A Teacher’s Corrective Feedback in a Freshman English Class

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Abstract

Corrective feedback is widely adopted by language teachers to implement Form-focused Instruction (FFI) in language classrooms. It functions as the teachers’ timely intervention to direct students’ attention to forms and to help students repair errors in their utterances. To explore a college teacher’s error treatment, the study analyzed a college teacher’s corrective feedback in a freshman English class. Six class periods were videotaped, and the classroom observation was transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) classification of feedback types was adopted as the coding scheme for the teacher’s corrective feedback types. The results showed that the most frequently found feedback type was explicit corrections, followed by clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitations. A further analysis of the teacher’s corrective feedback types indicated that explicit corrections were multifacetedly utilized in her class. She frequently used explicit corrections to highlight the students’ errors in pronunciation, grammar, information and vocabulary. The finding implied that the teacher preferred to direct students’ attention to forms by explicitly pointing out the students’ errors. By the means of explicit corrections, the teacher expected the students to better notice the errors in their utterances and to further repair them to produce well-formed utterances.

Key Terms: Corrective feedback; Error correction; Form-focused Instruction

Introduction

In the classroom interaction, language teachers often struggle with whether or not they should turn a blind eye to students’ mistakes in their oral production in order not to interrupt the flow of communication. What they further concern is how they can redirect students’ attention to form, so that the oral mistakes will not be fossilized (Brown, 2000). Language teachers, with no doubt, have been making efforts to find the pedagogical balance between fluency and accuracy in students’ oral production.

Form-focused instruction (FFI) has been generally accepted by language teachers to be essential, since it is a way to integrate the instruction of forms into communicatively oriented classrooms (Ellis, 2008). Form-focused instruction can be categorized into two types. The first type is carried out through a teacher’s deliberate planning on teaching certain grammatical points, while the other type is manifested via teachers’ pointing out students’ mistakes in incidental encounters in communicative activities (Loewen, 2004). The rationale of the latter type of FFI is
said to better fit into a CLT classroom, since FFI can be implemented during communicative activities. In doing so, teachers could better find the balance between accuracy and fluency in students’ language production.

To integrate form-focused instruction into a communicatively oriented language classroom, teachers tend to use different types of corrective feedback so that they can provide timely interference (Fanselow, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In light of the importance of corrective feedback in language classrooms, the present study attempts to examine a college teacher’s corrective feedback types.

**Literature Review**

Corrective feedback, according to Gass (2003), is termed, the negative evidence, which can be provided by teachers or advanced others. It can be further divided into two types: explicit and implicit negative evidence. The former refers to teachers’ explicit correction of an ill-formed utterance produced by students, while the latter refers to merely replacing one or more incorrect words in students’ utterances without explicit corrections. To investigate teachers’ error treatments, Fanselow (1977) examined students’ oral errors in 11 ESL teachers’ classrooms. The most common type of errors in students’ utterances was grammatical errors, including the misuse of function words, the omission of articles and auxiliary verbs, and pronunciation errors. It was also found that the students sometimes failed to provide grammatically correct responses due to the inadequate wait-time, the ambiguity in the teachers’ response to errors, and the teachers’ inconsistent treatments to errors. Fanselow later proposed several techniques to help students notice and practice the grammar points, including discrimination exercises, classification, analysis, and manipulation exercises.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) further provided a more elaborate categorization of the types of corrective feedback in teacher-student interaction. They categorized feedback types into six types: explicit corrections, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitations and repetitions. Explicit corrections refer to teachers’ provision of a well-formed utterance in response to students’ ill-formed speech production. Recasts are teachers’ attempts to throw a grammatically accurate utterance back to students, expecting them to automatically notice what have been reformulated. Clarifications occur when teachers do not understand students’ utterances, and thus need further clarification. Unlike explicit corrections, metalinguistic feedback contains the explanations of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Elicitations are manifested via teachers’ attempts to elicit correct responses either by providing pauses for students to “fill in the blank”, or by asking questions. Last, repetitions contain merely teachers’ reproduction of students’ ill-formed speech with rising intonation.
The findings of the related literature in corrective feedback showed that recasts are the most frequently found feedback type, and that they are also the least effective type to alert students to their errors (Fanselow, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998; Nichlas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001; Leeman, 2003). Of the six feedback types identified by Lyster and Ranta (1997), elicitation and metalinguistic feedback were the most useful techniques to focus students’ attention to forms, because they were more likely to result in students’ self-repair of errors than the other four types.

Although teachers may provide students with corrective feedback, it remains questionable whether students can detect what goes wrong in their speech. According to Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001), in order to turn “input” into “intake”, teachers need to provide signals to highlight students’ mistakes. Lyster and Ranta (1997) used “uptake” to refer to “a student’s utterance that immediately follows the teacher’s feedback and that constitute a reaction in some way to the teacher’s intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student’s initial utterance” (p. 49). In other words, an uptake occurs when students notice the teacher’s feedback as negative evidence, signaling the unacceptable form that needs to be repaired.

In order for negative evidence to result in learner uptake, language teachers should consider three aspects in giving corrective feedback. First, corrective feedback should be salient. According to Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001), in the dyadic interaction, learners must notice the messages behind corrective feedback in order for learning to occur. Thus, corrective feedback must be salient enough for learners to notice. In Leeman’s (2003) study on recasts, the enhanced salience group outperformed both recast and control groups on the posttest, implying that the rising intonation or stress functioned as the highlighter for learners to perceive teachers’ responses as corrective feedback. When noticing recasts as corrective feedback, learners can further attempt to repair their ill-formed production either by themselves or by the help of others. What was implied in this study is that, regardless of the feedback types used by teachers, teachers must make their corrective feedback noticeable so that students can make further attempts to repair their mistakes or errors.

Second, corrective feedback should be unambiguous. Learners might fail to recognize corrective feedback due to the fact that teachers inconsistently used recasts and repetitions to signal both correction and topic continuation (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998). In this case, students failed to notice teachers’ corrective feedback as negative evidence. Instead, they perceived teachers’ recasts and repetitions as genuine responses in the dyadic interaction. To solve the problem, teachers must make corrective feedback unambiguous so that learners can correctly receive teachers’ signals that urge them to repair errors.

Third, language teachers should take learners current language competence into
account when giving corrective feedback. Learners’ current language competence might affect their ability to perceive corrective feedback as negative evidence (Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001). In natural L1 communicative events, Nelson, Denninger, Bonvillian, Kaplan & Baker (1983) found that when children were more syntactically developed, they were more likely to respond to corrective feedback, especially recasts. It is implied that when students are more linguistically competent, they are more likely to notice the corrective feedback and further make corrections in their utterances.

The above discussion leads us to reconsider how to treat students’ errors more effectively. Research findings have shown that elicitation and metalinguistic feedback are the most effective ways for error treatment. Therefore, teachers can make their corrective feedback salient by asking questions and by providing metalinguistic explanations. Above all, the students’ errors should be made explicit. In doing so, learners can be expected to notice and self-repair their errors.

The purpose of the error treatment is not only to prevent communicative breakdowns but also to avoid fossilization. At times, teachers tend to ignore students’ errors so that the flow of communication is not interrupted. The decision might result in fossilization over time. Since teachers’ corrective feedback bear pedagogically significant functions, the study attempts to discover an EFL college teacher’s use of corrective feedback in a freshman English class in Southern Taiwan. Based on the purpose of the study, two research questions are addressed as follows:

1. What are the teachers’ corrective feedback types?
2. What are the teacher’s explicit corrections targeted to?

Methodology
The Participants
The present study investigated a college teacher’s corrective feedback in a freshman English class in a university in Southern Taiwan. There were totally five levels of freshman English classes, from Level A to Level E. Level A was labeled as the highest level, while Level E as the lowest. The grouping criterion was based on their English grades in the College Entrance Examination. The freshman English class in this study, which was heterogeneously grouped as Level B, was composed of students from different departments.

The class consisted of 36 males and 8 females. The instructor is a female teacher, who holds a PhD in applied linguistics. She has had around 15 years of teaching experience and has taught different levels of students, ranging from preschoolers, teenagers to adults.
Data Collection

The data were collected from the classroom observation of a freshman English class. With the teacher’s permission to observe the freshman English class, I entered the classroom as a pure observer. The teacher was informed that the present study aimed to explore the teacher-student interaction. She was not told that her corrective feedback was the focus of the study. Not knowing the purpose of the study, the teacher was expected to maintain her teaching approach and routines.

The instrument for data collection was a video camera. The video camera was set at the back of the classroom. Six class periods were videotaped, and then, the videotaped observation was transcribed verbatim for data analyses.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the class observation were further analyzed by Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) coding scheme for corrective feedback. The six feedback types are shown and exemplified as follows.

1. Explicit correction: It is a teacher’s “explicit provision of the correct form” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 46).
   S: She don’t like to go out.
   T: No, it should be “she doesn’t like to go out.”
2. Recasts: They refer to “the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance, minus the error” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 46).
   T: Where is she from?
   S: French.
   T: France.
3. Clarification requests: They occur when teachers do not understand students’ utterances, and thus need further clarification.
   S: I can’t go out after 9 in the evening.
   T: Pardon? Can you say that again?
4. Metalinguistic feedback: It “contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student’s utterance, without providing the correct form” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 47).
   T: What is softball in Chinese?
   S: 桌球 (table tennis).
   T: No, not 桌球 (table tennis). 桌球 is table tennis.
5. Elicitation: Teachers elicit correct responses either by providing “pause” for students to “fill in the blank”, or by asking questions.
   T: Where is she from?
S: 墨西哥 (Mexico).
T: Where is 墨西哥 (Mexico)? What is that?

S: I want to study France.
T: France (With a rising intonation)?

Results and Discussion
In this section, the frequencies of the teacher’s feedback types were presented. Then, I further examined the most frequently used feedback type, explicit corrections.

The Teacher’s Feedback Types
The purpose of the paper is to examine how the teacher responds to students’ oral errors. The frequencies of her feedback types are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback types</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit correction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recasts</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification requests</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elicitation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently used feedback type is explicit corrections, followed by clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitations. The teacher did not use recasts and repetitions as a means of error correction. It was found that the teacher preferred explicitly pinpointing students’ errors to avoid ambiguity.

The preference of explicit corrections seemed to be in accordance with the optimal conditions for the effective use of corrective feedback. First, the teacher’s feedback types were salient, because the teacher highlighted the students’ errors by using explicit corrections, metalinguistic feedback and elicitations. Second, the teacher’s feedback types were unambiguous, since recasts and repetitions were rarely used. As a matter of fact, she preferred a more straightforward treatment to correct students’ errors by the use of explicit corrections, metalinguistic feedback and elicitations. Third, the students’ linguistic competence was believed to be adequate to deal with the teacher’s corrective feedback. As Level B students in the freshman
English class, the students were believed to be more linguistically competent than most of the freshmen in this college. With the three optimal conditions, the students were expected to be able to notice the corrective feedback as negative evidence and to repair their ill-form utterances.

A Further Analysis of the Explicit Corrections

Since explicit corrections were the teacher’s most frequently used feedback type, I attempted to further analyze the teacher’s use of explicit corrections. The analyses showed that the teacher’s explicit corrections could be categorized into four subtypes, which are shown in Table 2 and illustrated in the following section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtypes of Explicit Corrections</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pronunciation-targeted Explicit Corrections

This subtype of explicit corrections was the most frequently used one, and was identified for seven times. When the teacher detected an error in students’ pronunciation, she would use this subtype of explicit corrections to directly point out the error and then demonstrate a correct pronunciation.

**Extract 1**

T: So what can you buy in the flea market? Very expensive one or very cheap one?
S: Cheap (It was pronounced as “chip”).
T: Very cheap one. Not “chip”. Very cheap one.

Since the pronunciation of a word can cause communicative breakdowns, the teacher seemed to place much emphasis on correcting errors in pronunciation. In Extract 3, the teacher provided a minimal pair, cheap and ship, to demonstrate the phonetic differences between the two. Noticing the phonetic differences between the two pronunciations, students were expected to produce the correct pronunciation.

Grammar-targeted Explicit Corrections

The second subtype of explicit correction, as illustrated in Extract 2, was targeted
to clarifying the grammar points in the textbook, which occurred twice.

**Extract 2**

SS: But the green one is only 22.25.
T: But “this” green one.
SS: but this green one.
T: Not “the”. Because you want to use “this” or “that”.

The episode in Extract 2 occurred when the teacher led students to go through the answers of an exercise. The grammar point here emphasized the use of “this” and “that”. When the students used “the”, instead of “this”, the teacher immediately corrected them. In this extract, however, some might argue against the teacher’s correction, insisting that the students’ response was also contextually acceptable. What the teacher did might hinder students’ language development in that students might think that there is only one way to express a certain situation. To find the balance, the teacher could have provided the answer in relation to the grammar point in the textbook, while she could have also pointed out that what students just said could be used to achieve the same purpose.

In extract 3, the teacher tried to direct students’ attention to the sentence pattern that was taught in the textbook. Similarly, what students said was acceptable, but the teacher wanted them to use the sentence pattern taught earlier. An example is presented in Extract 3.

**Extract 3**

T: What age groups like aerobics?
SS: Middle age.
T: No, no, no. “I think it’s popular with …” With what?
S: Middle-aged people.

Similar to the example in Extract 2, the student’s response in Extract 3 was contextually acceptable, but the teacher asked him to use the specific sentence pattern in the textbook. From the CLT point of view, as long as the message is successfully conveyed, learners should be encouraged to apply what they know to the negotiation of meaning with others. Thus, in addition to correcting students, the teacher should also inform them that there were other alternatives to convey the same idea.

**Information-targeted Explicit Corrections**

The third subtype of explicit corrections which was targeted to information was
identified twice. In this case, students’ utterances were syntactically correct, but the information embedded in their responses was contextually and semantically awkward. In Extract 4, an information-targeted explicit correction is exemplified.

**Extract 4**

T: What kind of sports do you like?
S: Baseball.
T: Baseball. How about you?
S: Shopping.
T: Shopping, okay. **Shopping is not a sport.** I’m sorry.
SS: (The whole class laughed)
S: Shopping is walking.
T: Oh, shopping is walking. Okay, that’s good.

The example in this extract showed that the teacher first attempted to correct a student’s answer, and the interaction between the teacher and the student turned out to be quite amusing since the student provided an unusual answer by saying that shopping was actually an exercise. At first, the teacher rejected the idea, but after the student made her point, the teacher accepted it. According to Long (1966, in Doughty and long, 2003), acquisition is facilitated through the negotiation of meaning, and the interaction in the extract clearly illustrated that the student tried to negotiate with the teacher, and she did successfully get her opinions across in English.

Vocabulary-targeted Explicit Corrections

The fourth subtype of explicit corrections is targeted to vocabulary, which was identified only once. This kind of feedback is used to correct students’ word usages, as shown in Extract 5.

**Extract 5**

T: A kiss on the cheek?
S: French.
T: **France, not French.** France. **French is a language.**

This extract took place when the whole class went through the answers of an exercise, aiming at discussing different ways of greetings in various countries. Students were supposed to answer each type of greetings by writing down the countries in blanks. Thus, when students responded to the teacher’s question by saying “French”, the teacher immediately pointed out that the answer should be
France, not French. Some, however, might disapprove the teacher’s response to the student’s answer. That is, the information embedded in “French” could be inferred as “French people”, which caused little hindrance to comprehension. Nevertheless, I argue otherwise. “French” and “France” are two words learned by those students before. They should have differentiated the usages between the two words. What the teacher did was merely to highlight the different usages of the two. If she had not done that, the error would have remained unnoticed.

In brief, the functions of the teacher’s explicit corrections were apparently multifaceted. Her explicit corrections alerted students to noticing their errors in pronunciation, grammar, information and vocabulary. By pointing out the problematic expressions, she expected students to fine-tune their utterances. Thus, the ubiquitous use of explicit corrections in her class was the direct evidence that FFI was applied in her freshman English class whenever and wherever necessary.

Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

The purpose of the study was to explore a college teacher’s corrective feedback. To achieve the purpose, I observed a freshman English class for six hours and analyzed the classroom discourse. The results showed that the most frequently used feedback type was explicit corrections, followed by clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitations. The teacher seemed to consistently adopt an explicit approach to correcting students’ errors.

The major pedagogical implication of the study concerns the teacher’s decision-making in when and how the teacher corrects students’ errors. In terms of the “when” factor, teachers have to consider whether the focus of an activity is on form or meaning. During a form-oriented activity, teachers can and should provide timely intervention to pinpoint students’ errors, while, during a meaning-oriented activity, teachers can prioritize the exchange of information as long as the errors made by students are minor and do not cause communication breakdowns. After students finish their sentences or the activity ends, teachers can summarize students’ errors and explain them explicitly and systematically.

As for the “how” factor in the teacher’s decision-making process, teachers should make their corrective feedback salient and unambiguous. By highlighting students’ verbal errors, the students can better notice their erroneous expressions and further self-repair. If corrective feedback is opaque or ambiguous, teachers’ intervention might stay unnoticed and result in vain.

The study has several limitations. First, the time span was limited. Six hours of observation cannot account for the long-term tendency of the teacher’s corrective feedback. Second, a second coder should have been invited to ensure the
trustworthiness of the results. Third, the selection of the participants was not representative so that the results accounted for little generalizability. Future studies can be done to compare different teachers’ corrective feedback types to explore how they respond to the oral errors produced by students of different proficiency levels. More importantly, students’ responses to the corrective feedback can be included to examine whether or not they self-repair their errors. Only when students produce grammatically and contextually acceptable utterances can we say that the error treatment is effective and facilitative.

References