

Corrective Feedback and Pedagogy: Two Activities in an Online Curriculum

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Introduction

El Tatawy (2002) provides Schachter's definitions for 'corrective feedback, negative evidence, and negative feedback' as 'three terms used respectively in the fields of language teaching, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology'. In this paper, corrective feedback (henceforth referred to as 'CF' and defined as 'responses to learner errors') will be the dominant term. The focus is mainly on CF in terms of pedagogy.

Literature Review

The jury may still be out on which types of CF are most effective, but there is consensus for its necessity. Nassaji and Swain (2000) claim CF 'may be needed for rejecting false hypotheses from particular sources and (for) preventing certain kinds of over-generalisation from becoming part of the L2 learner's interlanguage'. As Panova and Lyster (2002) point out via a number of researchers, 'learners may require negative evidence (i.e., information about ungrammaticality) in the form of either feedback on error or explicit instruction... in order to modify their interlanguage'. They further state that CF can 'enable learners to notice the gap between their interlanguage forms and target language forms'. They note that the feedback must be 'sufficiently salient' to be effective. Under the right conditions then, a cognitive comparison may 'trigger a destabilization and restructuring of the target language grammar'. 'The true correction' is the term El Tatawy (2002) borrows from Chaudron to indicate when CF 'succeeds in modifying the learner's interlanguage rule so that the error is eliminated from further production'.

Over the years, researchers have been hashing out the role of CF in instruction. Ellis (2006) considers: (a) whether the feedback is implicit or explicit and (b) whether the feedback is input or output based. As a response to learner error, implicit feedback is masked. It can be a *recast* 'which

reformulates a deviant utterance correcting it while keeping the same meaning' (e.g., S: She go home. T: She *went* home? S: Yeah... She went home.) *a request for clarification* (e.g., S: She go home. T: *What?* S: I mean... She went home.) or *a repetition of error* (e.g., S: She go home. T: *Go home?* S: I mean... She went home.) Explicit feedback includes direct correction, explanation (as a metalinguistic process) and elicitation. Ellis (2006) cites both Carroll and Swain (1993) and Lyster (2004) as they provide 'some evidence that explicit feedback is more effective in both eliciting the learner's immediate correct use of the structure and in eliciting subsequent correct use'. As a counter argument, Ellis goes on to explain that implicit feedback 'is more compatible with the focus-on-form approach' and that 'it ensures that learners are more likely to stay focused on meaning'. It seems likely both implicit and explicit feedback can be successful (on specific but not necessarily the same occasions) if applied with optimal skill and timing according to the learners developmental stage. The problem lies in defining and addressing the countless potential occasions in the L2 process.

Regarding (b) whether the feedback is input or output based, Ellis states: '*Input-based feedback* models the correct form for the learner (e.g., by means of a recast). *Output-based feedback* elicits production of the correct form from the learner (e.g., by means of a request for clarification)'. Though this model describes CF in different terms, the problem remains: how, when and how often to apply the various kinds of feedback for optimal learning. The answers become more complex as the number of students increase and their levels show greater variance within a single class.

Psycholinguistic variables, such as individual learner aptitude, attitude and anxiety (the three 'As') also contribute to complexity.

CF can have a metalinguistic (reflective) function as well considering that 'using language to reflect on language produced by others or the self, mediates second language learning' (Swain 2007). For example, learners can consult a grammar text, the internet or a teacher to inform themselves about specific grammatical, lexical or phonological rules.

Ellis (2007a) defines CF 'episodes' as 'comprised of a trigger, the feedback move and a potential response from the student', also known as (optionally) uptake.

T: When were you in school?

L: Yes. I stand in the first row? (trigger)

T: You stood in the first row. (corrective move)

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

Panova and Lyster (2002) draw attention to uptake with repair and uptake with needs-repair in relation to a study by Lyster and Ranta (1997) The key finding was that 'uptake was not considered to be an instance of learning, although the authors speculated that certain types of uptake (i.e., those including learner-generated repair) are likely to benefit the development of target language accuracy'. As Ellis (2006) points out: 'uptake is not the same as acquisition'.

Finally, there's the sociocultural perspective which is attributed to Vygotsky. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is designated as the learning potential between what learners are capable of doing themselves and what is 'developmentally beyond them'. Interlocutors then 'scaffold the learner into producing new grammatical forms'(Ellis 2007b). As learners are assisted by others in the social environment, they learn what they are developmentally prepared for and this 'development involves movement from other to self-regulation' (Ellis 2007a). Ellis (2007a) summarised Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) seminal study in which 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'. We could predict that first instances of CF for specific learner errors would be more explicit and that the corrective move becomes more implicit as the learner gradually adjusts interlanguage. Ellis adds, quite correctly, that 'a teacher needs considerable skill to determine the appropriate feedback needed' as the acquisition process develops. Scaffolding then, in terms of L2 acquisition, *could* be seen as CF (in total) in the zone of proximal development.

Controversy

Ellis (2007) has outlined the controversies in using CF:

(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).

Perhaps (4) and (5) are of the greatest interest. For example, 'for L2 learners whose grammar still needs to encompass the target rule, the correction is more often than not imperceptible, or perceived as merely an alternative to their own utterance (El Tatawy 2002). For example, a recast by the teacher for 'She went to home' being 'She went home' could be considered an alternative rather than an actual correction. A number of other misunderstandings could occur which could frustrate the learner. Further, although uptake may be evident, there is no way to conclude that the target form has been acquired. Therefore, durability is not a guaranteed result of CF implementation.

Pedagogical Applications

Closed questions (where a pre-determined answer is sought) introduce grammatical (and to a lesser extent, lexical) chunks of language (whether they be discrete items or part of an abstract system within a language) and are limited in cognitive scope. An expansion on these question forms is necessary to facilitate open-ended questions. I will use the terms **Guided Diversion/GDV** (for beginners without conversation skills) and **Guided Discussion/GDS** (for 'minimal discourse potential' and higher) as a teacher's means to expand upon closed questions.

Two activities in [The Language Works online English classroom](#) (Brockley 2006) will be considered in relation to CF in young learner efl classroom settings. The first is a closed vocabulary activity (WN-Noun Wizard) and will be used to explore GDV in terms of CF and the second is a closed syntax activity (PT-Photo Talk) and will be used to explore GDS.

Beyond Krashen, the idea of 'input + 1' is perhaps relevant in any learning environment (whether it be tennis or chess). Learning something suggests we are building knowledge gradually (hence, '+1'). This idea is essential in order to form appropriate open-ended questions for specific students or

groups. The essential consideration ALWAYS must be: Does input +1 match the learner's

developmental level, the in-built syllabus: Are they ready to learn it?

Here is a **GDV** example (from: [WN-09-People-One](#)): (see flash file—first slide):

T: Who are they?

S: They are policeman.

T: Policeman? (repetition) (other students are now scaffolding, 'policeMEN!')

S: Policemen.

T: What? (with gestures indicating a request for a full learner recast)

S: They are policemen.

(End of closed question—learner is developmentally ready for a diversion but NOT discussion)

T: Where are they? (open question—the image has a white background—learner must imagine)

S: Police office...

T: Not 'office...' (explicit feedback) (other students scaffold 'store' and 'station')

S: Police store.

T: Store? (repetition) (other students scaffold 'station')

S: Police station.

T: At the police station. Repeat! (very explicit) (introducing the phrase for practice but not demanding independent production)

All Ss: at the police station!

Here is a **GDS** example (from: [Photo Talk--PT4-3](#)): (see flash file—first slide):

T: Where are they?

S: They are at the park.

(End of closed question—learner is developmentally ready for simple discussion)

T: Where are you?

S: I am classroom. (scaffolding by others—'in' and 'in the')

T: Sorry... What? (request for clarification) (more scaffolding—some wrong forms—'at')

S: I in... no... I am in classroom?

T: Hmm... (with disapproving facial expression) (the main scaffold is now 'the')

S: I am in the classroom.

T: Bingo! One point for your team. Where is your mom? (addressed to another student)

S: She is in the home.

T: *The* home? (repetition + odd facial expression) (other learners scaffold 'a,' 'no *the*' and 'no *in*')

S: She is in home.

T: *In* home? (repetition + odd facial expression) (other learners scaffold 'at,' and 'no *in*')

S: She is AT home.

T: O.K., O.K., You've got it.

The movement from GDV to GDS is a benchmark in a beginner's L2 acquisition process—from almost nothing (nouns) to something (phrases/sentences). It reveals a learner's willingness and ability to move beyond naming objects and to begin describing self and others in terms of actions and states. CF and scaffolding are essential to shape the developing interlanguage to accord more

accurately with target language structures. From this point on, interlanguage becomes more and more complex, exhibiting variability and acquisition sequencing. During the process of CF, the teacher must decide/intuit (instantly) 'what' and 'how much of what' to introduce in order to match the learner's inbuilt syllabus. Large groups and multi-level learner groups, as mentioned previously, require sociocultural methods (scaffolding *and* other forms of collaboration such as encouragement) in order to create a facilitative learning environment. What is certain about CF is that the process itself could be considered an art—to be able to give students the golden apple of appropriate feedback consistently, in the proper instances *and* at the right time in relation to their developmental level, demands a high level of teacher proficiency.

Readings and Media

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