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CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A META-ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Corrective feedback, as a crucial part of classroom interaction, has emerged as a significant topic in foreign language teaching. Due to its significant role in facilitating language learning, a body of research has been done with regard to it. This paper attempts to offer a systematic meta-analysis of previous studies on oral corrective feedback in EFL classrooms which address issues such as the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback, the major factors affecting the effectiveness of corrective feedback, the optimal time to provide feedback, students' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards it and so forth, with a view to helping researches gain a more comprehensive understanding of the development and latest achievements of studies on oral corrective feedback. Pedagogical implications are also offered based on the findings of previous literature, and hopefully the study would provide some insights into the research on corrective feedback.

KEYWORDS: Corrective Feedback, Foreign Language Teaching, Efl Classrooms, Meta-Analysis

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the process of learning a foreign language, students are likely to commit errors from time to time. Therefore, corrective feedback occurs frequently in EFL classrooms and has been deemed as an essential part of classroom interaction. For decades, corrective feedback has always been one of the most primary concerns in the area of foreign language teaching research. Despite a few researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1985; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 1999) overlook or even deny the role of corrective feedback, there seems to be a widespread consensus among the majority of researchers and foreign language teachers with regard to the significant role played by corrective feedback in EFL classrooms. In retrospect, a number of meta-studies or empirical studies (Russell & Spada, 2006; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Lyster & Saito, 2010) have suggested that corrective feedback is of great value in language pedagogy. According to Long (1997), corrective feedback can promote language

development because it can give learners the opportunity to compare their output with target language forms. In other words, by providing corrective feedback, teachers are able to direct students' attention to their errors committed, so as to help them modify their output (Schmidt, 1990) and hence move forward along the interlanguage continuum.

Corrective feedback can be broadly classified into written corrective feedback and oral corrective feedback. The former refers to responses to errors in the written work of a student while the latter means feedback on verbal language errors committed by language learners. However, this article will mainly focus on the research on oral corrective feedback due to the following reason. Over the past few decades, in EFL classrooms, there has witnessed a shift of emphasis from language forms to language use, that is to say, the importance of cultivating students' communicative competence has been much more highlighted than before. In the meantime, students have more chances to interact with their peers and teachers in EFL classrooms. Accordingly, the issue of oral corrective feedback has also obtained substantial attention. Therefore, this article attempts to examine previous studies on oral corrective feedback systemically in the hope of informing readers of the development and academic results achieved in this field. More specifically, in this article, the author will explore the concept and theoretical basis of oral corrective feedback respectively, then presents key issues related to the study of corrective feedback, some of which are controversial, such as when is the optimal time to provide feedback, which type of feedback is more conducive to foreign language development, and what are the major factors that could possibly have an impact on the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Finally, the study also points out the direction for future language pedagogy and language teaching research.

2.0 DEFINING CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Corrective feedback, also recognized as “error correction” “negative feedback” or “negative evidence”, is an important technique employed when treating learners' errors. A variety of linguists have attempted to give their own definitions towards this term from diverse perspectives. For example, Chaudron (1988) deemed “treatment of error” as “any teacher behavior following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error” (p. 150). This definition has captured the basic property and function of corrective feedback, yet it is only limited to teacher's behaviors. As a matter of fact, students can not only receive feedback from their teachers but also their peers. According to Lightbown & Spada (1999), corrective feedback refers to “any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect” (p. 172). Compared with Chaudron's one, this definition is more comprehensive since it involves all kinds of responses that help students to notice their faults. When attempting to define corrective feedback, scholars might differ subtly in terms of their linguistic expressions and emphasis, yet their basic understanding towards it is virtually the same. Two key points about corrective feedback can be summarized as follows. Firstly, in terms of nature, corrective feedback means responses to students' errors. Secondly, with regard to its function, it serves to enable students to notice the incorrect or inappropriate use of the target language.

It should be noted that corrective feedback is invariably associated with the term “learner uptake”, which was defined as “a learner's utterance 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

learner's initial utterance" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p.49). In the model put forward by Lyster & Ranta (1997), learner uptake covers three types: repair, needs-repair and no-uptake. Repair happens when a learner modifies an ill-formed utterance properly. Needs-repair means that the student responds to the instructor somehow but there is no modification or a failure of modification of the original error. No uptake refers to a situation that the student does not react to the teacher's feedback but continues his or her communication. It is obvious that the ultimate purpose of corrective feedback is the successful uptake of learners, that is to say, students could repair their output and improve their accuracy of language use.

2.1 Theoretical rationales of oral corrective feedback

As mentioned in the part of introduction, in the past few decades, a number of studies have been conducted which have demonstrated the vital importance of oral corrective feedback in facilitating interlanguage development. The existing studies have revealed that there are primarily four theoretical rationales with regard to the research on oral corrective feedback, which are the Interaction Hypothesis, the Output Hypothesis, the Noticing Hypothesis, and the Sociocultural Theory.

Interaction Hypothesis was proposed in 1991 by Long who placed emphasis on the role of interaction in second language acquisition. According to Ellis (1991), there are two major claims about the role of interaction in second language acquisition in Interaction Hypothesis: "(1) comprehensible input is necessary for L2 acquisition; and (2) modifications to the interactional structure of conversations that take place in the process of negotiating a communication problem help make input comprehensible to a L2 learner" (p.4). It can be seen that oral corrective feedback is able to provide learners ample opportunities for negotiation of meaning in classroom interaction and hence contributes to learner's uptake.

The Output Hypothesis was developed by Swain (1985). It holds that language input alone is insufficient to improve learner's competence. In order to ensure the success of language acquisition, it is advisable for students to produce output in time while receiving input. Swain (1993) argued that output serves the hypothesis testing function. Second language learning is a continuous process of hypothesis testing of target language. Learners test their accuracy of grammar through feedback from their teacher or peers, thus gradually facilitating their interlanguage development.

Schmidt (1990) put forward the Noticing Hypothesis, which is also of great importance in second language acquisition. This hypothesis maintains that students cannot learn grammatical features unless they notice them. In other words, the key to language development is that students pay attention to language forms. By receiving corrective feedback from teachers, students are able to notice the gap between their own interlanguage system and target language, which is conducive to the development of interlanguage (Schmidt & Forta, 1986).

In recent years, some other scholars have adopted a new theoretical basis to study corrective feedback, that is, Sociocultural Theory, put forward by Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) argued that through social interaction with the "more knowledgeable other", a person who are more learned competent than themselves, children are able improve their ability of working out problems

independently. According to this theory, oral corrective feedback can provide opportunities for students to interact and learn from their students. However, it must be tailored to the needs of individual learners (Lantolf, 2000). It is necessary for teachers to provide scaffolding activities around learners' zone of proximal development. Only in this way, can they promote students' comprehension of knowledge.

2.2 Research on oral corrective feedback

Previous studies on oral corrective feedback, especially empirical studies, primarily concentrate on four topics, namely, the optimal time to provide corrective feedback, the effectiveness of different types of oral corrective feedback, factors affecting the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback and learners' and teachers' attitudes towards oral corrective feedback as well.

2.2.1 *The optimal time to provide corrective feedback*

In EFL classrooms, teachers can either offer feedback immediately following the student's error during a communicative task or correct it after the task is finished. The former is referred to as immediate feedback, while the latter is called delayed feedback. Despite that a number of studies have been done to examine which of the two is more helpful to student's uptake, no consensus has been achieved among scholars. Some researchers (e.g. Bartram & Walt, 1991; Harmer, 2007) don't think teachers should interfere with learners' communicative activities by arguing that teachers should pay more attention to fluency rather than accuracy when students speak. Similarly, Willis & Willis (2007) were also not in favor of providing immediate feedback by arguing if errors are pointed out during the task, learners' focus can be drawn from meaning to form, which is not helpful to the cultivation of students' communicative competence. However, some other scholars (Allwright, 1975; Doughty, 2001; Yoshida, 2008; Lee, 2013) held a positive attitude towards immediate feedback. Doughty (2001) maintained that teachers should provide feedback immediately so that learners can have the opportunity to compare the erroneous form with the correct one. Empirical studies have also been conducted to verify the value of immediate feedback. For example, a recent study conducted by Li, Zhu & Ellis (2016) asked different groups students to complete a story-telling task by using English passive voice, a totally new grammatical rule to them. The results have suggested that immediate feedback had an advantage over delayed feedback although the difference was only significant in terms of learner's explicit grammatical knowledge (Li et al., 2016). Based on these previous findings, it can be seen that no decisive conclusion can be drawn with regard to whether immediate feedback or delayed feedback is more conducive to language learning. Their effects are constrained by many language-internal and language-external variables which deserve further investigation in future research.

2.2.2 *Effectiveness of different types of oral corrective feedback*

With regard to the classification of feedback, there is no uniform criterion among scholars. In other words, different researchers follow a variety of ways of classification which reflect their different points of departure and research purposes. Lyster & Ranta (1997) distinguished six types of oral corrective feedback in French immersion classrooms, namely, explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, elicitation and repetition. This classification has been well recognized and widely accepted by scholars in the field of second language learning and teaching. Explicit correction happens when the teacher directly points out that the student's error

and then provides the correct language form. Recasts mean that the teacher repeats the learner's utterance but gets his or her error corrected. Clarification requests refer to a situation when the teacher asks the student to reformulate his or her utterance by using phrases such as "Pardon?" "I don't understand" etc. By metalinguistic clues, it is meant that the teacher points out the error by providing explanations and comments related to student's error. Elicitation means the teacher strategically pauses for a while to motivate the student to correct by themselves. Repetition, as its names shows, means the teacher repeats the student's ill-formed sentence. It may be accompanied by the emphasis on the intonation of the error. Since all of the last four types aim to motivate learners to make self-correction, they are then merged into one category named prompts (Lyster & Mori, 2006). By prompts, it is meant that the teacher only provides learners with some clues and encourages them to make correction on their own.

There is also another taxonomy of corrective feedback: explicit feedback and implicit feedback. The former directly points out the error in the learner's output and provides the learner with the corresponding correct form; while the latter motivates the learner to correct errors on their own. Thus, based on this distinction, explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback belong to explicit feedback, while recasts, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, elicitation and repetition fall into implicit feedback. There have been many studies that attempt to explore the characteristics of these two different feedback strategies. It is suggested that both of the two strategies have their distinctive advantages. For instance, explicit feedback is more effective in improving learner's language accuracy and (Sheen & Ellis, 2011). While implicit feedback is conducive to the cultivation learner's ability of self-learning (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Despite there is a general consensus that providing feedback is conducive to learner's language development, it still remains controversial regarding which type of oral corrective feedback is more feasible and effective in EFL classrooms. There has been a body of research (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Yang & Lyster, 2010) probing into the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback, especially recasts and prompts. The results of some studies (Sheen 2004, 2006; Llinares & Lyster, 2014) have revealed that the most frequently used type of oral feedback in EFL classrooms is recasts. Despite their high frequency, recasts are usually associated with a relatively low rate of uptake in learners. In contrast, prompts are borne out to be more effective than recasts by a body of research. Lyster & Satio (2010) employed the two kinds of feedback strategies respectively in form-focused classroom and suggested that prompts were more helpful for students when learning the gender of French vocabulary. They also argued that while recasts can provide the right language form for second language learners, they are not able to encourage learners to self-correct. Also, according to Lyster (1998), recasts, as a rather implicit form of corrective feedback, might make learners fail to notice it but rather mistake them as teacher's evaluation on content. In contrast, prompts can help learners modify their language output on their own so as to facilitate language learning more effectively. Yang & Lin (2012) also achieved similar results whose study found that prompts are more conducive for first-year English majors to acquire the past tense. As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of these different types of oral corrective feedback is also subject to the influence of other constraining factors, as will be illustrated in next section.

2.2.3 Factors affecting the effect of oral corrective feedback

The factors which affect the effect of oral corrective feedback have also been drawing researchers' attention for a long time. There are a number of factors examined which include individual factors, target language forms and so forth. Individual factors mainly refer to the personal traits of students which cover aspects such as learner's age, motivation, personality, language proficiency, degree of anxiety, etc.

Firstly, anxiety is a significant factor affecting the effect of corrective feedback. According to Krashen (1998), pushing learners to produce correct target form by giving them corrective feedback might hinder language learning by resulting in anxiety among learners. Especially when learners are not aware of the purpose and role of corrective feedback in facilitating their interlanguage development, corrective feedback can increase their level of anxiety (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). It is found that students with different degree of anxiety tend to benefit from different types of corrective feedback. As suggested by Rassaei's (2015) study, learners with low degree of anxiety benefited from both metalinguistic clues and recasts although the effect of metalinguistic feedback on their development was more evident. Conversely, the learners with high degree of anxiety benefited more from recasts than metalinguistic clues.

Additionally, the proficiency level of learners can also exert influence on the effectiveness of corrective feedback. There is a consensus among many scholars (e.g., Mackey & Philp, 1998; Philp, 2003; Ammar & Spada, 2006; Li, 2014) that more proficient language learners would adapt themselves to various kinds of corrective feedback more easily. In contrast, for those low-proficiency learners, they seem not to benefit a lot from corrective feedback, especially the implicit ones. The reason may lie in the fact they are deficient in the knowledge required for self-correction (Long 2007). The results are in line with Ammar & Spada's (2006) study which probed into the interface between feedback type and proficiency and suggested that for learners whose pretest scores were low, recasts were more effective than prompts. But for learners whose pretest scores were high, the two types of corrective feedback were equally effective.

Lastly, different target forms will also lead to different effect of corrective feedback. That is to say, learning different aspects of language will bring about different feedback effects. Kartchava & Ammar's (2014) study compared three feedback strategies (recasts, prompts and mixed) and their effectiveness in the acquisition of the past tense of declarative sentences and interrogative sentences. It was revealed that French college students acquired the declarative sentences better than yes-no questions in English given the same kind of feedback. In light of this study, it can be seen that, in most cases, the easier the target language form is, the more effective the corrective feedback will be.

2.2.4 Students' and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about oral corrective feedback

Since students' attitudes have a direct impact on foreign language learning achievement, therefore, many researchers are interested in this issue. Generally speaking, students tend to have a strong belief on the positive role played by corrective feedback in foreign language learning, as is evidenced by the study conducted by Chenoweth, Day, Chun & Luppescu (1983), McCargar (1993), etc. It is also indicated that students deemed errors which caused problems in conveying

meaning as the most important errors to be urgently corrected (Rahimi & Zhang, 2014). More recently, Zhu (2016) has elicited similar results when exploring the beliefs of Chinese college students about the effect of oral error correction feedback in English classroom, That is, students generally held a positive attitude towards oral correction feedback among students. What merits special attention is that the study has also discovered the fact that students expected to get more feedback from their teachers than their peers or classmates since they thought their teachers were more competent and authoritative feedback giver.

There are some other studies which focus on teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback which would finally impact their practice in classrooms and are key to successful language learning. Among them, one major stream of research which appeared recently is to compare how novice teachers and experienced teachers differ in terms of their teaching beliefs and pedagogical practice. According to Rahimi & Zhang (2015), teachers' classroom experience would exert a great deal of influence on their attitudes towards the necessity of different types of corrective feedback and their effectiveness. Generally speaking, more experienced teachers tend to display more flexibility and variability with regard to their beliefs and practices about the types and timing of feedback in classrooms (Junqueira & Kim, 2013). However, how exactly teacher's experience influences their practices remains a complicated issue. It deserves a close examination in future studies to reveal which corrective feedback strategies that novice and experienced teachers prefer to use and how they facilitate learners' interlanguage development.

3.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

It has been well recognized that corrective feedback plays a significant role in improving the students' accuracy and proficiency of target language. By drawing on students' attention to errors they have committed, corrective feedback is able to help students master language structures they have not yet grasped. Therefore, it is advisable that teachers should take full advantage of the technique of corrective feedback to facilitate language teaching. Also, the teacher need use various means to help students notice the feedback provided, such as modifying their intonation and putting stress on particular words. Otherwise, the feedback could be unfruitful.

The process of providing oral corrective feedback is rather complicated and involves many issues to be considered about. For instance, if a student's commits an error, the teacher has to determine whether, when and how to correct it. Just taking how to provide corrective feedback as example, there are a total of six strategies of feedback providing. Since not all types of feedback are equally effective, teachers should adopt different strategies flexibly to meet the needs of different situations or different teaching purposes. As mentioned in previous sections, some types of corrective feedback provide the learner with the right language form explicitly, while others aim to encourage the learner to make self-correction. Hence, when learners are not able to figure out their errors, it is advisable that explicit feedback should be adopted, such as metalinguistic cues which may not only help learners notice their errors but may also provide them with rules about the target language system.

As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of feedback is also constrained by a number of other factors such as the target language form, teaching environment, and learner's individual differences, such

as their language proficiency, personality, anxiety, etc. Hence, teachers should also take these variables into accounts when providing corrective feedback. Only in this way, can teachers provide corrective feedback effectively.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of oral corrective feedback in EFL classrooms, one of the most significant issues in the field of foreign language teaching. From the review, it can be seen that, in the past few decades, many scholars have done a great deal of in-depth research in this field, dealing with topics such as whether corrective feedback is beneficial to second language acquisition, the classification of corrective feedback, the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback on second language acquisition, the factors that impact corrective feedback, the optimal time to give corrective feedback in EFL classrooms, etc. All of these studies is not only of great theoretical but also practical significance in foreign language teaching. The theoretical significance lies in the fact that the research on feedback can shed light on the process of second language acquisition. In practice, corrective feedback is an important part of classroom interaction and is a powerful tool for the teacher to guide students to pay attention to grammatical forms and improve students' language competence. These studies are a great inspiration to teachers who should adopt appropriate feedback strategies to facilitate students' interlanguage development.

This paper has also suggested that, although the effect of feedback on second language acquisition has been confirmed by a great many studies, there are some issues that remain controversial, such as when is the best time to give corrective feedback in EFL classrooms, how to provide corrective feedback, etc. Therefore, more empirical research in EFL classrooms needs to be done to help address these problems. In particular, the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback in EFL classrooms should be further investigated, since how to combine oral corrective feedback with language teaching to improve learners' language accuracy and fluency has become a very practical problem in EFL classrooms. In addition, despite that the existing studies have examined factors affecting the effect of oral corrective feedback; other factors such as learner's personality and motivation have been barely touched upon. Hence, in order to achieve new breakthroughs in research on oral corrective feedback, future studies should be conducted by taking into account more factors that may have an impact on the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback.

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