CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS

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CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the past twenty years, corrective feedback (CF) has been a hotly debated topic in second-language acquisition. This paper seeks to summarize current research on the topic and offer instructors pragmatic ideas for properly administering CF in a communicative classroom. After a brief literature review of current meta-analyses, studies, and reports, classroom implications are considered. In addition, the paper identifies some areas of weakness in the current research that may help yield answers to current questions and problems with CF.

Keywords: *corrective feedback, second-language acquisition, EFL, ESL, metalinguistic, elicitation, recasts, explicit, implicit, intensive, extensive*

INTRODUCTION

Like many EFL instructors, I began my professional journey at a dispatch company. As part of my initial on-board training, I was placed under the tutelage of a business EFL trainer. Among other topics, it was discussed how and when to give feedback on learners' English. Paraphrasing the trainer, he stated that a client had never complained about a teacher providing too much negative feedback. This is one extreme of the corrective feedback (CF) debate. The other pole advocates for none.

Within the realm of EFL/ESL, "no CF" remains a popular stance. It is believed that CF interrupts the flow of communication, renders interlocutors less willing to engage in L2, and provides no tangible benefits to language development. There is some merit to these ideas as interrupting CF can stop a conversation dead in its tracks and cause speakers to lose focus. However, it is not so clear if CF is truly unhelpful or pushes learners to silence. CF for second-language acquisition (SLA) continues to be the focus of much research and debate. While Krashen, et al. (1985) advocated the view that negative feedback was of no value at all, going so far as to claim that it actually hindered improvement, the study by Swain (1985) highlighted several positive benefits of properly administered CF for L2 learners. Since then, numerous studies, meta-analyses, and reports have proved the efficacy of different kinds of CF. However, there remains questions about the best kind of CF, the context in which it is delivered, the frequency, and timing. In addition, there is a dearth of literature providing best practices for instructors. The present article seeks to clarify the current research on CF, provide some ideas for best practices in communicative EFL classes, and to consider possible future studies to further illuminate the topic.

BACKGROUND

CF as a component of the audio-lingual method was first challenged by Krashen (1982) and other nativists as not only non-beneficial to learners but actively harmful. It was thought that positive examples or models provided by the instructor should be enough to push learners to correct forms without pointing out specific mistakes in utterances. This model's foundation is based on a few assumptions: 1) That L2 learners can progress in the same way native speakers do where CF is typically limited or even non-existent; 2) that communication is more important than form; in other words, even if mistakes are made, that isn't a problem so long as the L2 learner can be understood by other speakers; and 3) CF can cause learners to fall back on simpler grammar forms due to a fear of making mistakes using more complex or complicated grammar.

The first presumption hinges on the idea that native speakers and L2 learners learn languages the same way. However, this is not necessarily the case. Native speakers begin to learn their native language from a very young age. On the other hand, ESL/EFL learners may not start until they are teenagers or even adults. Therefore, it is not clear that they benefit from the same style of learning as native speakers.

The idea that second-language learners do not need corrective feedback was also refuted by Swain (1985) in their studies of French immersion classes in Canada. Some of the

classes received little or even no CF, following the Krashen model. Others received more CF. In the end, it was found that the students who received CF made fewer grammar errors than those who did not. Thus, the first presumption appears to be built on a false premise: positive evidence and feedback alone is not sufficient to push learners in the right direction. What about the second presumption? Does it matter if L2 students make mistakes? The answer may be subjective.

EFL Instructors are quite accustomed to language mistakes. They are trained not only to understand SLA learners but also not to judge them based on their errors, especially when they are minor. Instructors must also act as counselors, reassuring that inconsequential mistakes in language use are not problematic for communication. However, that isn't necessarily the case for other native speakers with no experience in teaching or interacting with EFL/ESL learners. If the goal is to interact with and integrate with native speakers, or even high-level L2 users, it is probable that errors will be judged. Accent, for example, has been used as a means of linguistic discrimination in the workplace, so learners who hope to use their L2 skills to advance in a career may hit a glass ceiling if their language skills are judged too harshly (Rojas, et al., 2016); those who speak or write non-standard English are often discriminated socially and in education, so those who hope to live or study abroad may find themselves isolated or unable to transfer to the school of their choice (Dovchin, 2019); finally, linguistic discrimination of all kinds has been used to ostracize people from social groups, which can, again, lead to isolation for those who hope to live, work, or study abroad (Moscatelli, 2008). So while instructors should continue to reassure learners not to worry about their mistakes in the classroom, upon leaving, this may not be the case. Accordingly, trying to correct errors ought to be the goal of many EFL classrooms and probably all ESL classes.

Beyond all of that, learners desire CF. In a survey of some two thousand Chinese students at universities, one study found that about 90% of participants responded positively to CF, indicating that they expected instructors to correct their mistakes. In fact, approximately 70% of the respondents indicated a desire for instructors to correct all of their errors (Zhu & Wang, 2019). In a survey of 40 students at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages, it was found that 82.50% agreed with the statement "When I make a mistake, the teacher should correct me immediately." 72.50% agreed that, "Negative feedback helps me improve my language skills." Although this survey size is remarkably smaller than the Chinese survey, it is in line with it. Thus, not only is CF of benefit to students, but it is something they actually desire. Still, not all forms of CF are the same.

Lyster & Ranta (1997) identify several forms of CF: recasts, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, clarification, and repetition. Recasting is by far the most common, but not necessarily the most useful. This may be because recasts are the easiest for instructors as it merely involves repeating the learner's "erroneous utterance" with the errors corrected. For instance,

Learner: "I go to Paris last summer"
Instructor: "I went to Paris last summer"

Another advantage of recasts is that they are quick and may take up the least amount of class time. On the other hand, they have a few noteworthy disadvantages: they provide the correct form without requiring the learner to self repair; learners may not always understand that they are being corrected as recasts can sometimes sound like a confirmation (e.g. “You went to Paris last summer?”). By contrast, an explicit correction more clearly indicates a problem:

Learner: “I will eating pizza.”

Instructor: “I will eat pizza. We do not say ‘I will eating pizza.’”

This takes up a bit more time but makes the CF clearer. It still doesn’t require the learner to self repair unless the recast is omitted. Metalinguistic feedback indicates the type of mistake, which can be useful in form-focused SLA classes where grammar is emphasized:

Learner: “I swim yesterday.”

Instructor “You need to use past tense.”

However, a bare metalinguistic cue requires learners to self repair. Metalinguistic feedback can, of course, be combined with a recast.

The final three methods of corrective feedback require more input from the learner: elicitation, clarification, and repetition demand that the learner repeat the correct form without the instructor providing it first and without the clue from metalinguistic feedback. Thus, when the learner states, “I swim yesterday,” elicitation might ask the learner to repeat this, “It’s not ‘I swim yesterday.’ What is the correct way to say this in English?” Clarification and repetition provide the least evidence for the learner in the form of clarifying questions or simply repeating the mistaken form, “What do you mean by this?” or “I swim yesterday?” This requires the most repair but likely takes up the most class time as it requires learners not only to self repair but also identify the errors themselves. So, which method is most effective? A look at some of the current literature should help to elucidate that.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since 2000, the vast majority of literature appears to show a positive benefit from CF. However, there is still some disagreement about the value of the different types of CF; the timing of when instructors should provide it, immediate or delayed; whether the CF should be extensive, meaning that any errors are corrected, or intensive, meaning the focus is on a particular category or set of errors; and how long the effect of CF lasts. In particular, there is some disagreement about the explicit forms of corrective feedback (metalinguistic feedback and explicit correction) versus implicit feedback (recasts, elicitation, clarification, and repetition).

For example, in his meta-analysis of 2010, Li found that “explicit feedback worked better than implicit feedback on immediate and short-delayed posttests, but on long-delayed posttests, implicit feedback was slightly more effective than explicit feedback” (p. 343-344). This implies that a combination of different kinds of CF may be necessary to realize both long and short term boons: recasts for long term and elicitation/clarification for short term. Of course, some CF can be combined (e.g. metalinguistic feedback plus elicitation).

It is unclear from current literature what effect combinations of CF will have on short or long-term retention.

In a more recent meta-analysis by Brown (2016), it was shown that while recasts are the most common form of CF, they are also the “least effective in terms of eliciting uptake and repair” (p. 437). Both uptake--meaning a learner’s utterance after receiving an instructor’s feedback--and repair being the ostensible goal of CF. This seems to be somewhat in line with Li’s findings in 2010, but also contradict the perceived long-term value of recasts. It was unclear, from the Brown study, if the repairs and uptake were done short term or long term, however, so these findings may be in line with Li. Other studies also confirm that recasts are the most common but possibly the least effective (Su & Tian, 2016) (Ellis, et al., 2006) (Ito, 2015).

In a recent Iranian study of EFL learners, researchers used simple past tense to study the effects of delayed, explicit metalinguistic CF. This study found that not only did the group receiving CF outperform the non-CF group in delayed post-tests, but that there was no significant difference in terms of the complexity of the English used (Farrokhi, et al., 2018). One of the criticisms of CF leveled by nativists like Krashen is that it can cause learners to retreat into their “shells,” falling back on simpler forms out of a fear of making errors and, thus, stunting their growth in SLA. However, the Iranian study appears to counter this. Particularly, it found that, “the delayed explicit CF group statistically outperformed the other groups with respect to the production of error free simple past tense” while showing no comparable differences in complexity of spoken English. (Farrokhi, et al., 2018, p. 134). So instructors should not be afraid to employ CF out of a misguided belief that it will slow their students’ development.

Meanwhile, in a 2005 study of ESL question development, it was found that CF “in the form of clarification requests” helped to “contribute to question development by creating opportunities for learners to modify their output” (McDonough, p. 94). By asking probing questions about meaning or intention, learners came to realize how to repair and correct their output. In turn, learners were also able to work on question formulation. In other words, explicit CF can be useful for helping to reinforce or strengthen specific ESL tasks or forms. And this form of CF may be necessary to ensure learners are practicing their new skills correctly.

Most of the above studies and meta-analyses have focused on speaking skills, yet there have been some studies investigating the efficacy of CF in EFL/ESL writing classes as well. In particular, Sheen, et al. (2009) studied both “focused” (i.e. intensive) and “unfocused” (i.e. extensive) CF in EFL writing classes. Their study “failed to demonstrate any benefit in providing unfocused CF," yet found that focused CF helped learners to “notice errors in their written work, [. . .] engage in hypothesis testing, [. . .] and monitor the accuracy of their writing” (p. 567). Thus, it may be important to keep CF focused on a few points rather than randomly correcting learners’ mistakes.

However, this claim has been challenged by Nassaji (2017). In a study of English articles using 48 participants in Canada from various cultural backgrounds, some participants

received no CF, some received intensive CF only when they made mistakes with English articles, and the final group received CF for any kinds of mistakes they made. The extensive group "received 70% more recasts" than the intensive group (p. 359). In the end, recasts were confirmed as being more effective than no CF (p. 362). Beyond this, the extensive group also outperformed the intensive group in both an immediate and delayed post-tests. Unfortunately, the literature does not provide much clarification about extensive or intensive versions of CF as yet. The Iranian study indicated no significant difference between extensive and intensive groups (Farrokhi, et al., 2018). Thus, extensive versus intensive CF remains an open question for now. Until further studies are conducted, it remains unclear if intensive CF or extensive CF should be used exclusively. As with implicit and explicit CF, it may be necessary to use some of both.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

As the literature review indicates, there is little question that CF benefits learners. However, concerns remain about timing, frequency, and method. Another major concern, as raised by Ito (2015), concerns classroom time. The average ESL/EFL class simply does not have time to correct every mistake uttered by all the learners in class. Still, given the clear benefits of it, instructors should strive to include some CF in their classroom: recasts if time is an issue or more explicit forms when it is not. It may also be a good idea to consider combining different forms of CF to reap both the long and short term benefits. For instance, in a grammar focused classroom, a recast plus metalinguistic cue might look like this:

> "You need the past tense form here. It should be I went swimming."

On the other hand, for non-grammar focused classrooms, it may be easier to say something like this:

> "That's not correct. It should be I went swimming."

Of course, recasts can also be made more explicit by the use of emphasis or tone:

> "I went swimming."

This may be a better technique to save classroom time. Using recasts that are more explicit or include metalinguistic clues can help learners better understand and integrate corrections.

However, because the literature indicates benefits from the self-repair forms of CF (elicitation, repetition, and clarification), instructors should try to include them in their classrooms as well. As mentioned by Li (2018), "Output-prompting feedback pushes the learner to reflect on his/her own language use, involves deeper cognitive processing, and is better at consolidating and automatizing previously learned linguistic knowledge" (p. 6). One strategy may be to use some recasts during class, particularly when learners are engaged in pair work or group discussions. As the instructor circles around the classroom, he or she may decide to "spot check" some errors using recasts, being mindful not to interrupt the flow of communication. At the same time, taking notes on frequent or especially problematic errors can help to isolate problems that may be ripe for elicitation or other forms of self repair.

For instance, in a class where learners are frequently making mistakes with the preposition "in" or "on," the instructor may decide to provide some recasting, but then spend a little time at the end of class using elicitation or clarification. Here's an example:

> Instructor: "Some of you were saying 'The party is on the park.' Is that correct? How can we fix this?"
> Learner: "The party is in the park.

More hints can be provided if the learners fail to recognize the preposition mistake immediately. For instance, the instructor can use a metalinguistic clue or even repetition of "on, on" to help focus attention to the error. Since research indicates that even delayed CF is of benefit, planning the self-repair CF for a later date (e.g. next class) could also work. It remains unclear if extensive or intensive CF is more beneficial, so CF activities featuring mistakes made in class might also be a possibility. For example, learners might be provided with a script for a roleplay with mistakes made by students in class; the learners then need to correct the script together in their group before acting it out. This could be made extensive by including all manner of mistakes made in class or intensive by focusing on just a few specific problems--perhaps issues relating to a current grammar point being studied or some new vocabulary seen in a recent chapter of the textbook.

Once it has been accepted that CF will be provided in class, it's advisable to make sure students understand the instructor's intentions to use it. This can help to ameliorate some of the issues with the more implicit forms of CF: if students have been primed to expect it, they will be more likely to pick up on even subtle CF clues. Accordingly, it's a good idea to spend a few minutes on the first day of class explaining how CF will be offered. Learners don't need to know the word "recast," but they should understand what the instructor is trying to do when they hear it. Li (2018) also points out several strategies that make recasts more palatable for learners:

> These include using partial recasts where only the non-target-like part is reformulated, instead of full recasts that involve the reformulation of the whole sentence; making only one change instead of multiple changes; staying as close as possible to the original utterance; highlighting the error via prosodic emphasis [i.e. tone]; and using declarative (statements) instead of interrogative (questions) recasts. (p. 5)

Thus, if a student's full utterance is "I leaving for Paris tomorrow" the instructor's recast might just be "I'm leaving", possibly with extra emphasis added on the I'm. Questions should be omitted (e.g., "You're leaving for Paris tomorrow?") to avoid confusion as they can be perceived as confirmations rather than error correction, and they also encourage learners to simply reply in the affirmative: "Yes." In addition, questions don't allow the learner to understand what type of error they have made: grammatical, lexical, or phonemic. Of course, instructors can also encourage learners to respond in full sentences (e.g. "Yes, I am") to demonstrate comprehension and correction. Still, questions may be better served when trying to elicit a response and to encourage learner self repair.

This brings up another issue in the current literature. Namely, how is CF used to fix different types of errors? For mistakes in pronunciation, it seems natural to use recasts as

learners need to hear the correct sounds. However, with semantic and syntactic mistakes, the best choice is more ambiguous. The current literature reveals a dearth of data indicating what types of CF may be best for different kinds of errors. Consequently, future research should, in addition to differentiating between intensive and extensive as well as implicit versus explicit correction, also investigate if different types of CF are more appropriate for different kinds of errors. For instance, a common mistake by learners is using the wrong word given the context of the sentence:

Learner: "I like to play karate."

In this case, a simple recast probably isn't sufficient as learners need a lengthier explanation to understand when to use "play" versus "do" or "practice" with sports. A metalinguistic explanation is probably necessary here, depending on the level of the class. Of course, learner level is also a consideration.

Another common error in ESL has to do with the transitive verb enjoy. For instance, learners often utter something like this:

"Let's enjoy!" or "I enjoy!"

In this case, an elicitation might be most appropriate:

Instructor: "What do you enjoy?"

Again, a metalinguistic adds further clarity:

Instructor: "What do you enjoy? Enjoy needs an object after it."

Consequently, it should be clear that not all mistakes can be treated in the same way. There is no CF band-aid that can be applied in every situation, and instructors will need to weigh their choices based upon many factors: the level and grammatical knowledge of the learners, the types of errors they are making, the time for CF in class, and the relative importance of one mistake over others. In the end, even if the instructor has decided to use extensive CF, it is simply impossible to try to correct everything, and instructors must focus on the mistakes they deem as the most damaging to their learners' objectives.

A final consideration regards written versus oral CF. Most of the studies in the literature review indicate that CF was delivered by instructors orally. However, a few also included written CF (Sheen, et al., 2009). Written CF may be of value alongside final grades in a formal EFL class. For written CF, intensive feedback seems most appropriate, and since there is no ability to elicit responses from learners, written CF should probably take the form of a recast or edit. That said, identification of an error along with a prompt to self repair is also a possibility, for example:

Learner writing: Yesterday, I worked on my report decadently.

Written CF: Decadently means that something is decaying but in an overly indulgent or luxurious way. It isn't a good word choice here. What's a better word to describe how you worked on your report?

For many students, after the error is identified, self repair is significantly easier, so even pointing out mistakes and inviting the learner to edit is valuable.

CONCLUSION

Even though the debate over CF has been ongoing for nearly forty years, there are still many avenues that need to be thoroughly explored and elucidated. In particular, while there seems to be some consensus that both implicit and explicit feedback have merit, the relative values of them are not entirely clear. Questions also remain on extensive versus intensive CF with some studies indicating that intensive is better, others indicating that extensive is better, and yet still others indicating no statistical difference. Clearly, more studies need to be done to settle this question. Beyond that, future studies should move away from simply exploring grammar CF and also include pronunciation and lexical mistakes to determine if different kinds of CF are more effective in different kinds of situations. The same goes for written CF versus oral CF.

While it must be accepted that CF is valuable to learners and helps them to achieve their language objectives, instructors must still be careful about how they use it in the classroom. Clear goals and objectives should be announced beforehand so learners know what to expect. CF during activities should be limited enough that learners can practice communication and fluency but not so rare that learners are shocked when it happens. Similarly, instructors may want to provide a mix of both implicit and explicit CF in order to harness the advantages of both types. Implicit recasts may be more useful during class time while explicit CF with self repair--elicitation, repetition, or clarification--might be better for an end of class review or even as a separate activity on another day. Even delayed CF has merit, but instructors should be mindful not to wait too long.

In the future, studies and research will further reveal the best methods of employing CF in a communicative classroom to benefit learners. But for now, it is important to recognize that even a simple recast helps learners grow and develop their skills.

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