EFL Teachers' Feedback to Oral Errors in EFL Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives

Abdulmuhsen Ayedh Alqahtani,PhD
Eihab Khaled Al-enzi
Kuwait University

Abstract

The current paper aims at identifying how EFL learners perceive teachers' feedback when committing oral mistakes. For this purpose, a short questionnaire, having tested its validity and reliability, was designed and distributed among a sample of 103 EFL teachers. The results showed that (a) the receptive-transmission approach was the most adopted approach in the feedback process, then the constructive followed by the co-constructive approaches; (b) the clarification request was the most feedback way used by the EFL teachers while the metalinguistic way was the least one used; and the correlation coefficients were high between feedback approached and feedback ways in light of superficial vs. deep feedback. The study concluded with some relevant recommendations.

Key Words: Approaches to oral errors, Feedback to oral errors.

It goes without saying that mastering one foreign language or more has become a crucial element of today's educational systems. Therefore, teaching English as a foreign language in Kuwait starts early in school and mandatory in Kuwaiti curriculum. The overall aim of teaching is to develop all-round communicative skills necessary for enhancing individuals' abilities in today's changing world. Speaking skills constitute an important aspect of English language education. Within this context, oral feedback in school is assumed to be a tool for EFL teachers to help learners alerted to errors in order to avoid fossilization, in which non-target forms become fixed (Ellis, 1999) and to master knowledge and proficiency in English.

As EFL instructors, we have been trained and told about the importance of feedback for learners to improve their learning (cf. Alqahtani, 2007). However, we, the current researchers, realized that some EFL teachers seemed unaware and did not appreciate the process of feedback and; thus, did not care about it although extensive research showed that feedback is of great importance to the learning process in general (Black & William, 1998). Based on our observations, we found it imperative to examine teachers' perceptions of feedback.

Background to the Study

In general, feedback is used to express an opinion or a reaction to another person's performance (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000). This reaction is, in turn, aims to facilitate or promote more appropriate actions in the future, in relation to a goal and a vision. The feedback used in school is mostly defined in similar ways; it is a strategy where the teacher is imparting directly a judgment of a learner's strategies, skills, or attainment, and giving

information about the judgment (Askew, 2000). Furthermore, in educational environments, it could be used to praise achievement or to point out an error or a mistake (Marzano, 2003).

Feedback should always be personal, and never directed at the person's personality. Instead, feedback should focus on the person's actions in a certain situation. Humans can consciously change a behavior if "we become aware that a particular behavior produced an undesirable consequence" (Rubin & Campbell, 1997, p. 13). For example, if students receive oral feedback on how to pronounce a word, they will most likely improve the pronunciation because they learn the correct pronunciation and therefore choose to use the correct form and can see the benefits of using a standard pronunciation (Received Pronunciation). But corrective feedback can only be used to a limited extent, after which it can become discouraging and destructive.

Feedback can be classified according to the medium used to practice it (oral and written) and to the message conveyed (i.e., accuracy vs. fluency). However, prior to involving in the feedback process, EFL teachers should be aware of different types of errors the students usually make. One type of error is the *systematic error* which refers to the incomplete knowledge of the language. The other type of error is the *mistake*. Unlike errors, mistakes are caused by other non-linguistic factors such as carelessness, tiredness, distractions or other circumstances that are not part of the knowledge itself (Hedge, 2000).

In normal conditions, all individuals acquire their first language without overt instruction (Yule, 1985). Usually, this phenomenon occurs naturally, and it does not seem that corrections from the surroundings will have real effect on how they produce their first language orally. It has been suggested that an individual acquires the spoken aspects of his first language not because of specific instruction, but rather, due to the process being a result of the interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). When teenagers and adults, however, start to a

foreign language, they are usually exposed to this new language only a few hours a week compared to the situation when learning a first language.

It is not unusual for EFL learners to make mistakes (e.g., pronunciation, syntax, or word choice errors) while learning English (LittleWood, 1985; Yule, 1985). Many possible explanations have been proposed for this phenomenon, the most prominent of which is that individuals learn, but not acquire, a foreign language (Ellis, 1999; Krashen & Terrell, 1985; LittleWood, 1985; Yule, 1985). Unlike language learning, the process of language acquisition uniquely holds X characteristics: (a) it takes place in natural environments where formal knowledge of a language prevails; (b) it occurs gradually, unconsciously, and linguistic abilities develop in the same way; and (c) acquired language is used in real communication on approximately a daily basis. Thus, learning a foreign language is (a) a conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a language; and (b) taking place in somehow mechanic, not dynamic, environments. If learning a foreign language is not that natural and needs effort to master the language, mistakes are inevitable. Committed mistakes, if neglected, however, can lead to fossilizing these mistakes as acceptable forms of language; i.e., errors. Feedback is needed to avoid fossilization. Therefore the aim of this paper is to examine teachers' perceptions about oral feedback in the classroom and how valuable it is to avoid making the same mistake again.

Feedback can be classified into more than one type, depending on the various perspectives on. When teachers use feedback, however, it can also be classified into positive or negative feedback. Positive feedback stands for praising learners for doing a good job; this appraisal helps them to develop good self-confidence. On the contrary, negative feedback is used to help students understand what has to be changed in an utterance in order to avoid errors. Negative feedback is most often used in teaching contexts as these contexts are

characterized by the type of information which learners can use to revise their interlanguage (Ellis, 1999). Whether teachers use positive or negative feedback, the published literature revealed three different approaches: the receptive-transmission approach, the constructivist approach and the co-constructive approach.

The receptive-transmission approach

As the term implies, teachers using the receptive-transmission approach have the role of experts and are supposed to introduce new knowledge, concepts and skills to the learners (Askew, 2000), and as such those teachers direct the learning environment and correct learners. Based on this approach, the learning often "involves increased understanding of new ideas, memorizing new facts, practicing new skills and making decisions based on new information" (Askew, 2000, p. 4). Therefore, interruptions and comparisons, which normally minimize the constructiveness of feedback process, are not unusual when using feedback with this approach (Askew, 2000, p. 7).

The constructive approach

The constructive approach is a less corrective way for the teacher to give feedback. Basically, it rests managing the learner's experience to draw out information, rather than putting it in (Askew, 2000). Although the teacher's role is still as the expert in this approach, it admits that students have different intelligence levels, and different talents (Askew, 2000). Through a two-way communication where open questions and shared insights, this approach is believed to help learners draw their own conclusions, make their own connections between experiences and improve their understanding of the subject (Askew, 2000).

The co-constructive approach

The co-constructive approach proposes a more equal power dynamic relationship between teacher and learner (Askew, 2000). Within this approach, teachers are not the dominating power in the classroom; they also view themselves as learners, and the "feedback is a dialogue, formed by loops connecting the participants" (Askew, 2000, p. 4). Thus, learners are encouraged to collaborate with each other and the focus is taken away from the individual level. The overall objective is to make learners feel that the "responsibility for the learning is shared … [and] feedback and reflection become entwined, enabling the learner to review their learning in its context and relate to previous experiences and understandings" (Askew, 2000, p. 13).

As teaching requires that learners should acquire the ability to master language forms, both language content and forms are critical for developing linguistically coherent utterances (Russell & Spada, 2006). Thus, teachers' role is vital for helping learners to acquire oral skills in order to articulate appropriately utterances of a given language and to speak in a well-structured way (Philp, 2003). Teaching speaking is, in turn, can help learners develop their abilities to take part in conversations, discussions and negotiations and to express their own views and consider those of others'.

Teaching oral skills have undergone various teaching approaches over time. Most of teachers still emphasize accuracy and, thus, focus on forms. Those advocates to communicative approach in language teaching prefer alerting learners to language functions in the first place; the rationale behind their view of language teaching is (a) that language is a means of communication; and (b) producing a native-like learner cannot be accomplished solely through schooling in foreign language contexts. The impact of the communicative approach is that errors are seen as something negative in learning process; rather, errors should be seen as "a clue to the active learning progress being made by a student as he or she

tries out strategies of communication in the new language" (Yule, 1985, p. 154). In other words, the movement has been from a form-focused teaching approach to a meaning-focused approach (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Both approaches are significant and therefore a balance is needed, albeit the meaning-focused approach tolerates more mistakes and errors.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) identified four major kinds of corrective feedback that teacher often use:

- Clarification requests: where the teacher alerts the learner that a repetition or a reformulation is needed because his utterance has been misunderstood or that there is an error in it. Phrases such as 'excuse me, what do you mean by …?' or 'pardon! I cannot get your point' represent this way of practicing feedback.

- Recasts: the teacher repeats the learner's utterance, replicating the errors with an emphasis on the correct form. Examples include the following dialogue:

  Student: camel is animal.

  Teacher: of course a camel is an animal.

- Elicitations: the teacher asks questions in order to coach the learner to the correct form. The following dialogue is an example of this type of feedback:

  Student: I like go to the zoo.

  Teacher: where else do you like going to?

  Student: I like going to parks.

- Metalinguistic feedback: the teacher comments on the error, using language information about the error and correct the form of that error. A teacher may say, for

example, 'the concept of family could be either singular or plural, depending on how you say the family in a given context.'

Since there is likelihood that feedback open learners to criticism, something which individuals find difficult to handle, learners are likely to resist or reject the feedback process. As in other phenomena, emotions and feeling towards the feedback process are dependent upon how feedback is managed. In order to maximize the outcomes of feedback, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Nabei & Swain, 2002) is of great benefit in this regard. Maslow believes that when the physiological needs (the bottom level) are fulfilled, the individual can move on to the next level, which is safety, to fulfill the feelings of being protected from danger. When an individual feels safe, he can likely then feel being loved and accepted by other people. These three levels are believed to lead esteem, respect and appreciation from others. When an individual has self-esteem, then he is believed to be able to develop a proactive, creative personality, which is *actualization*.

Literature Review

Research examining certain types of feedback is till inconclusive and results are mixed with respect to the efficacy of one type over another and; therefore, it is uneasy to decide which type of feedback is best for all contexts (Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Loewen & Nabei, 2007; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006) although research, in general, showed a superior advantage for learners receiving feedback, regardless of its type (Leeman, 2003; Lyster, 2004; Swain, 1985). Laboratory-based studies (e.g., Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Philp, 2003) and classroom-based studies (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nabei & Swain, 2002) reported learner responses to feedback were able to recall the corrective feedback as, indicating they were noticing corrected language forms. Still, results from a number of

comparison studies, however, revealed that when learners are supplied with metalinguistic feedback concerning the correct formulation of the target forms, they recalled the corrected forms in future language usage and; thus, fossilization reduced (for elaboration, McDonough, 2005).

Comparison studies of feedback supported the evidence suggesting that metacognitive feedback helped learners generalize the information obtained from the feedback process to new contexts. Carroll (2001) examined the derivation of English nouns from verb stems by learners in four feedback treatment groups and a control group. Though all treatment groups significantly outperformed the control group on posttests on knowledge items for which they had received feedback, only participants in the groups that provided with either direct or indirect metalinguistic information concerning the target form error significantly outperformed the control group in new contexts. In the same line of research, Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) investigated the impact of metacognitive and recasts feedbacks on learners' use of the English past tense marker –ed. Findings showed that learners who received corrective feedback containing metalinguistic information significantly outperformed learners in the recast and control groups on tests of both implicit (oral elicited information) and explicit (grammaticality judgments) knowledge, and were able to generalize of the –ed form to new contexts.

Statement of the Problem

There are different theories on how learners learn foreign languages and how to use feedback in the learning process. The behaviorist theory claims that imitating the language patterns correctly should be linked with receiving positive reinforcement (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:9). The rationale behind this linear process of imitating then reinforcement makes it possible for the learners to keep learning and developing skills in the foreign

language. On the other hand, the theory developed by Noam Chomsky postulates that learners are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in just the same way that other biological functions develop where reinforcement does not play a critical role in language development (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:15).

According to the Kuwaiti curriculum policy, teachers have a responsibility to help the learners through the feedback process gain more confidence in order to gain meaningful knowledge and enhance their knowledge development (Alqahtani, 2007). The main aim in the current study is to find out if and how teachers in public schools use oral feedback approaches when they correct their students' oral errors.

Methods

Participants

The participants were mainly Kuwaiti EFL teachers teaching at public schools. The total number of subjects were 104 (74 males and 30 females).

Instrument

A short survey was developed to assess how Kuwaiti EFL teachers perceive their oral feedback skills towards learners' oral mistakes. The survey was composed of two parts:

Part one (15 statements): it was about the feedback approaches that the EFL teacher often used (i.e., the receptive-transmission approach, the constructive approach, and co-constructive approach). 'I give immediate feedback focusing on the correct form' was an example of this part.

Part two (20 statements): it was about the corrective feedback often used to give feedback. This part included statements related to four corrective feedback mentioned earlier: clarification requests, recasts, elicitations, and metalinguistic feedback. 'I repeat the student's utterance, focusing on the correct form' was an example of this part.

The validity of a survey in quantitative research refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of specific inferences made from test scores (Mackey & Gass, 2005). That is, it determines the level to which it measures what it was designed to measure. For purposes of the present study, several factors enhanced the validity of the original survey that was designed to examine teachers' perceptions about feedback. Content validity was established by asking EFL experts to review and evaluate the survey items in light of the concept of feedback. Items were also developed based on qualitative input from EFL teachers who reviewed the survey for face validity as well.

Reliability refers to the extent to which an instrument consistently measures a phenomenon over different times and different populations (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Chronbach's alpha for the current scale was reported at 0.85 and higher. This finding suggests that the current survey is a reliable instrument.

Results

Table 1 shows the results regarding perceptions about what approaches they adopt in their feedback practice. It is obvious that teachers perceived the receptive-transmission approach to be the most adopted approach in practicing feedback. The least adopted approach was co-constructive approach. It is noteworthy mentioning that the small values of standard deviations indicated that the sample were closely clustering

Table 1 :

Descriptive statistics of feedback approaches adopted by Kuwait EFL teachers

	Mean	Standard Deviation
- Receptive-transmission approach	3.22	.68
- Constructive approach	2.96	.77
- Co-constructive approach	2.1	.57

Kuwaiti EFL Teachers' reported use of different feedback ways are presented in Table 2. It seems that direct ways of giving feedback to oral errors (i.e., - Clarification requests and recasts) were often used by those teachers. On the contrary, indirect ways were used as well but not as often as the direct ones.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of feedback ways used by Kuwait EFL teachers

	Mean	Standard Deviation
- Clarification requests	4.2	.91
- Recasts	3.03	.75
- Elicitation	2.7	1.01

- Metalinguistic	2.9	.98	

Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to determine the relationship between the variables of the current study. The unit of analysis is the teacher; therefore, the number of observation is 104- the number of the participants in the current study. The correlation coefficients between the feedback approaches and corrective feedback ways are presented in Table 1. These obtained correlations suggest that statistically significant positive inter-relationships were established. Specifically, the receptive-transmission approach was statistically, significantly correlated with clarification requests and recasts.

Table 3

Correlation coefficients for the feedback ways and the feedback approaches

	Clarification requests	Recasts	Elicitation	Metalinguistic
- Receptive-transmission approach	.37*	.41*	.19	-.30*
- Constructive approach	.12	-.15	.60*	.62*
- Co-constructive approach	.37*	.08	.71*	.68*

* p<0.05 (two-tailed)

Three important points were revealed by the results in Table 3:

1. The receptive-transmission approach was positively, significantly correlated with directive feedback ways (i.e., clarification requests and recasts) while it was

negatively significantly correlated with metalinguistic way of communicating feedback. Although elicitation is conceptually related to metalinguistic way, it did not show any relation with the receptive-transmission approach.

2. It is apparent that the constructive approach was positively significantly correlated with feedback ways that make the learner an active player in the learning process. The results showed no significant relationship between the constructive approach and either the clarification requests or recasts, albeit the latter is negatively related to this approach.

3. The co-constructive approach is positively, significantly correlated with feedback ways that are based on communication between teacher and learner. The elicitation way, however, showed the highest correlation. The recasts feedback way showed insignificant correlation with this approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

Generally speaking, the findings of the current study support the previous research indications (for elaboration, refer to the lit review section above). Also, if taken deeply, the findings reported in the current study have indicated some two important issues. First, according to the postmodernism approach (a view that reality is a human construction), the power relationship between people is decided by and is a function of discourse and discursive practice. That is, the degree of EFL learners' power in power distribution with their EFL teachers is decided by the structure of co-constructed discourse that shapes the mode of communication between power poles (learner and teacher). Although practicing power over others can produce knowledge for those who are less powerful, learning contexts are practicing communities where the knowledge is transmitted in a reciprocal mode rather moving in a linear way. The rationale behind this tenet is that knowledge is no longer

peculiar to one source of authority. The EFL teacher adopting the receptive-transmission approach perceives himself the sole authority of knowledge where the learners are the less powerful dots within the relationship networks in the classroom; therefore, the teacher controls the flow discourse- he talks, demonstrates, asks, corrects, and then reinforces. Based on this power relationship in the EFL classrooms, it was not surprising for those teachers to use the direct ways of feedback more often than other ways. Moreover, the correlations matrix reported above supports this observation due to the fact learner-centered feedback ways (i.e., elicitation and metalinguistic) are correlated with those approaches that are dependent on all parties of the learning process.

Second, the use of feedback requires communication. The importance of the chosen mode communication in the feedback process cannot be overstated as "communication is central to the teaching process" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983, p. 175). Often, direct feedback is used to implicitly legitimize the expertise of EFL teachers. When an EFL teacher use his relationship power in giving a learner feedback, it is usually not necessary to say 'I am the authorized and legitimate source of information and I have the right to take my feedback.' Such appeals to power are implied and generally recognized by the EFL learner without being directly stated.

The correlation coefficients reported above support the perspective that learning for understanding is highly related to the two-way communication. When the power is shared through a two-way communication, the learning process goes beyond superficial reinforcement.

One serious pedagogical implication that the current study can provide is that EFL teachers have to adapt their teaching practices in order to enhance the use of language learning strategies that reinforce deep learning, rather than superficial learning. To test this

implication, I recommend conducting future studies with respect to exploring why some kinds of feedbacks are used than others and what other factors may have an impact on this matter.

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