BRIDGING CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK RESEARCH AND SECOND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses five key questions about corrective feedback that are usually raised in pedagogical settings and were first were posed in Hendrickson's (1978) review of error correction. It tries to create a bond between second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy with regard to the efficacy of corrective feedback, the type of errors that need to be given priority for correction, the person who had better do the correction, the best effective corrective feedback move and the most appropriate time for correction. At the end, some recommendations will be provided for language teachers to experiment with in class.

INTRODUCTION

Corrective feedback (CF) has long been considered important in both second language theories and language pedagogy. In Behaviorism, which was the dominant theory of learning in 1950's and 1960's, errors were regarded as damaging to learning and correction as a means of immediate eradication of those errors was of primary importance. Recently, those working within the interactionist framework (e.g., Long, 1996) maintain that since CF enables learners to make connections between form and meaning in the context of communication, it is important for acquisition. The role of CF in proceduralising declarative knowledge has also attracted the attention of those who support skill learning theories (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998). Sociocultural theories also consider CF to be effective in promote learning but they claim that there is no one best method of correction to be used in all occasions, and learners can derive benefit from CF when the teacher or interlocutor prompts learners to self-correct and tailor their choice of CF to the developmental level of the students (e.g., Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

On the pedagogical side, the importance of CF in language pedagogy cannot be denied. The fact that most of the language teaching handbooks allocate a section to error correction (e.g., Folse 2009; Harmer, 2007; Hedge 2000) indicates that this aspect of teaching practice deserves due attention in a classroom setting. While the results of survey studies have shown that L2 learners would like their teachers to correct them (Ferris, 1995; Leki 1991), there are still some questions in the heads of language teachers concerning the legitimacy of error correction and teachers are usually uncertain about providing CF (Sheen 2011). The descriptive studies of 1970's which focused on teachers' treatment of errors in a variety of classroom settings revealed that teachers

frequently corrected the errors no matter what the pedagogical focus was (Fanselow, 1977; Hendrickson, 1978). These studies also showed that teachers do not provide CF systematically, that is, the teachers' corrective moves are usually arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

Research on CF and its implications for language pedagogy must be given more attention and there is a need to make findings in this regard more relevant to teachers. Although research might not supply definitive answers to teachers about the best pedagogical technique to employ (Johnson, 1992), it has the capacity to inform language pedagogy by subjecting excising pedagogical practices to critical scrutiny (Ellis, 2003), and provide new insights into learning and teaching (McKay, 2006). This article aims to draw on the findings of some major CF studies in the literature and examines the pedagogical implications of them in order to bridge the gap between CF research and current pedagogical practice.

DOES CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK CONTRIBUTE TO L2 ACQUISITION?

Pedagogical methods have taken different positions concerning CF. Proponents of audio-lingual method hold that errors lead to the formation of bad habits and should be immediately corrected by the teacher (Brown, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The Humanistic methods emphasize positive assessment in order to promote a positive self-image (Ur, 1996). Communicative approaches view errors as a sign of linguistic development and leave some errors uncorrected. In post method era both cognitive contribution and potential affective damage that CF feedback may make are taken into consideration. Ur (1996) claims that since CF does not often result in the elimination of error, the role of CF in language acquisition should not be overestimated and teachers should help learners avoid errors rather than correct them. Harmer (2007) argues that teachers should refrain from providing CF during communicative activities which aim at developing fluency because it "interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form" (p.143). Teachers are likely to adopt one of these positions or guidelines in their pedagogical practices, defending their approach to CF as a logical one which has roots in research and theory, but an issue that needs to be addressed is if these views are totally in line with current research findings.

A quick review of literature on CF reveals that there is increasing evidence supporting the efficacy of CF (See Mackey 2007; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). SLA Researchers working within the cognitive-interactions frame work hold the view that CF contribute to acquisition in both laboratory and classroom settings (e.g., Mackey and Goo, 2007; Lyster and Saito, 2010) and it works best in context and time when the error is committed (Ellis, 2009). Ellis and Sheen (2011), as cited in Sheen (2011) recommend that error correction be provide in both accuracy and fluency work. Therefore there is enough evidence in SLA to support the use of CF in language pedagogy, irrespective of the nature of an activity i.e., accuracy vs. fluency work.

WHICH ERRORS SHOULD BE CORRECTED?

Language teaching methodologists have advanced different proposals regarding which errors to correct (Ferris, 1999; Harmer 2007). A number of methodologists draw on the distinction which Corder (1967) made between "errors" and "mistakes" and recommend that errors, which signal the lack of knowledge, should be addressed in L2 classes. Burt (1975) makes a distinction between global and local errors. According to Burt, teacher's focus should be on the errors that

affect overall sentence structure and lead to communication breakdown i.e. global errors rather than local errors which are related to a single element in a sentence and are not problematic in terms of communication should be addressed by teachers.

These proposal seem very attractive at first sight. What a teacher needs to do is just to decide if a learner's production is an error or a mistake; whether it hinders communication or not and then he/she can jump to action and make a decision regarding the most appropriate response to that erroneous utterance. However as Ellis (2009) and Sheen (2011) pointed out, these proposals do not seem to be easy to implement in practice because the distinction between these terms is somehow a matter of opinion between teachers. There are a number of teachers who consider all errors to be equally serious (Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz, 1984) and need to be corrected. Impossibility of assessing learner interlanguage at the time of production to decide whether the concerned production is an error or a mistake as well as the time limitations of real life classes can be other reasons that make the implementation of these recommendations almost difficult if not impossible.

An alternative way to the choice of which error to correct for the teachers is to adopt a focused intensive approach which has been supported by SLA research (Sheen, 2011). SLA researchers have investigated focused correction and have come up with enough evidence that lends support to the effectiveness of focusing on one or two specific erroneous linguistic form at a time (e.g., Han, 2001; Lyster, 2004, Bichener, Young, & Cameron, 2005) and then shifting to other types of linguistic problems in future lessons. A large number Researchers- although they have not addressed focus vs. unfocused as the main objective of their studies- have investigated the effect of focused CF on question formation (e.g., Mackey 1999) regular past tense (e.g., Ellis, et al., 2006), test consistency (e.g., Han, 2002), articles (Sheen, 2011) and a number of other linguistic features and their findings support the efficacy of focused correction.

WHO SHOULD CORRECT THE ERRORS?

One of the issues that has been debated concerning the error correction is the choice of corrector. Should the students be given the opportunity to self correct or the teacher should do the repair. In fact, CF can be divided according to who performs the repair, either others or self repair (Loewen & Nabei, 2007). Some researchers claim that the teacher should not have a dominant role in correction (e.g., Hendrickson, 1980). A number of methodologies also recommend that students should be given time to self-correct (e.g., Hedge, 2000). The studies which have been conducted on input-pushing and output-prompting CF techniques also reveal that output-pushing techniques are superior to input-providing ones (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster 2004). The beneficial role of self-correction has been discussed with regard to the theoretical claim that output may prompt learners to test hypotheses, notice the gaps in the interlanguage as well as serve as a point of departure for metalinguistic reflection (Swain 1985, 1995).

But as Ellis (2009) argued, learners' preference for the teacher to correct, learner's insufficient linguistic knowledge to do the self-repair and ambiguity of output-prompting techniques in terms of being a response to form or meaning are the problems that are associated with self-repair. An alternative approach is peer-correction which as Sheen (2011) argued has been extensively practiced but needs further empirical investigation. Sheen suggests that learners be trained about

how to conduct a peer correction. Another alternative is Ellis's (2009) solution. According to Ellis, CF can be conducted in two stages. First the teacher signals the occurrence of an error to encourage self-repair and if the learner fails to self-repair, the teacher does the correction. From these suggestions and recommendations, it seems apparent that the role of teacher as the corrector or prompter is determined by a number of factors such as learner's preferences, linguistic level, implicitness or explicitness of CF moves and learner's ability to do the proper peer correction.

WHICH CORRECTIVE FEEDBAK STRATEGY TO USE?

Coding of feedback types has usually been a great challenge for researchers conducting meta-analysis of CF because of much variation in the operationalization of CF strategies across different studies (e.g., Li, 2010; Lyster and Saito 2010). In the literature on CF, different researchers have classified and focused their attention on different broad categories of CF. Nassaji (2007) distinguished between reformulations and elicitations. According to Nassaji reformulations are those CF strategies that provide the learner with the correct form through rephrasing the learner's erroneous production while elicitations are those reactions on the part of the teacher that push the learner to self correct. These types of CF have also been referred to as input- proving and out-put prompting strategies by a number of researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2009). A number of studies have categorized CF into two distinct categories of recasts and prompts (Lyster, 1998b, 2004; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Ellis et al (2006) distinguished between implicit and explicit types of CF arguing that differentiating between implicit and explicit CF strategies can shed light on the relative contributions of implicit and explicit feedback to acquisition.

In the literature of language teaching there has not been theoretical agreement with regard to how errors should be corrected. Cognitive theories favor certain CF strategies and proponents of Sociocultural theory hold that CF must be fine-tuned to provide minimal amount of support in order to afford the learners the chance to self-correct. Teachers educators have also tried to avoid prescribing any specific CF technique. The choice of the best CF for all contexts is not established in SLA literature but overall the findings so far give support to superiority of explicit CF techniques (e.g., Ellis, et al., 2006; Sheen, 2011) and output pushing techniques (e.g., Ammar and Spada, 2006: Lyster, 2004). Teachers should consider the fact that there is not enough evidence to show that there is one best single CF move because of the various methodological designs that researchers have used in their studies which make generalizations almost difficult. Therefore, until enough empirical evidence is gleaned in this regard, the current research findings and pedagogical recommendations should be implemented with caution and accompanied with critical thinking.

WHEN SHOULD THE ERRORS BE CORRECTED?

A quick review of the literature on language teaching in general and CF in particular reveals that the prescriptive practices of error correction with regard to the time of correction differ from one methodologist to another. As it was pointed out before, Harmer (2007) argues that CF has no role to play in fluency work and it should be used when students engage in speaking. Similar recommendations have been made by other experts (e.g., Willis 1996, and Hedge 2000, Bartram

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and Walt 1991; Brown, 2007). They generally agree that CF should be provided immediately during accuracy-oriented activities but its provision in fluency work should be delayed because it disrupts the flow of communication. However, this claim is not advocated by a number SLA researchers.

(see Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2001).

The empirical studies which have been conducted in recent years show that form-focused instruction can have the most desirable outcome when it is incorporated into a meaningful communicative context (Nassaji and Fotos, 2011). Researchers have found out that CF in communicative activities assists acquisition. It has been claimed that when CF is provided immediately in response to the learner's erroneous utterance during a communicative activity, it enables the learner to construct a form meaning mapping which contributes to acquisition (Doughty, 2001). Therefore teachers can use reactive focus on form during communicative tasks.

CONCLUSION

Conducting CF in a pedagogical setting in such a way that it aids acquisition is an important issue that must be addressed in teacher education. CF research has enjoyed considerable attention in the past three decades and it has moved from descriptive studies of 1970's and 1980's, which shed light on characteristics and frequency of CF moves (see Chaudron, 1988), to the experimental studies of 1990's and 2010's which have shown that certain corrective strategies work better than others (see Sheen, 2011). Although these studies are unlikely to give definitive answers to teacher's questions about CF, they have the capacity to enhance teacher's awareness of the variables which might contribute to effectiveness of interactional moves.

CF is a complex issue and its effectiveness depends on various factors, therefore it is not possible to provide teachers with exact rules on the best pedagogical practice. However from what we already know about CF research findings, we can propose some guidelines for teachers and teachers educators. First, there is a place for CF in both fluency and accuracy work and some SLA researches present theoretical arguments for immediate correction in communicative activities. Second, CF works best when its pedagogical and corrective focus is made more explicit. Third, teachers should provide learners with wait time for repair and the learner should not be pressurized to self correct. Forth CF can be more effective when it is intensive and focused on one or two specific forms and finally teachers should decide whether the correction should be immediate or delayed and they should come up with the appropriate timing through practice and experiment

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