ESL Teachers' Use of Corrective Feedback and Its Effect on Learners' Uptake

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The efficacy of various forms of corrective feedback for second language acquisition (SLA) is a subject that has provoked considerable debate. The interaction of a complex yet interlocking host of variables, such as the method of corrective feedback chosen by the teacher, the proficiency of the learner in the target language, and the broader learning context can make assessment of the relative merits and limitations of individual strategies an unenviable endeavor. A previous study examined in this paper, attempted to bring much-needed clarity to this debate via examination of the various corrective feedback strategies employed in the instruction of beginner-intermediate English as a second language (ESL) learners. Specifically, that study found that metalinguistic feedback and repetition resulted in successful uptake and that teachers tended to correct mainly phonological errors. The most frequent forms of correction employed were explicit correction followed by metalinguistic clues for intermediate students, and finally by clarification requests and recasts for beginners. This investigation aimed to present a critical review of the findings of the study in an effort to examine the confluence of utility and limiting factors when applying this theoretical framework to an ESL context for SLA.

The debate over the relative effectiveness of corrective feedback strategies on learner linguistic uptake is influenced by a host of interconnected factors. These influences include but are not limited to one's perspective on the nature of language acquisition (be it input or output driven), and the type of knowledge acquired, such as implicit/procedural and explicit declarative (Ellis, 2015). The complex and nuanced nature of this debate has occasionally led to conflicting evidence as to the effectiveness of certain feedback strategies due to their application in

dissimilar learning contexts, fluctuating levels of learner proficiency, and the forms of errors that resulted in correction (Ellis, 2015). It is this lack of clarity that Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) sought to address via investigation into the effects of diverse feedback strategies within an English as a second language (ESL) classroom environment, studying two groups of participant-learners possessing varying levels of ESL proficiency. Additionally, a secondary aim of their inquiry was to ascertain the types of errors that teachers chose to correct. Against this background, this investigation presents a critical review of Gitsaki and Althobaiti's (2010) framework and conclusions in an effort to identify the relative convergence of benefits and limitations associated with their theoretical application.

The study by Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) falls firmly into the cognitive-interactionist school of thought with regards to the process of second language acquisition (SLA), stemming from Krashen's input hypothesis (1985), Long's interaction hypothesis (1996), Swain's output hypothesis (1985, 1995), and more recently, Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (2001). Essentially, the cognitive interactionist approach identifies the facilitation of L2 acquisition through the relationship between the cognitive constructs of noticing and attention; and the process of students encountering input, engaging in interaction, receiving feedback and producing output (Ellis, 2015). Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) attempted to build on this body of research via an investigation of the effectiveness of various feedback strategies: elicitation, recasts, explicit correction, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and modeling. Specifically, they sought clarification of the following issues:

1. "How often do ESL teachers provide different types of interactional feedback to students who are in different levels of English language proficiency?"

2. "Which types of interactional feedback lead to learner uptake most frequently?"

3. "Which errors (phonological, lexical, or grammatical) do ESL teachers prefer to correct, or what type(s) of feedback do they use with specific error categories?"

(Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010, p. 201)

Primary data measures were administered in an Australian English language school with participants consisting of 28 ESL students from various nationalities, including Spain, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, France, the Republic of Korea, Iran, Columbia, and Italy. Participants were then divided into two groups: 14 intermediate level students in class A and 14 beginner level students in class B. Each class was taught by a different native English-speaking teacher. Moreover, all classes were observed and audio recorded over a period of two days, with error correction and uptake taxonomy processed by means of a rubric detailed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). The study found that metalinguistic feedback and repetition resulted in successful uptake and that teachers tended to correct mainly phonological errors. The most frequent forms of correction used were explicit correction followed by metalinguistic clues for intermediate students and explicit correction followed by clarification requests and recasts for beginners.

Strengths of the Study

First, the study's goal of filling gaps in existing literature describing corrective feedback and ability is laudable. In my teaching practice, I have often contended with the relative merits and drawbacks of conflicting methods of feedback, particularly with regard to lower-level groups. The study's findings on greater efficacy of explicit feedback for intermediate level learners, as opposed to lower level students, positively correlates with my practice. Frequently, in lower level classes, excessive correction may lead to a disruption in the flow of communication and fluency-focused lessons. It may also lead to an undesirable and unproductive tangent as the students attempt to understand why, for example, a particular grammatical form is appropriate. Students can sometimes struggle as they try to follow a specific correction in relation to their currently underdeveloped interlanguage. This may lead to extraneous cognitive load, which Paas et al. (2010) identified as a significant obstacle to language acquisition.

By accurately defining these linguistic phenomena and clearly articulating several of the issues faced by ESL practitioners, the study provides a compelling

account of descriptive power. Additionally, Gitsaki and Althobaiti's (2010) continuous reflection on previous studies is a notable strength, specifically linking their findings to supporting or contrasting research. As noted previously, the study aimed to build on the body of work created by the cognitive-interactionist school of thought, with their investigation containing references to relevant studies throughout. This comparative reflection provides a certain degree of external validity. For example, Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) highlight how the findings of their inquiry that relate to the developmental readiness of intermediate level students to benefit from corrective feedback were supported by several studies in the field of SLA, including Philp (2003), Ammar et al. (2005); Ammar and Spada, (2006); and Trofimovich et al. (2007). Further, the study actively sought to answer hypotheses posed by Lyster and Ranta (1997) relating to the role of student ability in learner uptake and the types of corrective feedback utilized by teachers.

Arguably, it is possible to draw practical implications from the externally validated findings provided by this study. Given Gitsaki and Althobaiti's (2010) conclusions regarding the inefficient nature of corrective feedback (particularly more implicit forms) when applied to students with low comprehension, it is reasonable to suppose that it is best to be more judicious with the types of errors one decides to correct during communication-focused lessons. In practice, this might involve focusing more on fluency and choosing not to draw specific errors to the student's attention if they fail to relate directly to the targeted language functions of the lesson. During intermediate level classes, however, it may be more productive, both in terms of uptake and lesson flow, to provide feedback on a greater variety of student errors.

Limitations of the Study

The multiple aims of the study are problematic. Although one stated purpose is to "explore the effectiveness of the different feedback types across two different proficiency levels in an ESL classroom environment," the authors also aim to "reveal the types of errors that teachers choose to provide corrective feedback for" (Gitsaki & Althobaiti's, 2010, p. 201). Given the prevailing controversy

over the effectiveness of conflicting forms of feedback (Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Ellis, 2015), it is perhaps unwise to attempt to extrapolate general conclusions relating to the effectiveness of various feedback strategies if the individual teacher-researchers involved in the study were free to employ multiple types of error correction at their discretion. As Ellis (2015) notes: "different types of corrective feedback may affect learning in different ways" (p. 184). By failing to strictly control the type of error correction given to students, measurement of the effectiveness of a given form of feedback may prove arduous.

This challenge calls the explanatory power of the study into question. By allowing participating teachers to correct errors as they saw fit, it is likely that the analytical waters were to some extent muddied, making it difficult to assess accurately *why* corrective feedback was or was not successful. Ellis (2015) famously highlighted the complexity of this issue by addressing the controversy over the relative effectiveness of input-providing and output-prompting corrective feedback strategies. He notes that whilst research by Lyster and Saito (2010) found that output-prompting strategies were more productive, this may be due to the fact that these prompts included four separate strategies: repetition of error, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, and elicitation. Conversely, input-providing recasts amount to an isolated procedure; hence, "it is possible that the greater effect for prompts is simply because many strategies are more effective than one" (Ellis, 2015, p. 162). As a consequence, the study's internal validity is weakened as a result of the simultaneous examination of conflicting goals within a single inquiry. Given this failure to adequately control for certain variables and the subsequent (arguably) compromised nature of the results, it is therefore doubtful that we can infer robust claims regarding the quality of SLA and corrective feedback from the study.

This issue is compounded by the fact that the investigation sought to ascertain the effects of feedback on students of different proficiency levels. While proficiency remains a key vector during contemplation of feedback strategy effectiveness, language uptake resulting from feedback is an inherently complex process, influenced by a host of individual operations. These variances may include but are not limited to language anxiety, working memory, and

motivation (Ellis, 2015). This point may be particularly pertinent given the presence of various learner nationalities during primary data measures. It is well noted that both the acculturation and socio-educational models highlight the significance of sociocultural factors with regards to SLA (Ellis, 2015). The impact of individual cultural and social integrative attitudes on language acquisition, however, is not addressed by the study.

Finally, a potential methodological weakness of the inquiry is the categorization of linguistic uptake. Successful uptake was defined by Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) as dependent on whether participants were capable of repeating a feedback corrected utterance or if they were able to use the altered form in a longer statement. While it is certainly possible that students performing these actions present evidence of uptake, it is also possible to argue that merely repeating a teacher-provided correction or using the corrected form at a later stage during the lesson does not demonstrate uptake adequately. Thus, follow-up assessment is necessary if the researchers are to lay claim to valid learner uptake. To their credit, Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) acknowledge this frailty and call for researchers to address the issue in future studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the earlier paper provided a valuable contribution to the debate over corrective feedback with regard to SLA. Of principal note are implications for the differing extent and nature of feedback provided to learners, based on their level of linguistic proficiency. It is, however, possible to identify certain limitations of the study. Given the diverse cultural makeup of the students who participated and the various corrective strategies in the lessons being employed at the discretion of the two teachers, it is perhaps reasonable to caution against extrapolating firm conclusions from the study. The interaction of complex factors such as ability, cultural differences, anxiety, and individual motivation potentially muddy the analytical waters. These issues are further complicated by the inherent difficulties in accurately identifying student uptake. The prior researchers are to be commended for helping to elucidate this area of SLA research. It is advised that future research into the usage of corrective feedback with regards

to ESL contexts endeavor to control for the type of feedback given to learners of different abilities. It is also necessary to account for—to the greatest extent possible—socio-cultural factors among the participants. It is hoped that by more closely controlling for these variables, researchers may be able to obtain greater confidence in the theoretical justification for the practical application of various corrective strategies within the classroom.

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