Error correction and feedback : investigating frequency and types of feedback in the EFL classroom

Error Correction and Feedback:
Investigating Frequency and Types of Feedback
in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The role of error correction and feedback in the classroom is a complex issue, and has been the subject of much interest among researchers in recent times. However, there has been a degree of uncertainty as to the effectiveness of both corrective feedback in general, and also of specific feedback types. This study examines four classes of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, with the aim of ascertaining the frequency of feedback types, the level of uptake, factors influencing the teacher's selection of feedback strategies, and possible factors influencing uptake. The results are presented, along with implications for future research.

Introduction and Literature Review

The role of error correction and feedback is both fascinating and complex, and has generated a considerable amount of interest among researchers in the field. Although the topic is wide-ranging, interest has particularly focused on a number of key issues.

One important question that researchers have attempted to address is whether learner errors should indeed be corrected at all. Swain (1998) suggests that learners, by "noticing the gap" in their second language (L2) knowledge, will focus on linguistic forms, and thus attempt to produce more accurate target language. One such method of raising learner awareness of their knowledge "gap", as suggested by

Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993), would be to correct inaccuracies in their L2 production. They propose that

"`pushing` learners to improve the accuracy of their production results not only in immediate improved performance, but also in gains in accuracy over time." (p. 208)

Lynch (1997) also suggests that providing negative feedback can be useful to learners, especially that which involves encouraging the learners to self-correct. Dekeyser (1993) on the other hand, found that, overall, error correction did not lead to any significant improvement in learner performance. However, he qualifies this by noting that higher-level students, and those with low motivation levels responded better to correction than lower-level learners, or those that were highly motivated. The implication seems to be that error correction can be effective in certain contexts.

Various studies of the effects of error correction on L2 acquisition have been carried out. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found there to be six main types of correction given by teachers to second language learners: elicitation, clarification requests, explicit correction, repetition, recasts and metalingistic feedback. Of these, recasts were the most frequent. Also interested in the effect these different types had, they observed the "uptake" and "repair" levels of each kind of correction. Uptake is defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997) as a

"…student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the initial utterance." (p.49)

It was found that a teacher's recasts led to the lowest levels of student repair, while elicitation led to the highest. The authors speculate as to the reason for the relative "failure" of recasts, stating "there is a great deal of ambiguity… as students are expected to sort out whether the teacher's intentions are concerned with form or meaning"(p.57). They conclude

"…our results suggest, when they do indeed provide feedback, teachers might want to consider the whole range of techniques they have at their disposal rather than relying so extensively on recasts…In so doing, teachers would ensure more opportunities for uptake following feedback." (p.56)

Sheen (2004) also found lower levels of uptake and repair for recasts. In contrast however, Oliver (2000) found evidence that recasts (implicit feedback) could be useful for second language learners, noting that "learners frequently use implicit feedback in their subsequent language production" (p.142).

The situation is further complicated by a number of factors that can affect corrective feedback and its effects. The aforementioned DeKeyser (1993) study found students' proficiency and motivation levels to affect the usefulness of error correction. Mackey et al (2003) found the age of learners can affect the frequency and type of feedback given. Further, Nicholas et al (2001) suggest that recasts may be more effective when students realize they are corrective, rather than meaning-based. Sheen (2004) also notes differences between students of different countries, implying cultural factors may be influential.

There has also been debate as to the validity of using uptake levels as reliable indicators of the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Mackey et al (2003), although acknowledging this, state:

"Although immediate incorporation of feedback or the production of modified output may not be a reliable indicator of the long term effects of negative feedback, the hypothesized benefits nonetheless make it an interesting object of investigation." (p.48)

However, Mackey and Philp (1998) found that recasts could have beneficial effects on language learning, even if uptake was not immediately present:

"…provided the level is appropriate, recasts may be used eventually by some learners, regardless of their immediate response to the recast." (p.352)

Clearly, the use of uptake as a tool in observing second language learners, and in relation, the usefulness of recasting student inaccuracies, is a complex issue. As Nicholas et al (2001) comment:

"…it is not yet possible to draw general conclusions about the contribution that recasts make in language development. There remain questions that cannot be answered on the basis of the current research." (p.748)

Methodology

Four different ninety minute EFL classes were observed (each class was only observed on one occasion) at a large higher education institution in the United Kingdom. Before each class, information was received from the teacher, including the class proficiency level, student nationalities, the age-range and information about the type of lesson to be taught.

The first class to be observed (class one) was a mid-intermediate group of twelve students within an 18-60 age-range. Class two was a pre-intermediate group of fourteen students in the 18-30 age-range. Class three was an advanced level group of nine students in the 20-35 age-range. Class four's proficiency level was upper-intermediate, and consisted of thirteen students mostly in the 18-30 age-range (there were two older females).

The data will be used to attempt answers to four main questions: 1) Which kinds of error correction are most frequent? 2) What were the levels of uptake for each correction type? 3) What factors may be influencing the type of error correction given by the teachers? And 4) What factors may have influenced the levels of uptake?

For purposes of classification, Lyster and Ranta (1997)'s six error correction types were used. These are as follows:

1. *Explicit correction*- the teacher clearly gives the student the correct form of the target language, while drawing the student`s attention to the error. For example:

    T: "How do you spell it?"

    S: "B-o-l-d."

    T: (shakes head)

    S: "B-a-l-d."

    T: "Yes, that's right."   (upper-intermediate group)

2. *Recasts*- the teacher repeats what the student has said, but correcting the error.

    S: "...about the minners (phonetic)…"

    T: "Miners, yes."   (mid-intermediate class)

3. *Clarification requests*- involve asking the student to clarify their previous utterance, implying that the teacher didn`t understand the utterance, or thinks it is incorrect.

    T: "Who is he?"

    S: "Sorry, she!"   (mid-intermediate class)

4. *Metalinguistic feedback*- usually involves the use of grammatical language ("verb," "clause"), and talks about the student`s utterance without actually providing the correction.

    S: "There will be many computer develops."

    T: "Develop is the verb, what's the noun?"

    S: "Developments?"

    T: "Yeah, good."   (advanced class)

5. *Elicitation*- whereby the teacher attempts to get the student to utter the correct form.

    T: "What's today's date?"

    S: "16th October."

    T: 16th…?"

    S: "16th of October."   (mid-intermediate class)

6. *Repetition*- Here, the teacher, repeats the student`s inaccurate utterance in such a way as to attempt to elicit self-correction from the student.

    S: "So, he can't…"

    T: "He can't?"

    S: "He couldn't."   (mid-intermediate class)

Both the frequency and level of uptake of each type were recorded (see appendix for observation sheets), as well as actual examples of student error and teacher feedback. Lyster and Ranta's (1997) definition of "uptake" (see literature review above) was used as a guide to what constituted learner uptake in the observed classes.

Findings

Of the six error correction types, by far the most frequent was explicit correction (with the exception of the advanced group), accounting for 41.5% of all recorded instances of error correction. Elicitation was the second most frequent (26%), followed by metalingual feedback (12%), clarification requests (8.5%), recasts (8.5%) and repetition (4%).

Error correction, overall, was more frequent for the lower level groups (pre-intermediate and mid-intermediate) with 27 and 36 recorded instances respectively, and considerably less frequent for the upper-intermediate and advanced groups (13 and 6 instances).

Across all classes, overall, levels of uptake were highest for the elicitation (21/22), clarification request (7/7) and repetition (3/3) corrective feedback types. Uptake for explicit correction was less frequent (22/34), as was also the case for metalingual feedback (4/10) and recasts (3/7).

Figure 1: Frequency of error correction types across the class levels with instances of uptake in parentheses

	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced	Total
Explicit correction	10 (8)	16 (10)	8 (4)	0 (0)	34
Elicitation	8 (8)	8 (8)	3 (2)	3 (3)	22
Metalinguistic feedback	2 (0)	5 (2)	1 (1)	2 (1)	10
Clarification request	3 (3)	2 (2)	2 (2)	0 (0)	7
Repetition	2 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3
Recast	2 (0)	4 (3)	0 (0)	1 (0)	7
Total	27 (21)	36 (26)	13 (9)	6 (4)	83

Figure 2: Total number of error correction types, and uptake
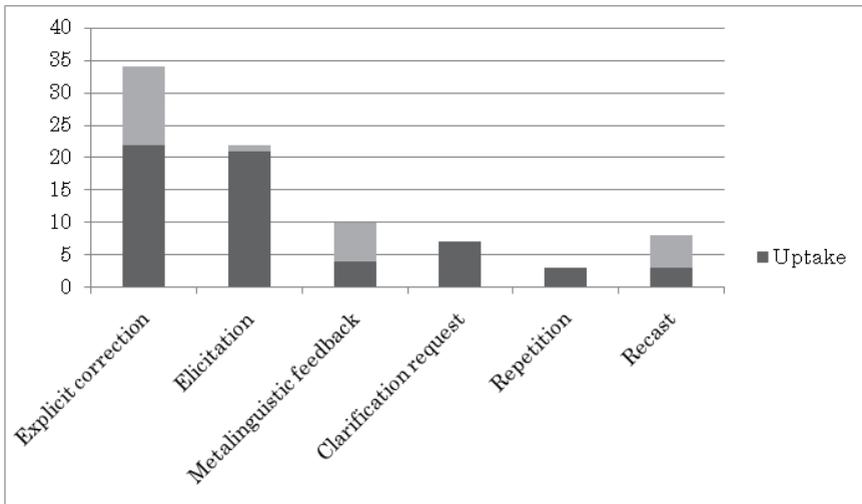
Figure 3: Instances of uptake/ total number of error corrections

	Uptake
Explicit correction	22/34 (64.7%)
Elicitation	21/22 (95.5%)
Metalinguistic feedback	4/10 (40%)
Clarification request	7/7 (100%)
Repetition	3/3 (100%)
Recast	3/7 (43%)

Discussion

It is important to note that the data from the observations, though interesting, must be qualified with a number of points. The sample is relatively small, with only four classes observed, and each class with relatively few students. Because of this, the number of instances of error correction is also relatively small. Therefore, on the basis of the data, it is difficult to extrapolate the findings of this study onto second language acquisition in a wider context.

In particular, the number of recorded instances of some of the correction types is so small, it would be misleading to talk of percentages of uptake (there were, for example, only three instances of repetition) and wider significance.

Further, due to the limitations of only one observer being present in the classes, and the speed of some of the interactions between the teachers and students, quite possibly some instances of learner uptake were not recognized and recorded by the observer. This is of course, despite every effort to capture feedback and uptake as accurately as possible. With these significant qualifications in mind however, the findings will be discussed in relation to the literature.

From the data, it can be seen that the explicit correction type was the most frequent (see figure 3). This was a little surprising, as a number of past studies (Lyster and

Ranta, 1997; Sheen, 2004) have found recasts to be the most common. In the Lyster and Ranta (1997) study, for example, 55% of all corrections were of the recast variety. In this study however, recasts were recorded only seven times (8.5%). For the lower-level classes this is perhaps less surprising. As Lyster and Ranta (1997) state:

"Providing feedback as part of a negotiated sequence…is of course feasible in L2 classrooms only where learners already possess an adequate level of proficiency." (p.58)

Forms of error correction that require self-repair therefore, may not always be possible for less able learners.

Although it is problematic to pinpoint any one reason for this, one possible explanation is age. Mackey et al (2003) found that the age of learners could affect the type of feedback given. In Lyster and Ranta (1997), for example, the learners were school-age children, while the students in this study were all adults. It may be tentatively suggested therefore, that teachers may be more willing to explicitly correct adults than children. Recasts, a more implicit form of negative feedback, may be thought more appropriate for young learners, due to its "gentler" nature.

The fact that a greater amount of corrective feedback was recorded for the lower levels may be reflective of those students producing more inaccurate target language (see figure 1). However, as the total number of mistakes made by students was not a focus of this study, this cannot be suggested with any certainty. It could also be due to teachers focusing more on linguistic form for the lower level students, while concentrating more on fluency for the higher level students. In fluency-focused class situations, teachers may be less willing to interrupt student interactions with corrective feedback. Again, this cannot be asserted with certainty.

It was found that, overall, levels of uptake were highest for the elicitation, clarification request and repetition forms of error correction (see figures 2 and 3).

This supports Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Sheen (2004), who found elicitation to be the most successful corrective feedback type, whereas recasts were less effective. An example of elicitation is shown below:

T: *"What do we call a travel company?"*

S: *"Agent."*

T: *"Agent, yes."*   (pre-intermediate class)

A teacher also asks for clarification:

S: *"A friend ask…"*

T: *"Ask or asks?"*

S: *"Asks."*   (upper-intermediate class)

The relative success in these error correction types leading to uptake may be due to encouraging the learner to self-repair their own inaccuracies. In this way, students may be more likely to "notice the gap" in their knowledge. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993), for example, suggest that "pushing" the learner in this way can lead to improved target language production. Lynch (1997) also proposes that encouraging the learner to self-correct is more effective than simply providing the correction. In this study, for example, students were often explicitly corrected:

S: *"We get the cops."*

T: *"No, we call the cops."*   (mid-intermediate class)

However, learner uptake for explicit correction was 64.7%, compared to almost 100% for elicitation. Again, it must be stressed that the small size of this study renders these proposed patterns inconclusive, though interesting nevertheless.

Conclusion

It appears from the literature, and also from this study, that the types of error correction that involve learner self-correction are more successful in encouraging uptake among students. Following Lyster and Ranta's (1997) suggestion therefore, this indicates that the use of a variety of feedback strategies by the teacher in the classroom may be more effective than an overreliance on recasts. In particular, eliciting self-repair appears to be an effective means of raising student awareness of inaccuracies in their L2 output. Use of error correction will vary depending on some of the varying factors discussed above however. For instance, lower-level students may lack sufficient proficiency to effectively respond to elicitation or clarification requests. However, when teaching lower-level learners, the use of more implicit correction techniques, such as recasting, may be of use in an effort to avoid damaging fragile learner confidence. Ensuring students are aware of a recast's corrective focus however, may yield greater uptake, as recommended by Nicholas et al (2001).

Due to time and size constraints, certain interesting areas of corrective feedback fell outside the scope of the observations. A useful follow-up would be to observe how teachers respond to different kinds of errors, and whether some errors are not corrected at all. The small size of this piece of research also limits the ability to generalize findings. A larger-scale study would help to address this issue.

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Appendix

Observation 1

	Example Language	Frequency	Uptake
Explicit correction		0	0
Recasts	S: "Laiypeople (phonetic)." T: "lay-people, yes."	1	0
Clarification Requests		0	0
Metalinguistic Feedback	T: "Don`t forget when using quotation marks to be consistent."	2	1
Elicitation	S: "There will be many computer develops." T: Develop is the verb, what`s the noun?" S: "Developments?" T: "Yeah, good."    S: "He has to be dead by now." T: "Has to be dead? Die! So what should we say?" S: "Should." T: "Yes, he should`ve died by now." S: "Cambridge." T: "The other one!" S: "Oxford." T: "Yes." S: "Theoretical…" T: "Theoreti…" S: "…cally."	3	3
Repetition		0	0
Explicit correction		0	0
Recasts	S: "Laiypeople (phonetic)." T: "lay-people, yes."	1	0
Clarification Requests		0	0
Metalinguistic Feedback	T: "Don`t forget when using quotation marks to be consistent."	2	1
Elicitation	S: "There will be many computer develops." T: Develop is the verb, what`s the noun?" S: "Developments?" T: "Yeah, good."    S: "He has to be dead by now." T: "Has to be dead? Die! So what should we say?" S: "Should." T: "Yes, he should`ve died by now." S: "Cambridge." T: "The other one!" S: "Oxford." T: "Yes." S: "Theoretical…" T: "Theoreti…" S: "…cally."	3	3
Repetition		0	0

Observation 2

	Example Language	Frequency	Uptake
Explicit correction	T: "No." S: "Why?" T: "Because that`s not what happens when you eat burgers."	8	4
	S: "He had a double chan." T: "Chin, chin."		
	T: "How do you spell it?" S: "B-o-l-d." T: (shakes head) S: "B-a-l-d." T: "Yes, that`s right."		
	T: "Freckles, good. Can you spell it?" S: "F-r-i…" T: " Not i…" S: "e." T: "Good."		
	S: "Crooked." (wrong pronunciation) T: " would say crooked."		
	S: "maybe a fresh relationship." T: "What?" S: "A fresh relationship." T: "you mean like a new relationship?" S: "Yes."		
	S: "A good peer." T: "Not a good peer, but a doormat."		
	T: (rubs out mistake).		
Recasts		0	0
Clarification Requests	T: "Was that a word we learnt yesterday?" S: "Er…no!" T: "Ok."	2	2
	S: "A friend ask…" T: "Ask or asks?" S: "Asks."		
Metalinguistic Feedback	T: "It`s uncountable."	1	1
Elicitation	T: "Thick would be ok, There`s another word we could use…"	3	2
	S: "He suddenly turned up one day…" T: "Clean…?" S: "Clean-shaven." T: Clean-shaven, yes."		
	T: "What letter is this?" S: "A." T: "Not "a" but…?"		
Repetition		0	0

Observation 3

	Example Language	Frequency	Uptake
Explicit correction	T: "memory, not mind."	16	10
Recasts	T: "It`s *biography*."	4	3
	S: "We get the cops." T: "No, we call cops."		
	T: "You can use the word *live*, not *lived*."		
	T: "I would put *non-fiction*."		
	S: "…about the minners (ph)…" T: "miners, yes."		
	S: "I meaned…" T: "meant…"		
	S: "If he won, the giant will leave…" T: "If he won, the giant would have to leave, yes."		
Clarification Requests	T: "Is it northern Italy, or southern Italy?"	2	2
	T: "Who is he?" S: "Sorry, she!"		
Metalinguistic Feedback	T: "Where is the stress?" S: "*Artist*." T: "*Artist*, yes, that`s right."	5	2
	S: so we don`t say 13 years old boy?" T: It becomes and adjective, so not plural- 13 year old boy."		
	T: "We don`t use the verb to be here."		
	T: "This is a conditional."		
Elicitation	T: "What`s today`s date?" S: "16th October." T: "16th…?" S: "16th *of* October."	8	8
	T: "If it`s real life, what do we call it?"		
	T: "Is it today of the 1950s?"		
	T: "was he a monk or a farmer?" S: "Sorry, a farmer."		
Repetition	S: "So, he can`t…" T: "He can`t?" S: "He couldn`t…"	1	1

Observation 4

	Example Language	Frequency	Uptake
Explicit correction	T: "I wouldn`t use *lived* Tasuke."	10	8
Recasts	T: "When you get to Italy- Roma, but here, it`s called Rome."		
	T: "Wheelchair, not armchair."		
	S: I drive a ship…" T: "We say sail, or captain a ship."		
	S: "I would leave tomorrow…" T: " You *will* leave tomorrow, yes."	2	0
	S: "70 pounds for 11 days." T: "700 pounds for 11 days…"		
Clarification Requests	T: "You mean to work with other people?" S: "Yeah."	3	3
	T: "You mean like a small horse?"		
Metalinguistic Feedback	T: "What`s the verb?"	2	0
	T: "Remember, it`s an adjective."		
Elicitation	T: "What do we call a travel company?" S: "Agent." T: "Agent, yes."	8	8
	T: "Not Captain Nelson, but…? S: "Lord Nelson."		
	T: "Yes, but what did we see her doing at the end?"		
	T: "And if you`re in a car? S: "Carsick." T: "Good."		
	T: "And the word is…?"		
	T: "Now you don`t drive a ship, what do you do?"		
Repetition	S: "I want to go to Glasgow." T: "You want to go to *Glasgow*?"	2	2