Corrective Feedback in Theory, Research and Practice

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The pedagogical problem

'To facilitate successful language learning teachers must perform a complicated balancing act of two necessary but seemingly contradictory roles. They must establish positive affect among students yet also engage in the interactive confrontational activity of error correction.'
(Magilow, 1999)

Defining corrective feedback

Corrective feedback takes the form of responses to learner utterances containing an error. The responses are other-initiated repairs and can consist of:

(1) an indication that an error has been committed, or

(2) provision of the correct target language form, or

(3) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error or

(4) any combination of these.

Corrective feedback episodes

Corrective feedback (CF) episodes are comprised of a trigger, the feedback move and (optionally) uptake.

    T: When were you in school?

    L: Yes. I <u>stand</u> in the first row? (trigger)

    T: You <u>stood</u> in the first row. (corrective move)

    L: Yes, in the first row, and sit, ah, sat the first row. (uptake)

CF episodes can also be complex involving a number of corrective moves and further triggering moves.

Corrective feedback in SLA and language pedagogy

CF is an area that bridges the concerns of teachers and SLA researchers.

Teachers are concerned with whether or not to correct learners errors, and when and how to do it.

SLA researchers are concerned with whether corrective feedback has any effect on learners' interlanguage development and what type of CF is most effective.

Both teachers and SLA theorists disagree about whether CF is desirable and about how it should be undertaken to promote acquisition.

Outline of Talk

This talk will:

- discuss some of the key controversies surrounding CF in both language pedagogy and SLA.

- argue that a general weakness of current accounts of CF is that they have focussed narrowly on the cognitive aspects of correction and acquisition and that a fuller understanding requires a consideration of the social context of CF and the psychological characteristics of individual learners.

- outline a sociocultural view of CF

- offer some general guidelines for conducting CF.

Controversies concerning CF

I will consider controversies concerning:

(1) whether CF contributes to L2 acquisition,

(2) which errors to correct,

(3) who should do the correcting (the teacher or the learner him/herself),

(4) which type of CF is the most effective, and

(5) what is the best timing for CF (i.e. immediate or delayed).

In outlining these controversies I will draw on both the pedagogic and SLA literature and refer to both oral and written CF.

Controversy (1): The efficacy of CF

CF is allocated a very different role in different methods (Ur 1996):

audiolingualism - 'negative assessment is to be avoided as far as possible since it functions as 'punishment' and may inhibit or discourage learning'

humanistic methods - 'assessment should be positive or non-judgemental' in order to 'promote a positive self-image of the learner as a person and language learner'

skill theory - 'the learner needs feedback on how well he or she is doing'

A modern view of CF in language pedagogy

Accuracy work – CF has a place
Fluency work – CF should be avoided

Harmer (1983) - when students are engaged in communicative activity, the teacher should not intervene by 'telling students that they are making mistakes, insisting on accuracy and asking for repetition etc.' (p. 44).

This is a view that is reflected in teachers' own opinions about CF (Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis 2004).

The efficacy of written CF

Truscott (1996; 1999) - correcting learners' errors in a written composition may enable them to eliminate the errors in a subsequent draft but has no effect on grammatical accuracy in a new piece of writing (i.e. it does not result in acquisition).

Ferris (1999) - if the correction is clear and consistent it will work for acquisition.

Hyland and Hyland (2006) - 'it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions and generalizations from the literature as a result of varied populations, treatments and research designs' (p. 84).

The efficacy of oral CF

Krashen (1982) - error correction is 'a serious mistake' because it puts learners on the defensive and because it only assists the development of 'learned knowledge' and plays no role in 'acquired knowledge'. But error correction directed at simple and portable rules, such as third person –s is useful because it helps monitoring.

Long (1996) - CF in the form of negotiating for meaning can help learners notice their errors, create form-meaning connections and thus aid acquisition.

Student attitudes towards correction

Studies that have elicited students' attitudes have consistently shown that they favour CF. In particular they express a desire for more feedback on grammar.

Zacharias (2007) reported that Indonesian students preferred the teacher to give feedback as they considered this to be more 'accurate', 'valid' and 'trustworthy'.

Controversy (2): Choice of errors to correct

There are two issues here;

(1) which specific errors should be corrected

(2) whether CF should be unfocused (i.e. address all or most of the errors learners commit) or focused (i.e. address just one or two error types).

Which errors?

Corder (1967) - correct 'errors' but not 'mistakes'.

Burt (1975) - focus on 'global' rather than 'local errors'. Global errors are errors that affect overall sentence organization. Examples are wrong word order, missing or wrongly placed sentence connectors, and syntactic overgeneralizations. Local errors are errors that affect single elements in a sentence (for example, errors in morphology or grammatical functors).

Krashen (1982) - limit CF to features that are simple and portable (i.e. 'rules of thumb').

Ferris (1999) - direct written CF at 'treatable errors' (i.e. errors relating to features that occur in 'a patterned, rule-governed way'.

But theoretical problems exist with all these proposals.

Focused vs. unfocused CF?

Less controversy here - focused CF favoured over unfocused CF by both methodologists and SLA/ writing researchers.

SLA studies of CF afford plenty of evidence of the efficacy of oral, CF (e.g. Han 2001; Lyster 2004; Sheen 2006).

Written CF studies - Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) and Sheen (2006) show that when written CF is 'focused' it is effective in promoting acquisition, suggesting that Truscott is wrong to dismiss written CF.

Controversy (3): Choice of corrector

Teachers are often advised to give students the opportunity to self-correct and, if that fails, to invite other students to perform the correction (e.g. Hedge 2000). Such advice can be seen as part and parcel of the western educational ideology of learner-centredness.

Some CF strategies require learner self-correction

Oral CF - signalling an error by means of a clarification request or by simply repeating the erroneous utterance.

Written CF - 'indirect correction' (e.g. indicating the presence of an error without supplying the correct form or using an error-coding system to signal the general category of an error)

There is evidence to suggest that prodding the learner to self-correct is effective in promoting acquisition (e.g. Lyster 2004; Ferris 2006).

Problems with self-correction

- learners typically prefer the teacher do the correction for them.
- learners can only self-correct if they possess the necessary linguistic knowledge. That is, in Corder's terms they can correct their 'mistakes' but not their 'errors'. Other (typically teacher) correction will be necessary to enable learners to identify forms that are not yet part of the interlanguage.
- output-prompting CF strategies signal that there is some kind of problem with the learner's utterance they do not make it clear that the problem is a linguistic one (as opposed to just a communicative one).

A two-stage solution

First encourage self-correction and, if that fails, provide the correction.

L: I think that the worm will go under the soil.

T: I *think* that the worm *will* go under the soil?

L: (no response)

T: I *thought* that the worm *would* go under the soil.

L: I *thought* that the worm *would* go under the soil.

But such an approach is time-consuming; it is arguably simpler and less intrusive to simply provide an explicit correction (e.g. 'You need past tense – thought').

Controversy (4); Choice of CF strategy

Methodologists and SLA researchers have identified a number of different ways in which errors can be corrected.

Written CF - the key distinction is between direct and indirect forms of correction.

Oral CF - (1) explicit vs. implicit CF; (2) input-providing vs. output-prompting CF.

A taxonomy of CF strategies

	Implicit	Explicit
Input-providing	Recasts	Explicit correction
Output-prompting	Repetition Clarification requests	Metalinguistic explanation Elicitation Paralinguistic signals

Recasts

Each strategy can be realized in a number of ways. This is especially the case with recasts.

- they may or may not include prosodic emphasis on the problematic form;
- they may be performed with rising intonation (i.e. as a confirmation check) or with falling intonation (i.e. as a statement);
- They may be partial (i.e. reformulate only the erroneous segment in the learner's utterance) or complete (i.e. reformulate all of it);
- They may involve correcting just one or more than one feature.

Thus, depending on the particular way the recast is realized, it may be implicit or much more explicit .

Two characteristics of teacher CF - imprecision and inconsistency

Imprecision - teachers use the same overt behaviour (e.g. 'repetition') to both indicate that an error has been made and to reinforce a correct response (Lyster 1998).

Inconsistency arises when teachers respond variably to the same error made by different students in the same class, correcting some students and ignoring others.

But imprecision may force the learner into more effort (greater depth of processing) while inconsistency is not necessarily undesirable - Allwright (1975) pointed out that it may reflect teachers' attempts to cater for individual differences among their students.

What teacher educators say about the choice of CF strategy

They have been reluctant to prescribe or proscribe the strategies that teachers should use. Two reasons:

- they are uncertain as to which strategies are the effective ones.

- They recognize that the process of correcting errors is a complex one, involving a number of competing factors.

  Ur's (1996) approach – she raises questions for teachers' to consider and then offers answers based on her own practical teaching experience.

What SLA researchers say about choice of CF strategy

SLA researchers have advanced a number of claims about which type of CF works best for acquisition:

Long (1996; 2006) – recasts provide learners with the correct target forms in a context that establishes form-meaning connections and are non-intrusive (i.e. do not interfere with the flow of communication which Long sees as important for acquisition).

Seedhouse (1997; 2004) - direct, unmitigated repair by the teacher marks errors as unimportant and unembarassing and thus should be preferred to recasts.

Lyster (1998; 2004) - output-prompting strategies are preferable because they enable learners to increase control over linguistic forms that they have partially acquired.

What SLA research tells us about the choice of CF strategy

Russell and Spada (2006) - a meta-analysis demonstrated that CF is effective in promoting acquisition but could not show which strategy was the most effective due to insufficient studies meeting the requirements of a meta-analysis.

Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) – a traditional survey of CF studies showed that (1) both implicit and explicit CF assist acquisition and (2) explicit is generally more effective than implicit.

Caveats will inevitably arise as to whether any one strategy will prove the most effective with all learners in all contexts.

Controversy (5): The timing of CF

Written CF - always delayed to allow for teachers to collect in written work and respond.

Oral CF - teachers are faced with the choice of either correcting immediately following the learner's erroneous utterance or delaying the correction until later. Choice depends on whether the activity is accuracy-based (correct immediately) or fluency-based (methodologists propose correcting later). Hedge (2000) suggested techniques for delaying CF:

- recording an activity and then asking students to identify and correct their own errors
- simply noting down errors as students perform an activity and going through these afterwards.

The case for immediate oral CF

Doughty (2001):

- to induce change in learner's interlanguage CF needs to take place in a 'window of opportunity' and to attract 'roving attention to form' while the learner's focal attention remains on meaning.

- delayed CF involves focal attention on form resulting in explicit rather than implicit L2 knowledge.

Doughty's position, then, is in direct opposition to that of many teacher educators.

So where are we regarding the timing of CF?

It is not possible to arrive at any general conclusion regarding the relative efficacy of immediate and delayed CF.

But the claim that immediate CF inevitably disrupts fluency work is probably not justified - Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001).

Also, there is no evidence to show that immediate correction is more effective than delayed - Dabaghi (2006).

The need for a broader perspective on CF

CF is a highly complex phenomenon that manifests cognitive, social and psychological dimensions. Any error correction policy must take account of all of these.

The cognitive dimension - accounts for how learners process the information provided by CF for acquisition (i.e. the interactions between input, output and the learner's internal mechanisms). It affords a universalistic account of CF.

The social dimension - acknowledges that both the practice of CF and learners' capacity to benefit from it will be influenced by the social context in which it is enacted and by the social background of the participants.

The psychological dimension – addresses how individual difference factors such as beliefs about learning, language aptitude and anxiety impact on both the teacher's choice of CF strategies and learners' responses to them.

Sociocultural theory

The theory that best integrates the cognitive, social and psychological perspectives is a sociocultural one.

Key premises of a sociocultural theory:

-   language learning is dialogically based; acquisition occurs *in* rather than *as a result of* interaction.

-   dialogic interaction demonstrates what a learner can and cannot do without assistance.

-   development originates in the zone of proximal development

-   development involves movement from other to self-regulation

Sociocultural theory and CF: Some general principles

1. First and foremost, CF must constitute 'a collaborative endeavour' - participants must agree on the goals of the CF.
2. CF must reflect a real need on the part of the learner - if the learner can self-correct without feedback then CF is not needed.
3. CF must be highly flexible, adapted to the individual learner and to the social/ situational context.
4. CF will be effective if it succeeds in enabling the participants to interactively construct a ZPD for the learner.
5. Thus, CF facilitates when it is graduated, providing no more help than is needed to enable the learner to correct the error.

Sociocultural theory and CF: Some general principles (cont.)

6. CF must also take account of the affective needs of the learner.

7. One type of CF (e.g. explicit or output-prompting CF) is not inherently more effective than another type (e.g. implicit or input-providing); what is best for one learner in one context will not be best for the same learner (or another learner) in a different context.

8. Learner uptake with repair of the original error is beneficial because it is the first step in the learner's path toward self-regulation.

9. Ultimately, it is the learner who determines whether to appropriate the CF provided by the teacher.

CF needs to be dynamic and situated.

Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) study

Aljaafreh and Lantolf developed a 'regulatory scale' to reflect the extent to which the help provided by a writing tutor was implicit or explicit – e.g. asking learners to find and correct their own errors is an implicit strategy; providing examples of the correct form was an explicit strategy; just indicating the nature of an error was an intermediate strategy.

They showed how the degree of scaffolding provided by the tutor for a particular learner became more implicit over time because the learners assumed increased control over the L2 and needed less assistance.

Clearly, however, a teacher needs considerable skill to determine the appropriate feedback needed.

Guidelines for correcting student errors

1. CF works and so teachers should not be afraid to correct students' errors in both and accuracy and fluency work.

2. Teachers should ascertain their students' attitudes towards CF, appraise them of the value of CF, and negotiate agreed goals for CF with them.

3. Focused CF is likely to be more effective than unfocussed CF so teachers should identify specific linguistic targets for correction in different lessons. Teachers should ensure that learners know they are being corrected (i.e. they should not attempt to hide the corrective force of their CF moves from the learners).

Guidelines for correcting student errors (cont.)

4. Teachers need to be able to implement a variety of CF strategies and to adapt the specific strategies they use to the particular learner they are correcting. One way of doing this is to start with a relatively implicit form of correction (e.g. simply indicating that there is an error) and, if the learner is unable to self-correct moving to a more explicit form (e.g. a direct correction).
5. CF can be both immediate and delayed. Teachers need to experiment with the timing of the CF.
6. Teachers need to create space following the corrective move for learners to uptake the correction. However, the teacher need not require the learner to produce the correct form.

Guidelines for correcting student errors (cont.)

4. Teachers should be prepared to vary whom, when and how they correct in accordance with the cognitive and affective needs of the individual learner. In effect this means they should be prepared to be inconsistent.

5. Teachers should be prepared to correct a specific error on several occasions to enable the learner to achieve full self-regulation.

6. Anxiety can have a negative impact on learners' ability to benefit from CF but teachers can minimize this danger by scaffolding students' responses to their CF.

Corrective feedback and teacher education

These guidelines should not be presented to teachers as mandatory but as a set of propositions that they can reflect on and debate. The role of the teacher trainer/ educator is two fold:

(1) to instigate and guide debate on the guidelines and

(2) to assist the trainee teachers in finding the means for operationalizing them.

This can be best achieved is by initiating discussion of actual examples of CF.