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# Theorizing EFL Teachers' Perspectives and Rationales on Providing Corrective Feedback

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### Abstract

Researchers condemn teachers by saying that tradition, rather than research findings, derive their practice while teachers condemn researchers by saying that their research findings are universal generalizations that fail in practice. To turn mutual distrust to mutual trust, this data-driven study aims at theorizing practice, rather than enlighten practice through theory-driven research. The theoretical sampling of twenty EFL teachers' perspectives concerning corrective feedback, together with the rigorous coding schemes of grounded theory yielded some context-sensitive corrective feedback techniques: direct feedback; indirect feedback such as recast, providing an alternative, asking other students, pausing before the error, providing the rule, using the correct structure and showing surprise; feedback through other language skills including writing and listening; and no correction on cognitive, affective and information processing grounds. Moreover analysis uncovered a set of specifications on when, where, and why to use these techniques. Not only do the findings help practitioners get in-sights and improve their providing feedback, but also they help researchers modify their hypotheses before testing them through the quantitative research that aims at generalization.

### Keywords

Grounded Theory, Theoretical Sampling, Corrective Feedback, ContextSensitive, Specifications for Use

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## Theorizing EFL Teachers' Perspectives and Rationales on Providing Corrective Feedback

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*Researchers condemn teachers by saying that tradition, rather than research findings, derive their practice while teachers condemn researchers by saying that their research findings are universal generalizations that fail in practice. To turn mutual distrust to mutual trust, this data-driven study aims at theorizing practice, rather than enlighten practice through theory-driven research. The theoretical sampling of twenty EFL teachers' perspectives concerning corrective feedback, together with the rigorous coding schemes of grounded theory yielded some context-sensitive corrective feedback techniques: direct feedback; indirect feedback such as recast, providing an alternative, asking other students, pausing before the error, providing the rule, using the correct structure and showing surprise; feedback through other language skills including writing and listening; and no correction on cognitive, affective and information processing grounds. Moreover analysis uncovered a set of specifications on when, where, and why to use these techniques. Not only do the findings help practitioners get in-sights and improve their providing feedback, but also they help researchers modify their hypotheses before testing them through the quantitative research that aims at generalization. Keywords: Grounded Theory, Theoretical Sampling, Corrective Feedback, Context-Sensitive, Specifications for Use*

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Students usually begin to learn English formally in junior high schools and this process continues till the end of their formal studies at universities in Iran. But what is learned at schools and universities and the way it is taught can in no way meet their future needs, especially their needs regarding oral communication. Students know a good deal of vocabulary and structures but they don't seem to be able to use them properly. In other words, they are neither linguistically competent nor communicatively competent. A great majority of students are not able to communicate and those who dare to communicate make a host of errors. This seems to be strange since a noticeable portion of class time is habitually spent on error correction. It seems that error correction has had no effects on learners. This observation is likely to substantiate both Huntley (1992) and Truscott (1996) who state that substantial research evidence suggests that correction of surface level errors is futile and may not be worth the instructor's time and effort. Truscott goes even farther to conclude that this type of correction should be abandoned in L2 writing classes because it can have harmful effects such as derailing students' attention away from communicating meaning towards striving for the correct form without knowing the rule that generates the erroneous form. Ferris (1999), however, evaluates Truscott's case and concludes that his argument concerning grammar correction is too strong. In an ongoing debate, Truscott (1999) responds to Ferris by arguing that the criticisms she presents are unfounded and selective. Thus, the research evidence on the effects of error correction on L2 students' writing is far from conclusive (Ferris, 2004). To substantiate the inconclusive effect of feedback, take the following polar views:

- Uptake plays no significant role in acquisition (Long, 2006) vs. uptake with repair is crucially important (Lyster, 2004).
- Recasts facilitate learning (Iwashita, 2003; Leeman, 2003) vs. recasts are so implicit that learners fail to notice their corrective intent.
- There is an advantage for meta-linguistic explanations over direct error correction alone (Bitchener et al., 2005; Sheen, 2007) vs. there is no advantage for those who received meta-linguistic explanation after a similar two month period (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008).

The findings of these studies are inconclusive because, in line with cognitivism, they are in search of an approach to corrective feedback that will be universally applicable for all learners. Both written and oral corrective feedback research have been driven by what Block (2003) called the *Input-Interaction-Output Model* and as such they are dead and deaf to the social context of L2 learning (Tarone, 2000). In contrast with the cognitive paradigm that aims at finding a cross-culturally applicable approach to corrective feedback, the following studies indicate that one method cannot be applied universally across varied contexts:

- Learners respond differently to feedback in teacher-fronted and peer-learning settings, with uptake higher in the latter (Ohta, 2001).
- Recasts are more frequent in Korea whereas elicitation was more frequent in Canada immersion (Sheen, 2004).
- Higher and intermediate level learners were significantly more accurate when recalling recasts than the lower level learners (Philp, 2003).
- The social dynamics of the classroom affect learners' perceptions of recasts (Morris & Tarone, 2003).
- There may be a mismatch in what students and teachers perceive to be effective error correction (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005).

The futility of error correction in public high schools of Iran may be due to form-focused instruction. Error correction will be beneficial if teachers follow an integrated approach to language instruction, incorporating attention to language structures within a meaning-focused activity or task. One method is to provide error correction while learners are using the language to communicate (Doughty, 2001; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Loewen, 2005; Russell & Spada, 2006). On the other hand, Ostovar-Namaghi (2010) believes that error correction is futile when it is not differentiated. More specifically, he believes that while undifferentiated error correction is futile, differentiating the *how* and *what* of error correction based on learners' purpose, learners' age, learners' level of proficiency, together with task objective and source of error, that is, inter-lingual and intra-lingual, can make a difference in students' grasp of the correct form and developing their linguistic competence.

The foregoing studies clearly indicate that the findings of corrective feedback studies are inconclusive since they are theory-driven studies that aim at shedding light on the practice of error correction cross-culturally. To generalize their findings they weed out contextual variations as irrelevant. To take contextual variations into account and come up with situated, rather than universal, knowledge of corrective feedback, the field is in an urgent need of a shift away from a positivist to a constructivist research paradigm (Hatch, 2002). More specifically, the field is in urgent need of data-driven studies that aim at shedding light on theories by conceptualizing and theorizing teachers' concerns, views and perspectives concerning corrective feedback.

## Purpose and Significance

This study aims at presenting an insider's view of error correction by conceptualizing and theorizing experienced language teachers' concerns, views and perspectives concerning corrective feedback. The study is significant in that it:

- helps practitioners reflect on their experience, voice their views, and evaluate the efficiency of instruction, especially in providing effective error treatment
- provides *in-sights* for researchers who are interested in modifying their etic views concerning corrective feedback; and
- adds to the knowledge-base of corrective feedback by generating propositions and hypotheses from interview and observation data under normal classroom conditions rather than testing hypothesis under controlled laboratory conditions; and
- uncovers situated knowledge of corrective feedback that complements the findings of theory-driven studies which are supposed to be cross-culturally applicable.

## Research Context

As experienced practitioners in developing students' English language proficiency at different levels, we found that one method for all in providing corrective feedback is a waste of time. This insight was driven from our experience in private and public schools of Iran. When researchers present a limited number of techniques for corrective feedback, the practitioner may wrongly suppose that these techniques are universally applicable across different teaching contexts because theory-driven approaches to corrective feedback ignore contextual constraints. In this data-driven study it is assumed that it is the contextual constraints rather than externally-imposed, top-down techniques that determine how practitioners provide their students with corrective feedback. As such, rather than weeding out contextual constraints as irrelevant, they should be accommodated in theorizing to present practitioners with situated rather than universal knowledge of corrective feedback.

## Research Method

### Participants

Instead of statistically sampling participants, the researchers theoretically sample concepts and categories from interviewing a total of 20 experienced language teachers who were willing to share their views with the researcher. Having sought the school principals' consent, the researchers selected interested teachers from different public high schools and private institutes in Gorgan, a major city located in the northern parts of Iran. The participants were both male and female. Except for five, the rest of the participants majored in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Twelve of them had earned their master's degree and the three had earned their bachelor's degree. They were selected on the basis of their teaching experience and their willingness to share their views with the researcher because "understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with one that challenges our understandings" (Schwandt, 1999, p. 458). The researcher stopped sampling when theoretical saturation was achieved.

## **Data Collection**

The interview began with a very general question regarding the teachers' perceptions and techniques regarding error treatment. Subsequent questions emerged from an initial analysis of the interviews. It should be noted that these questions aim at clarifying the participants' perspectives and adding depths to the interviews. The acquired data were analyzed and more analytic questions were devised to be asked in subsequent interviews. The interviews were repeated with more detailed questions. This process continued till theoretical saturation of concepts and categories was achieved, that is, the researcher kept on collecting data until he "received only already known statements" (Seldén 2005, p. 124). The interviews were all audio-recorded to be transcribed verbatim and meticulously analyzed soon after the interviews were done. By the time theoretical saturation was attained, the number of interviewees reached 20. The total time for interviewing each one of the teachers averaged 30 minutes, with a minimum of 15 minutes and a maximum of 45 minutes. All in all, 112 pages of transcribed interviews were analyzed to derive transient and final concepts and categories. It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted in the participants' native language so as to make sure that no information is lost due to the participants' level of proficiency. Moreover, to ensure consistency and brevity of style, quotations reflect intended meanings rather than what the speakers said verbatim.

## **Data Analysis**

After the data collected from the interviews were transcribed, the researchers analyzed them by the coding processes suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In open coding the raw data, that is, interview transcripts, were initially examined, fractured and eventually collated to find transient concepts and categories. In axial coding the researcher tried to elaborate the concepts and categories by specifying their dimensions and properties and then fining the interrelationships between concepts and categories. And finally selective coding helped the researcher find the core category that pulled the concepts and categories together into a unified whole. The validity of concepts and categories was assured by careful and strenuous coding as well as repeatedly returning to the original transcripts and field notes. In addition, final concepts and categories were verified through member-checking (Petrie, 2003). In line with the ethics of qualitative research, participants' real names were not identified in this study. Prior to data collection, complete confidentiality was established by informing the participants that pseudonyms will be used instead of the participants' real names in the final report.

## **Limitations**

Despite the fact that the researcher bent over backwards to achieve credible and grounded concepts and categories using the constant comparative technique and the rigorous coding schemes of grounded theory, they do not guarantee the credibility of qualitative findings. We also cannot ignore how interviewer and interviewee negotiate face or manage impressions (Goffman, 1959) in interviews. An interview is but a snapshot in time. Much is left unsaid about events and persons despite the intention of the interviewer to provide a holistic account. Of course, more interviews and stories would deepen our understanding of language teachers' use of corrective feedback.

## Results

Following (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we took the data apart, analyzed relationships, and re-conceptualized the data, and formed the basis for the narrative report.

The rigorous analysis yielded corrective feedback techniques as the core category, which pulled together and summarized direct correction, indirect correction, correction through other skills, and no correction as the subordinate categories. Analysis of categories in terms of their properties yielded the following dimensions for each category.

- Direct correction
- Indirect correction covers recast, providing an alternative, asking other students, stopping before the error, providing the rule, using the correct structure and showing surprise.
- Correction through other skills covers using writing and using listening.
- No correction covers cognitive, affective and information processing rationales for rejecting the use of corrective feedback.

The narrative that follows aims at elucidating the findings by relating them to participants' views and perspectives of the use of corrective feedback techniques.

### Direct Corrective Feedback

In this technique, the teacher clearly notifies the student that there exists an error in his/her utterance and then provides him/her with the correct response. The teachers using this technique clearly address the student who has made an error and tells him what the correct form is. These participants believed that for some special groups who are confident enough and are at the appropriate level we can obviously refer to the erroneous part and provide the student with the correct response. Mr. Ahani believes that whenever we face our language learners' errors, first of all we should consider the situation and then determine what technique to use in order to have a good result. This implies that there is no single best technique of error correction that can be cross-culturally applicable. He explains:

When I see a student commits an error, considering his confidence level, I stop him from continuing and explicitly correct him. I do this because I think in such a case there is no need to waste the time and try to correct him in some different ways. When I realize that s/he can be corrected in a very simple way, why waste the time? Although we are not supposed to forget that this kind of correcting requires considering the student's motivation, confidence level and personality.

As it may seem normal, upon asking different teachers who used the same technique, we came across various explanations by different teachers. However, it seems that almost all of the teachers believe that a key factor in applying this technique is psychological factors.

Similarly, Mr. Barani emphasizes psychological factors and believes that teachers must not eliminate some techniques of error treatment just because they are not so popular and the criterion for evaluating a given technique is its workability in a particular situation. Taking students' individual differences into account, he explains:

Well, this is another technique by which teachers can get their students' errors corrected. When this technique works, why not use it? May be some people or experts say this technique may damage the students' face or character, but I

think, considering the student's characteristics, this technique works too. Here the teachers' role as a psychologist gets bold.

Ms. Jamshidi is another teacher who applies the fore-mentioned technique and refers to the role of the teacher in error treatment issue and appears to believe that teachers must play the role of a partner in their classes rather than the role of somebody who will punish students in case they make errors. More specifically, she believes that the teachers should establish an environment in which they dare to make errors in communicating their intentions. To this end she proscribes penalizing students for their errors and rejects any judgments on the part of the teacher. She explains:

You know, I try not to make the student think that they will lose a point for making errors. I think it degrades the value of error correction. I simply do my best to show myself as somebody who aims to help her student improve his/her performance. I somehow try to be a partner who knows more than him/her so I can help him/her in times of difficulty in mastering the language. I see my role as a partner who is there to help the learner express his/ her communicative intents using correct forms.

### **Indirect Corrective Feedback**

Indirect correction was one of other prevalent strategies or even the most prevalent strategies used by the participants. Through this category, teachers avoid directly getting their students corrected. Obviously there would be no pointing to the error in this technique and certainly most of the teachers act so for one reason or another. In some techniques of this category the teachers tried to push the learners to find or to produce the correct form by themselves. De Bot (1996) claimed that second language learners are more likely to benefit from being pushed to find the correct language forms (self-repair) than from simply hearing correct forms in input (teacher repair). Also Swain (1985) purported that self-production as well as self-modified output are necessary for language improvement. Teachers under investigation tended to use six techniques under the heading of indirect correction including recast, providing an alternative, asking other students, stopping before the error, providing the rule, and using the correct structure. What follows better elaborates the foregoing categories on providing corrective feedback.

### **Recast**

In this technique, the teacher paraphrases the student's utterance, excluding the error. As it was stated before there is no pointing to the error itself. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), recast referred to a corrective feedback type that teacher reformulates all or part of the learner's utterance in an implicit way. Mr. Jalali states that language learning is not an easy task especially in our country where there are many barriers and obstacles in the way of those who really want to master the skills of the language. He believes that in this not an appropriate environment for language learning. Thus teachers who are in direct contact with the students and who are carrying the burden of language teaching on their shoulders must play their role as effectively as possible. Any direct correction may de-motivate the students and jeopardize their next move in trying to use language for communication. He states:

I firmly believe in a close relationship between teacher and his students. I act like this because as I said I do not want to kill my student's motive for soldiering



on in learning the language. Language learning is not an easy job to do, and I try to act like a partner who knows more English than him. I try not to tell him that he has committed an error.

Along the same lines, Mr. Rajabi refers to the affective aspects of language education and believes that teachers must encourage their students what they have expressed correctly and then go indirectly correct the rest of the sentence. His own comments better substantiate this point:

Based on the definition of recast, after a student commits an error, teacher repeats all or some parts of the same utterance except the erroneous part. In this way we in fact confirm what the student has said. Actually we as teachers kill two birds with one stone: (1) Encourage students in a way that the teachers indirectly tell them what they expressed is correct and we appreciate their effort; and (2) give them a chance to improve their performance in communicating meaning by exposing them to the correct form.

Just like some other teachers, Ms. Haghdati points to the role of teachers in classes and supposes that for doing everything about language education, first, teachers must try to establish rapport they employ the least obtrusive techniques of providing corrective feedback. She adds:

Well I said that I believe when you as a teacher want to get your students' errors corrected, your correction should precede a form of complimentary and completing sentence or utterance. Correction on its own may not always yield any fruit. I myself try to avoid correcting them; rather I do want them indirectly to consider me as their friend not just somebody who teaches them.

### **Providing Alternatives**

The next technique used under the category of indirect correction is giving alternatives to the student who has committed an error to choose the correct item from among the given items. Again, as in other techniques of indirect correction, teachers do not mention anything about the error. Immediately after the student has committed the error, they pose two questions: the first one which is exactly the same erroneous sentence the student has expressed; and the second one is the corrected form. Through this technique the teachers seek to elicit the correct form from the students and avoid telling them explicitly what the correct form is like. For instance, in response to the erroneous form, "I was believing that," the teacher says, "I was believing that or I believed that." In this process, we actually let the students carry the responsibility of recognizing the error and correcting it. Teachers who apply this strategy believe in a somehow trial and error procedure for learning the language and believe that if the students themselves can discover their errors and remove them, they can have a much more lasting language knowledge in their minds. Along these lines Mr. Rajabi comments:

I want the student him/herself to arrive at the correct sentence. I think in this way the correct form will last longer in the student's mind. Because s/he imagines that he has found the correct form on his own. I use both sentences in a question tone and always the correct sentence comes immediately after the incorrect form of the sentence. This way the student automatically chooses the correct utterance, of course sometimes after a short pause. In this process, s/he

has a chance to compare the correct form with the erroneous form and then actively choose the correct form.

Miss Roshandel, refers to the role of the students in language learning classes and seems to be applying what she has studied in language teaching books in actual environment of language classes. Believing that students should not be the passive recipients of instruction; rather they should play an active role in discovering and producing the target language forms and improve their interlanguage forms. To elaborate her point she explains:

I think it may refer back to the belief that learning is the learners' duty rather than that of the teachers'. Today it is said that teachers must talk less and let the students do the talking. Following this belief, I try sometimes to apply alternatives so that the student has a chance to see the correct form and erroneous form in juxtaposition, and then actively choose the correct form. When you present the correct form, it acts as input but it may never guarantee the uptake.

### **Asking Other Students**

In comparison to other categories, there are quite a lot of subcategories included in indirect category and this implicates the importance of indirect corrective feedback when it is compared with other categories. One important subcategory of indirect corrective feedback is asking other students to correct their peer's error, that is, peer-to-peer feedback. For instance, as students are communicating their ideas in pairs, one of them says, "I spend a lot of money for clothes." and his partner says, "on clothes not for clothes." In this technique, for some reasons teachers prefer to neither tell the correct form themselves nor let the student him/herself get the error corrected. Rather they choose other students to play the role of corrector. One merit of this strategy is that it involves the whole class rather than just the student who has made the error. Another merit is that the technique arouses lots of classroom interaction. An interactive atmosphere is more conducive to learning than a teacher-centered, teacher-fronted method of teaching. In this technique, teachers somehow put the burden of correcting errors on the shoulders of other students. In short, instead of providing the correct form or make the students correct the faulty form, the teacher involves all members of the class. Mr. Sharifi upon asking the question why he does so refers to the role of other students in correcting their classmates' errors and believes that this strategy alerts all of the students. In elaborating this tip, he says:

I think this strategy enables me to achieve two goals simultaneously: (1) keep other students alert to find their classmates' errors and through this correcting their own probable errors which may appear in their own speaking; (2) saving time through not correcting each one of the students over and over. Since the same error is likely to appear in other students' performance.

Ms. Ghods says that it is mostly because we want other students to focus their attention on the lessons and what we do in class. When we want other students to pay attention and correct their probable errors they have to listen and this way they can both learn and correct their classmate. Moreover being alert to what other classmates say has two merits: (1) students learn to learn from each other and this is a step towards learner autonomy; (2) in addition to critically listening to find the erroneous form, they are simultaneously exposed to their correct forms and add it to their repertoire for future use. Even if they do not know the correct form,

being alert to what their classmates say will increase the odds of learning. In explaining the merits of these techniques, she says:

One thing which is common in language classes is that sometimes when a student commits an error while speaking, some other students abruptly try to say the correct form of the sentence. It is good from the aspect that well it shows other students are paying attention to what is going on in the class but it may have a negative aspect; that is, it may damage the speaking student's motivation and willingness to speak in the class. To turn this constraint into an opportunity and prevent students from negatively judging each other's performance, we invite them to learn from each other by listening, learning the correct forms, and correcting the incorrect form.

### **Pausing Before the Error**

In this technique, after a student commits an error, the teacher repeats the same utterance and stops right before the erroneous form. For instance, the student says, "Reza married with Marym." The teacher says, "Reza married" and stops to encourage students reflect on the sentence. They don't say anything about the error and just want students indirectly to try to find the correct structure or utterance. More often than not, this technique is accompanied with surprise and a question tone. Mr. Heravi maneuvers on the difference between acquisition and learning and believes that since what our students are experiencing in language classes is more learning than acquisition, we must give our students a chance to use the conscious knowledge they developed through classroom instruction and independent learning.

This technique enables students to make use of learned knowledge, as opposed to acquired knowledge; knowledge that would otherwise remain useless because in EFL contexts including Iran, English has no social use. Thus they use of their knowledge for correcting their peers creates a kind of internal drive for learning, as opposed to instrumental motivation which derives Iranian students' learning and practice.

Focusing the situated nature of teaching knowledge, Mr. Seyyed Rezayee believes that the best person to know what to do in the class in order to get his students reach their full potential is the classroom teacher. He supposes that teachers, by knowing the situation should choose the technique of providing feedback that best fit the context, rather than haphazardly choose a theory-driven technique, which is wrongly supposed to be cross-culturally applicable and effective in each and every teaching context. Techniques which are prescribed to be universally applied are always doomed to failure since they ignore a myriad of contextual conditions. To explain the merit of context-sensitive techniques over context-irrelevant techniques he contends:

I do use this technique, that is, as an error correction technique I pause before the correct form to encourage the learner come up with an alternative but if it is not effective I change my strategy and resort to another technique. I said that everything depends on situation. In higher levels that students show their productive skills, committing errors is unavoidable but we are supposed to consider the person and the class environment as well as the way the student reacts. But I have come to the conclusion that I define some signs in my classes which for example if I stop on a word or part of an utterance, it means that the

word or utterance has not been chosen correctly, after signaling the contextually agreed upon technique, I give the student a chance to correct it.

### **Providing the Rule**

Of the other techniques applied by some teachers is going back to the presented lesson and briefly reviewing it for the students to remove any misconception or error regarding it. For instance if the previous lesson was about causative sentences and I see that the ill-formed sentence indicates their imperfect knowledge of the rule, review the previous lesson by writing the rule, “get something done” on the board. On many occasions when teachers feel their students haven’t mastered the taught structure yet, they try to write down the erroneous forms and in the end, they provide the rule, explain it and immerse students with drills which immerse students in the correct use of erroneous forms. Ms. Etminan, who strongly believes that error correction is not needed in most of the cases, explains that her purpose is first and foremost leading the students to do the book exercises again so that students remember what they have been taught. In the meantime she notes down the erroneous forms for later drilling and practice. This strategy has an edge over other techniques since in other strategies the teacher corrects the students whereas in this strategy the teacher corrects the errors and indirectly helps students master the rule without identifying those who made the error. This strategy has an additional merit of saving students’ face. As for the ex post facto drills, she explains:

My purpose of teaching them the rule again is opening a way for them to practice the drills through which they can master the structure or word or whatever needed. I mean the drills are of more importance to me. Correcting mistakes is a waste of time since to the extent that students have not mastered the rule through systematic drilling and practice, they keep making the same error irrespective of how many times they are corrected. Drills are not just a practice, they can be thought of presentation too. Sometimes I have a mental note and when the students’ task is done and I feel my students’ psychological signs is bolded, I remind them about the errors they have committed, and then I give them a chance to practice more. I mostly use the drills which are in the form of a game and make the students active. I think variety is a key factor here. Some of the students are so smart, if there is variety in their drills they answer so well, but as soon as variety fades away they seem to get silent.

Mr. Rajabi looks for the problem in his own teaching style or method and tries to review what he has done before and this time tries to be clearer, probably by giving more examples. Instead of correcting students’ performance, I look for an influence on the opposite direction, i.e., I try to correct my own performance because I know that one main reason for making errors is faulty or imperfect presentation on the part of the teachers. On the importance of remedial teaching, he comments:

You know, I do this especially when I see a lot of students commit the same error. Because when an error is so prevalent I come to the conclusion that may be my teaching was not strong enough or there has been a problem in my teaching that most or all of them are unable to use the correct structure. Correction seems ludicrous and superfluous when the rule has not been mastered.

## Using the Correct Structure

Students produce an ill-formed sentence because of their imperfect knowledge of the rule. You can compensate for their lack of knowledge either by error correction or explanation of the rule that generates the sentence. Here participants suggest another alternative, that is, instead of correcting errors or explaining the rule, the teacher tries to use that structure by bombarding students with examples of that structure. In this respect, Mr. Soheili explains: For instance while communicating one of the student says, “Yesterday, I had my car fix.” I try to help the students notice the error by saying, “Look, I had my shoes polished; I had my shirt ironed; I had my house painted; etc.” sometimes I go further by making students produce other similar sentences.

Ms. Haghdadi, appears to believe in what we experience unconsciously in our lives. When you use the structure, students learn to use the rule by following the model subconsciously. She tries to use this concept for making her students master the skills of English language and explains:

Uh! You know that one cannot use the same techniques in all the situations. Sometimes we teachers need to add some variety to our job. I think one of the things which can help a lot to the students’ learning is listening and paying attention to what their teacher or other students say. So, I instead of correcting an ill-formed sentence, I try to immerse my students in examples by using the structure. When they do so, it unconsciously strengthens that rule or structure in their mind and the students naturally correct their errors on their own in the way that sometimes they don’t even notice that themselves.

## Showing Surprise

Teachers show surprise to give their students a signal or hint to make them know something is wrong in their speaking but locating and correcting it are the student’s own responsibility. For instance, the student says, “I like to listen to music during I’m listening.” Instead of proving the correct form, in a surprised tone I say, “DURING.” While that specific student may not come up with the correct form, his classmates may give the correct form. In asking the teachers why they preferred to do this, they referred mostly to psychological factors which they believed can influence their students’ learning rate to a large extent. Miss Jamshidi points to the importance of psychological factors and believes that direct and explicit ways of error treatment do not always work and teachers are supposed to consider their students’ personalities. Elaborating this point, she states:

I think it has psychological reasons. The error treatment technique adopted by the teacher should be sensitive to individual differences including age. Children or younger learners naturally are not that eager to be corrected in front of their peers and I always avoid suppressing my students’ desire to learn by correcting them in front of their friends.

Ms. Haghdadi uses the same technique, that is., showing surprise, on a different ground. She seems to be strongly in favor of good relation between teacher and student and tries to motivate her students to soldier on. Being indirect, this technique saves students’ face and help the teacher keep his or her good relationships with the students. She explains:

I show surprise in a funny manner to break the students' defensive mechanism. I think this indirect and fun technique of error correction is an ideal channel to make the students discover and correct the erroneous forms while communicating their feelings and ideas. Indirectly, it tells them not to be worried; I'm a friend who is here to give a helping hand when you need me. To me it's more like a psychological tool which I believe can influence students' learning rate to a large extent.

### **Correction through Other Language Skills**

Making students discover and repair their erroneous forms through other skills was another tool. In this technique which can also be considered delayed correction, the teachers tended not to correct the students' errors immediately rather, they waited till their task is done, and then made them use the same structures in writing or expose them to the correct form of the structure through listening. This technique is rarely mentioned in the rhetoric of corrective feedback. What follows aims at specifying how and when the technique is applied and clarifying the rationale behind the proposed technique.

### **Using Writing**

In this technique the teacher tries to write down the erroneous forms and then at the end of the oral communication activity, makes the students use the specified forms in writing. To this end, I involve students in communication and as they are communicating, I make note of their errors, and then when their communication is over, I make students use that form by illustrating their mastery of the form in written sentences of their own. These teachers believe that the students discover and use the correct form in writing the reason is that in contrast with speaking which allows no time for reflection of linguistic forms, writing provides the students to monitor their performance and then produce it, or to use it erroneously and correct it in retrospection. I try to correct only those errors that were repeated in writing and classify those which were corrected as mistake, that is, resulting from performance factors. Mr. Kave explains the rationale for the use of this technique by explaining:

I make my students write about the same topic at home. I think there are many factors affecting somebody's function in class. One of them may be the stress students may experience. The other one is the fear of speaking in front of others. The third one can be not having enough experiential knowledge about the topic they're going to speak about. In this case they are likely to make mistakes, as opposed to error, since their mind is too pre-occupied with content to notice the form. When we evaluate them through writing, in fact the effect of those factors is minimized and we can have a better view of what they have really learned and consequently we have more real errors to correct.

Miss Jamshidi justifies the efficacy of this technique based on her own experience as a language learner. This technique gives a chance to the teacher to tell an error from a mistake and count and correct errors rather than mistakes. Writing similarly helps the student regain his/her eroded confidence by subtracting mistakes from the total number of errors. She believes that teachers should not judge students' performance based on their speaking in communicative tasks because it involves lots of performance mistakes which are totally irrelevant to

competence. She relates the use of this technique by relating it to her past experience as a language learner when she complains:

The first stages of speaking were really terrifying for me, since I always reproached myself for making mistakes despite the fact that I could not apply a rule I really know, more specifically, I had grasped the concept but I could not execute it due to lots of factors that now I term them performance factors. It was more terrifying since error correction was judgmental and for each and every mistake I made I lost I point from the total score. Having learned from my experience, now I try to give them a writing task to tell mistakes and errors apart, and provide correction for errors and do away with mistakes since they need no correction. All in all, I try to help them notice the difference between the correct form and the error, rather than just correct the error.

### **Using Listening**

This one is, to a large extent, similar to the previous one with the difference that this time the skill used to work as a correction tool is listening. Similar to the previous technique, the teacher tried to write down and corrects them systematically later on but this time through listening. In effect, through the listening task, the teacher immerses students in the correct use of erroneous forms and provides them with a chance to inductively come up with the correct form. Mr. Jalali points to the fact that if we experience something by ourselves and find the answer to something by our own effort, the result would be much more long-lasting. Justifying the use of this technique he says:

I write down the incorrect forms, classify them, prepare a contrived listening task containing the repeated use of erroneous forms, and next session I present it to the students and make them discover the correct forms by themselves. As you know, there are three ways by which a student's error can be removed: (1) the students themselves; (2) the other students; (3) the teacher. I think one of the most influential sources is the students themselves. When through a process, they realize their own error and try to remove it, that student will never commit that error again. But about the other sources I cannot talk so confidently.

Ms. Tofighian, on the other hand, justifies the use of listening by reasoning that receiving the correct use of linguistic forms precedes the production of these forms. She explains that listening is of vital importance in an EFL context where students develop a conscious knowledge of forms through studying without knowing how to use them in practice. To this end she uses listening to repair students' erroneous forms. She contends:

I believe that the reason why students produce incorrect forms is that they have learned the linguistic forms but they have not had enough input to perceive the correct use of those forms in practice. To help students repair the faulty forms, I write their mistake down, plan a text that shows the correct use of these forms in different contexts and then present it in the form of a listening task to my students. In presenting the text I try to emphasize the erroneous forms. To make sure that the technique is effective, I try to receive feedback by making students to produce the erroneous forms.

## No Correction

In all the previous error treatment techniques, one concern was common and that was the act of giving corrective feedback was considered a necessary action or reaction by teachers. In contrast, some participants believed that sometimes it is to the best of the students to ignore their errors and provide no correction. They believe that, for instance in the case of children and beginners, correction is not necessary. These participants reject error correction for the specified groups for cognitive, psycholinguistic, and non-linguistic reasons. In what follows, the participants elaborate when and why no corrective feedback pays off better than providing feedback one way or another.

One of the reasons mentioned by some of the teachers as to why correction is not required was the so called futility of correcting the students' errors. The teachers claimed that whatever correction they do, it doesn't seem to bear any fruit because the students will commit the same error again later on. They believe that corrective feedback is a waste of time because their cognitive structure has not been shaped through proper teaching of the correct forms and as such despite any correction, the student repeatedly makes the same errors. Ms. Etminan, who is strongly against error correction, believes that errors have to get removed through proper teaching and learning. Providing correcting feedback to remove language learners' errors is futile. She explains:

Correcting students' errors has got no effect on students learning and even if you correct your language learners' errors many times, you may not remove them from his/her speech and they will commit the same error again on other occasions. She believes that for some errors corrective feedback is useless because they will automatically fade away as the student is exposed to the correct forms later on. Sometimes errors are either so trivial that they don't damage the flow of communication and hence there is no need to correct them, or they are so big that they make you doubt about any learning. In this case remedial teaching rather than corrective feedback is needed. I believe such errors are due to a lack of data-base or a faulty data base. In either case, teachers should try to resort to remedial teaching rather than fruitless provision of corrective feedback.

Mr. Ardalan believes that correcting children's and beginners' errors is like fighting global warming. One can never fight global warming, but he can fight greenhouse gases that bring it about. Along the same line, he believes correcting the error is fighting an effect. Fighting the effect is useless it is much better to fight the cause. He recommends that teachers improve the knowledge-base that produces the faulty forms. That is, instead of repairing performance, i.e. the effect, teachers should develop competence, i.e. competence or cognition. He elaborates on this belief by saying:

I think we teachers correct errors habitually irrespective of individual differences in terms of age and proficiency. Sometimes, as I have experienced myself, it is not that helpful to correct our students' errors, especially children and beginners. I believe in the case of beginners and children, correction is of no use. At this stage most of the students make errors since they are forced to talk when they are not ready to talk. To meet the communicative pressure imposed on them, they clothe Persian structures in English words. Performance is an offshoot of competence. For children and beginners, it is their Persian competence that produces their utterances. Thus instead of wasting the class



time on repairing performance, we must try to improve competence through proper teaching the target form and immersing learners in examples which shows the use of the target form. We should also avoid making students talk when they do not have the competence for that.

The other mentioned reason was psycholinguistic factors which, the teachers believed, would hinder the process of learning. Throughout the previous parts of data you may have noticed that psychological factors were among one of the most widely mentioned reasons for employing different techniques. Teachers emphasized this factor, especially for the children or lower level language learners who have newly started their language learning. The teachers wondered if they correct them directly, it may have some negative and damaging results on their students. As the name speaks for itself, the second round of reasons for not correcting language learners' errors is psychological factors which have been also mentioned for some of the other kinds of error treatment techniques. As Ms. Haghdadi says:

I do not correct errors since I believe providing corrective feedback may or may not solve the problem but for sure causes another problem: it erodes the students' confidence and kills the desire and willingness to communicate. When you correct errors, the student focuses on the correct use of linguistic forms at the cost of communicating meaning. Thus correction forces the student to sacrifice the end for the means, i.e. communication for language. Before making students communicate, we should ensure the mastery of and automatic control over the prerequisite linguistic forms, which motives the student to communicate, rather than correct errors, which disrupts the process of and desire for communication.

Those who correct errors believe that learning fundamentally depends on the brain. But more fundamental than learning is the desire for learning which is determined by the heart. Along these lines Mr. Jorjani rejects cognitive error treatment by arguing that learning is more depended on heart than on mind. His own comments better explains this point:

I think that heart is a window on the brain. If it is closed, the brain will never learn. More specifically, the heart determines the why of learning and the brain determines the how of learning. Since at the beginning stages of interlanguage, students' performance reflects the rules of the first language, mistakes are inevitable. Resorting to error correction turns off the motor or the motivation for learning by telling the student what he can't do. Repeated correction inculcates the idea of incompetency in the student and he avoids and withholds communication till his interlanguage rules reflect those of a native speaker and this is waiting for a boat which never comes. For the brain to discover rules more efficiently, the teacher should cultivate the willingness to communicate by *focusing on what students can do*. When you repeatedly focus on what the student can do, you inculcate a sense of competency, confidence and success. This feeling of success turns the motor on or opens the window to available target language input, and the brain picks up target language patterns more efficiently.

Some participants believe that students' errors are due to teaching methodology and syllabus design. The syllabus is linear and as such learners learn a linguistic form in one lesson and go to the next form in the next lesson. The second problem is that most of the class time

in Iran is devoted to teaching and there is little or no time for practice. Lack of practice and linear presentation of forms leaves no room for the automatic processing of these forms by the brain. Mr. Rafiee contends:

My colleagues believe that errors are cognitive in origin and they try to eliminate them by error correction. I, on the other hand, believe that learners make errors because they do not have an automatic control over learned forms. Conscious attention on form taxes working memory and cannot generate sentences under the time pressure imposed by the communicative demands. Following Krashen I believe that communication of meaning depends on unconscious knowledge of rules and. And the unconscious, automatic, and parallel processing of forms depends on practice. In our language education system teachers equate teaching with covering the book since the syllabus leaves no time for practice. When you waste the class time on error correction, you minimize the minimum time available for practice. For me, teaching means teaching a point and leaving enough room for practice so that learners move from controlled processing of rules to automatic processing of rules. When you correct, the student may learn the rule but that rule is not accessible for use. Its accessibility depends on practice.

Without directing stating the role of automatic processing, Mr. Kave explains the role of repetition, which I believe is the root to automatic use of linguistic forms. He believes that for a language to be learned much repetition is needed. He says:

I said before that one of the reasons I prefer not to correct them is that for mastering various aspects and skills of language students are supposed to repeat the linguistic rules they learn many times over. But their language books are designed in a way that they continually face different structures in order to inculcate them. That is, once a form is presented, the lesson moves to a new point. This approach leaves no room for repetition and recurrent use of the same rule. Students move to the next rule without mastering the rule and being able to use it for communication of meaning. This system defines learning as accumulation of knowledge rather than creating opportunities for practice and use of linguistic knowledge for communication. Sometimes you correct a form repeatedly but later on the students repeat the erroneous form not because he does not know it but because he has not mastered it.

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications**

Early in the abstract it was stated that the researchers condemn practitioners by arguing that tradition, rather than research findings derive their practice. The myriad of techniques and rationales presented by the participants in this study does not substantiate this claim. The naming of the techniques and the way they voice their views, however, clearly show that they are alien with the rhetoric of corrective feedback. But this is not fair to conclude that tradition derives their practices. Ostovar-Namaghi (2010) rejects such a view by arguing, "Although practitioners are not up-to-date with literature, years of teaching experience has led them to the realization that they cannot cater for a myriad of individual differences in terms of background, age, level, purpose, etc. with one technique of error correction for all" (p. 18). Thus they have developed their own techniques in providing corrective feedback.

Thus it is not tradition that drives their practice, and neither is it the research findings. Rather it is personally constructed context-sensitive personal narratives which arise from “reflection on action” (Schön, 1987, p. 26), which helps them fine tune their corrective feedback technique to respond to the contextual nuances. Practitioners’ responsive approach towards error correction substantiates Connor, Morrison, and Petrella (2004) who found that one-size-fits-all is far from yielding fruit. The techniques and rationales presented by the participants may be taken from practice rather than research findings. But practice without theory is like winking at somebody in a dark room: you know what you are doing but the other party does not know. Thus practitioners do need theoretical perspective and research finding to complement their personal narratives but they rarely use these insightful sources because: (1) there are technicalities involved in the research reports including complicated and perplexing statistical analysis and technical jargons, which make these studies quite incomprehensible for a great majority of practitioners; (2) most of these studies are theory-driven, undertaken under controlled laboratory conditions which aim at generalized findings that are applicable universally, and cross-culturally.

But the main problem with language teacher education is that it always aims at improving practitioners’ work through research findings. The field is in dearth of studies that make a case in the opposite direction, that is, studies that theorize practitioners’ views to enlighten theories. To fill in this gap in knowledge, the field of language teacher education research needs a shift away from theory-driven studies to data-driven studies. To remedy the situation and turn mutual distrust between practitioners and researchers into mutual trust it is essential that:

- theoreticians modify their theories through the feedback they receive from data-driven studies that theorize practitioners’ concerns, views and perspectives to enlighten their theories;
- researchers report their findings in practitioner-friendly manner by minimizing technical jargons, and complicated statistical concepts, and shift away from theory-driven approach that weeds out contextual variations as irrelevant to data-driven studies that are responsive to contextual variations; and
- practitioners modify their perspectives and widen their vision through accommodating research findings into their cognitive structure and practice, and define their role as teacher-researchers who voice their views through action research and enlighten aspects of research and theory.

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