inherent in repetition, learners’ might or might not recognize or notice the correction. Thus, the degree of learner-generated repair may be limited.

Student: “I have a cousin. His name is Martha”

Teacher: “*His* name is Martha?”

Conclusion

The notion of corrective feedback in communicative language classrooms is one with important theoretical and pedagogical implications for researchers, theorists, and classroom teachers. Through a greater understanding of the characteristics and methods

of corrective feedback, educators will be better able to make sound pedagogical decisions regarding its implementation. The considered and well-conceived implementation of corrective feedback in the language classroom will foster the overall communicative language competencies of learners, leading to L2 acquisition.

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