An Investigation into Teachers’ Corrective Feedback in Chinese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper reports a study on the provision of teachers’ corrective feedback (CF) and its effect on learners’ uptake in Chinese EFL classrooms. It investigated what CF strategies were used and examined the effect of error types on strategy choice as well as the effect of CF strategies on learners’ response. The subjects were four teachers and 89 English majors from a foreign language school and a top university. Data were collected through 40 class hours of classroom observation and interviews carried out with the four teachers. The CF strategies used were then analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings are summarized as follows:

1. In Chinese EFL classrooms, a new type of CF was included, namely, nonverbal signals. With nonverbal signals, teachers could use gestures or facial expressions to indicate the existence of errors in students’ utterance. Altogether teachers provided seven types of CF in Chinese senior-school and college EFL classrooms: explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, repetition and nonverbal signals. All of the seven CF types can be explicit or implicit, input-providing or output-prompting. Implicit/input-providing feedback dominates in the different CF types.

2. Different error types led to different choice of feedback strategies. Discourse errors attracted greatest attention from teachers who showed much more tolerance for syntactic errors than other CF types. Recasts, as implicit/input-providing feedback, were still used most frequently in treating all the error types while teachers tended to prompt students’ self-correction when lexical and discourse errors occurred in order to make error correction salient to learners.

3. Output-prompting feedback worked more effectively in eliciting learners’ uptake than input-providing strategies did. But input-providing feedback moves yielded a lower needs-repair rate, which means students could do self-correction more successfully when offered with input-providing feedback.
The results reveal that different CF strategies can be used according to the nature of errors and thus will yield different responses from learners. Based on these findings, the study suggests that teachers should employ different feedback strategies to improve their teaching qualities.

Key words: corrective feedback; strategy; error; uptake

1. Introduction

According to Corder (1967), errors play an important role in the language learning process and indicate to what extent learners have grasped the target language as well as in what way they still need help. This study is aimed at examining how teachers orally correct learners’ errors and the effect such correction has on learners’ response in Chinese EFL classrooms by analyzing transcripts obtained from classroom observation plus interview data. The results reveal that teachers’ oral feedback to errors (termed as “corrective feedback” or CF) with various strategies can be employed by teachers to improve their teaching quality.

2. Literature Review

As in the past decades, classroom instruction has shifted its focus “from language forms to functional language within communicative contexts” (Brown, 2002: 219), error correction has become more and more important. Error treatment appears to be most effective if incorporated into a communicative classroom. One way not to interrupt the flow of discourse is to imbed error treatment in the feedback that a learner receives from others.

Vigil and Oller (1976) identified two types of feedback learners receive from their interlocutors, namely, cognitive feedback and affective feedback. Cognitive feedback carries the information as to the use of the linguistic code, and through affective feedback learners get such information as to whether the learners’ contributions are valuable and worthwhile. When conducting studies in error treatment, researchers have employed different terms to refer to negative cognitive feedback upon the occurrence of linguistic errors. Chaudron (1977: 31) defined “corrective feedback” as “any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance”.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

According to Long’s Interaction Hypothesis, engaging in interpersonal oral interaction, in which communication problems arise and are negotiated, facilitates language acquisition. The hypothesis draws criticism from Swain who points out that learners need opportunities for meaningful use of linguistic resources. Schmidt, in his Noticing Hypothesis, argues that input doesn’t become intake for language learning unless it is
noticed, or to put it simply, no noticing, no acquisition.

The facilitative role of CF can be justified by the three hypotheses above. CF helps learners to notice the gap between interlanguage forms and target forms and facilitates second language acquisition (SLA) through the provision of negative evidence in negotiation work and through opportunities for modified output.

2.2 Overseas Research on Corrective Feedback
CF has aroused great interest on both theoretical and pedagogical grounds. It is an area that bridges the concerns of both language teachers and SLA researchers.

2.2.1 Corrective feedback and error choice
Earlier studies yielded varied findings because of their different taxonomy of errors.

Corder (1967) contended that teachers should distinguish errors from mistakes and it is errors instead of mistakes that should be corrected. Burt (1975) held that error correction should focus on “global” rather than “local errors”. Krashen (1982), however, regarded error correction a serious mistake and thought that it was useful to limit CF to simple and portable rules, such as third person -s because this helps monitoring. Chun, Day, Chenweth & Luppescu (1982) found that factual errors attracted most attention from native speakers and were corrected 89.5% of the time. In a later study (Chenoweth, Day, Chun & Luppescu, 1983), analysis of self-reported data from questionnaires indicated that learners were corrected most often in the areas of pronunciation and word choice, and least in factual errors. The studies taken by Chenoweth et al. (1983) and Cathcart and Olsen (1976) suggest that there is a gap between what native language speakers pay attention to and what learners expect to be corrected. In Nystrom’s (1983) study, she classified errors into six types: phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic, discourse, dialect and content errors. Nystrom investigated four bilingual classes and found different distribution patterns in the four classes. It is a pity that the treatment of different types of errors was not studied. The results of Oliver’s (1995) study of interaction on child NS-NNS suggested that most recasts were found in response to single-error utterances, while negotiation occurred more often following NNS turns with multiple errors. Lyster (1998b) shifted the attention to how each type of error was corrected and explored the relationships between error types and feedback types in four French immersion elementary level classrooms.

2.2.2 Corrective feedback and learners’ uptake
In the past decades, a growing number of the CF studies have been conducted in both a classroom and a laboratory context and have focused on the role of CF in L2 development. The issues approached in these studies include: the types of CF that lead to successful learner repair, learners’ perceptions of negative feedback, the effects of different types of CF or a specific CF type on learner response, feedback explicitness and its role, and the best timing for CF (e.g., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty, 1994; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001; Ellis & Sheen, 2006; Han, 2001; Havranek, 2002; Loewen & Nabei, 2007; Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; McDonough, 2005; Mackey, Gass &
McDonough, 2000; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Roberts, 1995; Sheen, 2006). Previous studies have used various measures to determine the effectiveness of feedback, such as immediate uptake (i.e., learners’ response to the CF) and repair (i.e., if learners reformulate their erroneous utterance correctly following the CF) (e.g., Ellis et al., 2001; Lyster, 1997, 1998b; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2004, 2006), the use of pretest-posttest measures in experimental research (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Han, 2002; Lyster, 2004; Mackey & Philp, 1998), and individualized testing (e.g., Loewen, 2005; Loewen & Philp, 2006). Though many researchers argued against the use of uptake as a measure of acquisition, learner uptake has been seen as a legitimate object of inquiry. Mackey, Oliver and Leeman (2003: 48) note:

Although immediate incorporation of feedback of 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. Even though there may be a direct correlation between modified output and L2 development, this has not been demonstrated empirically.

The empirical studies yielded different, even conflicting results depending on instructional backgrounds. Younghee Sheen (2004) examined similarities and differences in teachers’ CF and learners’ uptake behavior across instructional settings, namely, French immersion, Canada ESL, New Zealand ESL and Korean EFL. Her research confirms that recasts (i.e., the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance minus the error without clearly indicating that an error has occurred.) are the most dominant type of CF in classrooms and emphasizes that the nature of recasts differed considerably and the more salient recasts are, the more they lead to uptake and successful repair.

### 2.3 Related Research in China

Though CF is gaining more and more prominence abroad, it has not drawn enough attention in China. The few issues addressed in studies in China are teachers’ CF and learners’ uptake in EFL classrooms in primary and middle schools (Zhao, 2005); CF strategies used in oral English classrooms (Zhu, 1996).

Zhao’s study (2005) examined CF and uptake behavior at three proficiency levels—classrooms in primary schools, junior and senior middle schools—and concluded that negotiation of form is more preferred than recasts in correcting lexical and phonological errors, and, in response to grammatical errors, teachers provided different CF strategies according to the different proficiency levels of learners. The present research will target learners from senior high school and university instead of those at beginners levels.

Hu’s (1999, 2005) study elicited by questionnaires and interviews the opinions and attitudes of both teachers and students on: 1) how often errors were treated; 2) what types of errors were treated; 3) how errors were treated. However, it did not touch the relationships between error types and CF or between CF and uptake types.
2.4 Significance of the Present Research
A number of existing studies examined CF in ESL/EFL classrooms and yet different dimensions of examination could yield different results. Because of the importance of and inadequate research on CF in China the present research investigated teachers’ provision of CF as well as learners’ uptake in Chinese EFL classrooms at senior middle school and university.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to the classification of CF. Unlike most studies in the West, the present study investigates the provision of CF and its effect on learner uptake in Chinese EFL classrooms where the categorization of CF may vary and hopefully some new types of CF will be found and included into Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) model of six CF types.

Pedagogically, it is very important for us to find out how teachers use CF in certain contexts. It is helpful for teachers to know what kinds of feedback will be most acceptable to learners and win their response. When errors occur, teachers will use these strategies consciously, selectively and effectively. Through such effective error correction, learners will reformulate their interlanguage, avoid fossilization and thus enhance their language proficiency.

Besides, unlike the related previous studies which are largely quantitative, the present research combines both quantitative and qualitative analysis. In order to examine CF in Chinese EFL classrooms in a more realistic and complex way, the present research will offer qualitative analysis in addition to discussion based quantitative data. Such qualitative analysis will give a vivid picture of corrective feedback from which some feasible implications will be elicited.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions
The purpose of the present study is to find out how learners’ errors are corrected and how teachers’ error correction influences learners’ response. The research questions are as follows:

1. How often do teachers use different types of CF?
2. To what extent do error types influence the provision of CF?
   - What kinds of errors tend to receive CF?
   - How do error types influence the provision of each CF type?
3. To what extent do various CF types influence students’ uptake?
   - What kinds of students’ uptake does CF lead to?
   - How do CF types influence students’ uptake?

3.2 Research Methods
The study employed classroom observation and interviews to investigate the provision and effectiveness of CF in Chinese EFL classrooms.
3.2.1 Participants
The observational study engaged four complete classes, two from Senior 2 of a renowned foreign language school and the other two made up of first-year English majors from a well-known comprehensive university. Both the foreign language school and the university are top ones in Nanjing. The foreign language school, unlike ordinary high schools, gives priority to foreign language learning by adding a comprehensive English course, speaking classes and listening training to their students’ curriculum. The four classes had 25, 25, 23, and 16 students respectively.

The four EFL teachers were all female teachers aging from 26 to 33 and had taught comprehensive English course for more than 5 years. They were selected on their own willingness to have their lessons observed and tape-recorded. They were coded as T1, T2, T3, and T4. T1 and T2 were from the foreign language school, while T3 and T4 were from the English Department of the university.

The four teachers, though from different educational institutes, had reached to some extent consensus that the comprehensive English course was aimed at improving students’ language competence including the abilities to use English skillfully. They organized their instruction in a similar cyclical format: each unit began with a warm-up discussion, the topic of which was closely related to the text in question. The text discussion took up most of the time of the class periods and during this period students were often asked questions to engage in the interaction. During the last class period, exercises were discussed and checked.

3.2.2 Instruments
The instruments of the present research included classroom observation and interviews.

1) Classroom observation framework
The teachers’ and students’ speech was recorded when the researcher was observing the four teachers’ lessons. The focus of observation was on the teacher and learner interaction in the 40 hours when the students were asked to answer questions or when they volunteered to express their opinions in English. The teacher’s participation in the students’ group discussion was excluded from the data collected. When errors occurred in the students’ utterance, the researcher would closely examine how the teacher reacted to the errors, and whether and how the students responded to the teacher’s error correction. The researcher also took notes to help with the later analysis. If there were any unclear points, the researcher would talk with the teachers and the students and asked them to clarify these points. Although they knew the researcher was interested in classroom interaction, the teachers were unaware of the research focus related to corrective feedback.

2) Interview schedule
Semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted after the analysis of the classroom data was completed. In the interviews, the researcher asked the teachers some questions about their views on language teaching, their attitudes towards the students’ errors and their treatment of these errors.

The interviews were carried out in Chinese so that both the researcher and the teachers could express their ideas freely and clearly.
3.2.3 Data collection
From March to June 2007, a total of 40 class hours were recorded, 10 class hours for each teacher. Since the present study focused on the teacher-student interaction where at least one error occurred, the final transcripts for each teacher lasted about 60 minutes, with irrelevant content omitted. Total errors, teachers’ feedback and students’ uptake and repair were later carefully coded and calculated.

In July 2007, the researcher interviewed the individual teachers and the interviews were recorded for further analysis.

3.2.4 Data analysis
3.2.4.1 Error treatment sequence
The analytic model of the present research was based on Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) operationalization of error treatment sequence as in Figure 3.1.

![Figure 3.1 Error treatment sequence (cited from Lyster, 1998b: 194)](image)

The present research looked into the interrelationships between learner error, teacher feedback and learner uptake. The error treatment sequences were identified in the transcripts and coded according to the analytic model above. Needs-repair could lead to additional feedback from the teacher but no new sequence would be identified unless there appeared a new error. The data collected excluded the teacher-student exchanges when the teachers were doing exercise-checking because when checking exercises the teachers had no choice but to correct every error made by the students. The researcher did not take such interaction into consideration.
3.2.4.2 Error types
Both errors and mistakes were taken as errors in this research. They were identified by the researcher and when she was uncertain whether an utterance was erroneous or not she would consult dictionaries or ask a native speaker for help. On analyzing the data, five types of errors were recognized in the data: phonological, lexical, syntactic and discourse errors as well as unsolicited use of L1.
  
  • **Phonological error**
  Phonological errors referred to those concerning mispronunciation. When a student “explicitly” pronounced a word in a wrong way, for example, when he or she pronounced the word “leave” as /lɪv/, it was considered a phonological error.
  
  • **Lexical error**
  Lexical errors resulted from improper use of words in the context. Most lexical errors were caused by confusion of words similar in form or meaning or non-target derivation of nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives as well as incorrect use of prefixes and suffixes. The utterances containing lexical errors may be grammatically correct but ambiguous in meaning or unacceptable to native speakers. For example, a college student talked about the high expense of his trip to Suzhou, but said “the consumption is very expensive”, in which the word “expensive” was wrongly used to describe “consumption”.
  
  • **Syntactical error**
  Syntactical errors were grammatical errors concerning the misuse of determiners, prepositions, pronouns, tense, auxiliaries, pluralization, negation, question formation, and so on. For example, in “they fight with bare fists [in the past]”, the verb should be “fought” instead of “fight”.
  
  • **Discourse error**
  The utterances including discourse errors were not as ill-formed as those with the other three types of errors above, but acceptable on the surface. When put in context, however, the utterances were not coherent in meaning. For example, a student stated, “She was sure that he would keep his word.” Though without any errors on the surface, when the statement was put in context, listeners got confused about what the pronoun “he” referred to as there were more than one man that had been mentioned in the previous utterance.
  
  • **Unsolicited use of L1**
  When the learners failed to find an English equivalent and used Chinese instead of English, they were considered to have made this type of error. When a student said, “When at that time in summer they [the plants] are very 茂盛 (‘lush’)”, the expression is coded as one with unsolicited use of L1.

If a learner’s utterance contained more than one error, coded as “multiple” in Lyster and Ranta’s study in 1997, each error was numbered and coded.

3.2.4.3 Corrective feedback
Data analysis was based on Ellis’ (2007) taxonomy of the CF strategies (see Table 3.1), which covers two levels of categorization. The upper level involves four main groups, named implicit input-providing, implicit output-prompting, explicit input-providing
and explicit output-prompting feedback, and the lower one includes six types of feedback strategies which came from Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) categorization.

According to Ellis (2006), corrective feedback differs in terms of how implicit or explicit it is. In the case of implicit feedback, there is no overt indicator that an error has been committed, whereas in explicit feedback types there is. Feedback can also be classified along with the distinction between input-providing and output-prompting. In input-providing feedback, teachers provide students with the correct form while in output-prompting feedback, they prompt students to self-correct.

Table 3.1 Ellis’ taxonomy of CF strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implicit</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input-providing</td>
<td>Recasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output-prompting</td>
<td>Repetition</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

At the lower level, the six types of corrective feedback, which were sorted into the four major categories by Ellis (2007), refer to: explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. The examples below are all taken from the data collected in the present research.

• Explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form by the teacher who clearly indicates that what the student said was incorrect.

Example 3.1:

S: General draw up a plan to defeat the enemies. (Syntactical error)
T1: *bu yao zong shi yong yuan xing* ("don’t always use the infinitive form"). The general has drawn up or drew up a plan to defeat the enemy. (Explicit correction)
S: (No uptake)

• Recasts involve the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance minus the error without clearly indicating that an error has occurred.

Example 3.2:

S: She feared that she would never see /sei/ Rastus again. (Phonological error)
T2: See /si/. (Recast)
S: (No uptake)

• Clarification requests are used to create opportunities for learners to reformulate or repeat their ill-formed utterance. Sometimes the teacher uses a clarification request, such as “I’m sorry” or “I don’t understand,” when he or she is not sure what the student means. In some other situations, there is no comprehension problem and the teacher just wants to elicit self-repair from the learner.

Example 3.3:
T4: How about the trip in Suzhou?
S: The consumption is very expensive. (Lexical error)
T4: What do you mean by consumption? (Clarification request)
S: I spent more money than I expected. (Needs-repair)

• Metalinguistic explanation refers to “either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student utterance, without explicitly providing the correct answer” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997: 47).
Example 3.4:

S: [If you don’t tell me the truth,] I will have to be reduced to tricks. (Lexical error)
T4: Well, well, because you have used the phrase “be reduced to”, the implication is that you have been forced to do something. Therefore you don’t have to say “have to” again. That’s redundant. Would you please repeat the sentence? (Metalinguistic feedback)
S: If you don’t tell me the truth, I’m reduced to tricks. (Repair)

• Elicitation is a corrective technique that the teacher uses to allow the learner to complete the utterance by strategically pausing plus some open questions or requests for reformulating the ill-formed utterance.
Example 3.5:

S: …but they recently took considerable interest in Mrs. Eleanor /'ɛlənər/ Ramsay’s cat. (Phonological error with “Eleanor”)
T1: Mrs. What? (Elicitation)
S: Eleanor Ramsay. (Needs-repair)

• Repetition refers to the teacher’s repetition, in isolation, of the learner’s ill-formed utterance, sometimes with a change in intonation.
Example 3.6:

S: For he have drank— (Syntactic error)
T2: Drank, drank? (Repetition with rising tone)
S: Have drank— (Needs-repair)

In addition to the seven feedback types, there was another category called “multiple feedback”, which referred to combinations of more than one type of feedback in one teacher turn (Example 3.7).
Example 3.7:

S: …and my brothers also came to see me off.
T3: Your brothers? Your cousins! (Repetition and recast)

In the present database, this kind of feedback took up only a fraction and emerged in the
form of a certain feedback move preceded by repetition which serves as a means to raise students’ attention.

In the data analysis, each feedback type was coded.

3.2.4.4 Uptake and repair

Uptake in Lyster and Ranta’s model (1997: 49) refers to “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 student’s initial utterance”. Uptake is the response from learners to either repeat or reformulate their ill-formed utterance following CF from the teacher.

There are two types of uptake as reaction to CF: repair and needs-repair. Repair refers to the correct reformulation of an error as uttered in a single learner turn, excluding those self-initiated repair. Needs-repair refers to a situation in which learners’ uptake still needs further repair to achieve correctness. The examples above can well illustrate repair (Example 3.4) and needs-repair (Examples 3.5 and 3.6).

3.2.4.5 Transcriptions of the interviews

The questions asked in the interviews were not in the same order. Therefore, after making the transcriptions, the researcher put the interviewees’ answers to the same question together when analyzing the data to make it easier for comparison.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Strategies of Corrective Feedback

4.1.1 Distribution of teachers’ CF strategies

Table 4.1 displays the frequencies of each CF types at both the higher and the lower levels. As shown in Table 4.1, implicit input-providing feedback moves were most frequently used by the teachers (63.3%) and explicit input-providing moves were used least frequently (8.7%).

Among implicit feedback, input-providing (63.3%) outnumbered output-prompting (11.1%). The teachers from the senior high school used more output-prompting feedback (both explicit and implicit) than the college teachers (42 and 16 respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1 Distribution of CF Types</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CF types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/output</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Regarding explicit feedback, the teachers provoked output from students (16.9%) more frequently than just offered input (8.7%).

At the lower level, a new type of CF, which is not included in Ellis’ (2007) taxonomy, was identified during classroom observation. Without speaking, teachers just used gestures or facial expressions to “tell” students that they had just made an error. This new type of CF, namely, nonverbal signals, involved a salient indicator of an error committed and prompted learners to make self-correction and thus such CF was taken as both explicit and output-prompting.

Recast (also called implicit/input-providing feedback) occurred most frequently and accounted for 63.3% of all the feedback moves. Nonverbal signals were used the least frequently (only 1.0%). The other feedback types are distributed in decreasing frequency as follows: elicitation (11.6%), explicit correction (8.7%), clarification request (5.8%), repetition (5.3%), and metalinguistic feedback (4.3%).

It shows that in Chinese EFL classrooms, apart from the six types of CF, teachers may also use nonverbal signals to indicate there are errors in student utterances. Teachers use different corrective strategies with varied frequencies. Although all four teachers in the study showed great preference for recasts, their choice of CF differed in some subtle ways. The teachers from Senior 2 adopted more elicitation and fewer recasts than the two college teachers.

4.1.2 Discussion
The findings suggest that the teachers preferred to use implicit input-providing feedback rather than feedback types that prompt students to self repair, and this is similar to the results of previous studies (Hu, 1999; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998a; Panova & Lyster, 2002). What is different from the previous studies lies in the fact that senior high school teachers used a higher frequency of output-prompting feedback than university teachers. There appears to be some relationship between English proficiency and output-prompting feedback. According to the previous studies, it seems that the higher the proficiency level of the students, the more output-prompting feedback teachers will offer. Lyster and Ranta (1997: 56) pointed out that teachers needed to “carefully take into account their students’ level of L2 proficiency when making decisions about feedback”. But their study yielded a relationship opposite to the finding of this study; in this study, the higher the proficiency level, the more frequently teachers would “rely on the modeling techniques (i.e., recasts)”
and the less often teachers would draw output from students. Anyway, given the fact that these two studies were conducted in different contexts and both involved relatively small numbers of participants, further research is called for on the relationship between student proficiency and the teacher’s provision of CF.

Implicit feedback tends to combine with input-providing feedback, and explicit feedback tends to combine with output-prompting feedback. These findings are in accordance with the teachers’ belief as revealed in the interviews. All four teachers hold that they will try their best not to interrupt students explicitly by correcting errors except when the errors are considered serious or repeatedly occur. Recast or implicit/input-providing feedback facilitates the flow of conversation without distracting students from what they are talking about or driving them to correct errors. As for the errors taken as serious or with high rates of occurrence, the teachers said they would like to point them out explicitly and force students to correct them.

Nonverbal signals emerged as an independent CF type in the present study. They refer to gestures and facial expressions which indicate there are errors in students’ utterances. In the database, a student misused “often” for “offer”. The teacher waved her hand to show that he had made an error and the student immediately corrected the error by himself. Although there were only two cases in which nonverbal signals were used, such signals played the role of corrective feedback and may draw response from students. With nonverbal signals, students are shown explicitly that there are errors and are provoked to self-correction.

There are two reasons for the predominant role of recast. First, “by providing implicit CF through recasts, the teachers were able to maintain the flow of communication” (Sheen, 2004: 291). According to the interview data, all four teachers believe that in their classes students should be given opportunities to speak English as much as possible. It is rather time-consuming if they spend much time in eliciting students’ correct output and thus will distract students from thinking about their opinions. Second, recast, rather than explicit correction, can save face for the students who made errors and thus encourage them to speak more. In the interviews, all four teachers mentioned that they would take students’ feelings into consideration when deciding how to treat errors so as to make students feel less intimidated. Students will get discouraged by thinking that what they say is full of errors and hesitate to speak out to avoid losing face in front of their classmates.

### 4.2 Relationships Between Error Types and Corrective Feedback

#### 4.2.1 Treatment of different error types

Table 4.2 presents how each error type distributes and how CF is distributed across different error types. Various error types and the feedback following them show similar tendencies of distribution share. Table 4.3 reports the rate at which each error type received CF and reveals that syntactical errors are least likely to be treated by teachers.
Table 4.2 Number and percentage of errors and feedback moves per error type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error type</th>
<th>Errors (N = 294)</th>
<th>Feedback (N = 207)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonological</td>
<td>53 (18%)</td>
<td>48 (23.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical</td>
<td>52 (17.7%)</td>
<td>47 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntactical</td>
<td>131 (44.6%)</td>
<td>59 (28.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>46 (15.6%)</td>
<td>43 (20.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>12 (4.1%)</td>
<td>10 (4.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Rates of feedback per error type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error type</th>
<th>Rates of feedback per error type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>43/46 (93.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological</td>
<td>48/53 (90.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical</td>
<td>47/52 (90.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>10/12 (83.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntactical</td>
<td>59/131 (45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Provision of CF types across different error types

Table 4.4 and Figure 4.1 display a comparison of the distribution of CF types following each error type.

As for all the five types of errors, implicit input-providing feedback is used most frequently, 79.1%, 46.8%, 61%, 58.1%, and 100%, respectively.

Table 4.4 Distribution of errors receiving CF across CF types and error types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error types CF types</th>
<th>Phonological</th>
<th>Lexical</th>
<th>Syntactical</th>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Unsolicited use of L1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/input</td>
<td>2 (4.2%)</td>
<td>8 (17.0%)</td>
<td>6 (10.2%)</td>
<td>2 (4.7%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/input</td>
<td>38 (79.1%)</td>
<td>22 (46.8%)</td>
<td>36 (61%)</td>
<td>25 (58.1%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/output</td>
<td>6 (12.5%)</td>
<td>10 (21.3%)</td>
<td>11 (18.6%)</td>
<td>8 (18.6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/output</td>
<td>2 (4.2%)</td>
<td>7 (14.9%)</td>
<td>6 (10.2%)</td>
<td>8 (18.6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48 (100%)</td>
<td>47 (100%)</td>
<td>59 (100%)</td>
<td>43 (100%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Investigation into Teachers’ Corrective Feedback in Chinese EFL Classrooms

As for the relationships between error types and CF types, it is found that the teachers tended to provide more output-prompting feedback when correcting lexical and discourse errors than when correcting phonological and syntactical errors, as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Percentage of errors receiving output-prompting CF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error types CF types</th>
<th>Phonological</th>
<th>Lexical</th>
<th>Syntactical</th>
<th>Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Output-prompting</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.3 Discussion

The teachers’ treatment of oral errors was related to error types. Although implicit input-providing feedback was popular in the treatment of all errors, teachers still altered their feedback strategies in the light of the nature of errors.

The proportions of error types receiving CF reflected the rates at which these various error types occurred. Syntactical errors accounted for the largest proportion of CF moves (28.5%) due to their high frequency (44.6%). Despite this, syntactical errors received CF at the lowest rate, only 45% were followed by CF. It reveals “some degree of perseverance in combination with selectivity” (Lyster, 1998b: 209) when teachers decide which errors to correct. The teachers actually show a high degree of tolerance for syntactical errors. It is one of the teachers’ considerations, when teachers try to decide which errors to treat, that they should maintain the flow of communication as mentioned before. All four teachers thought that they would react differently to different errors.

Apart from that, the teachers also took into account the nature of syntactical errors in their classrooms. When asked what kind of errors they are most likely to correct, they all said they would not interrupt students frequently to correct errors and only those they took as serious errors had to be corrected. According to the four teachers, serious errors mean those that students often committed or that keep hearers from catching what the speaker said. T1 pointed out that misuse of tense and agreement was also included in her list sometimes, especially when one student committed the same kind of error several times. Both T1 and T2 admitted that they would like to give feedback to the errors that could be “easily” corrected (i.e., those concerning simple and portable features such as plural forms of nouns) as well as those serious ones. Syntactical errors may be caused
either by ignorance of grammatical rules or by careless use of such rules. For EFL learners from senior schools and universities in China, the most frequent syntactical errors take place in misuse of tense and agreement, which do not result from their ignorance, but from their unfamiliarity with these rules. As the teachers said, students lack practice in using grammatical rules orally and when such errors occur, most students will immediately realize that they have just committed an error, and also sometimes, their classmates will speak out to correct them. It seems that there is no need for teachers to spend much time in correcting these errors every time they take place, since many of them have already been realized by the students or corrected by their classmates.

The rates of CF across the five error types also show conformity to what the teachers said in the interviews. Discourse errors are most likely to cause misunderstanding as they make the meaning of the whole discourse incoherent. As a result, discourse errors are treated as “serious” errors by all four teachers which have to be corrected.

Different from what has been found by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Zhao (2005), implicit input-providing feedback is the most frequently used CF strategy following all the error types including the lexical errors which seemed to be more likely followed by the output-prompting feedback in the previous studies.

Ten out of all the 12 cases (see Table 4.4) of unsolicited use of L1 were followed by feedback moves all of which were implicit input-providing feedback (in some studies, implicit input-providing feedback in such situations is also called translation). This type of error indicates that learners are aware of their failure to find the proper expression in English. Therefore, implicit input-providing feedback is accepted by them as corrective responses from teachers. In three of the 10 cases, the teachers translated learners’ L1 into English like a confirmation check (as in Example 4.1):

Example 4.1:

S: There are many, eh, 具有哲理的 (“with philosophical meaning”) sentences.
T: Philosophical sentences?
S: Yeah.
(Topic continues)

Implicit input-providing feedback in the disguise of a confirmation check makes the conversation flow smoothly and is more likely to win response from learners.

Implicit input-providing feedback is teachers’ first choice in response to most phonological errors (79.1%) because recasting students’ phonological errors is very salient and unequivocal, especially when students are reading aloud. Most of the implicit input-providing feedback following phonological errors was short, targeted and immediate after the error was committed, and such feedback can help students notice their incorrect pronunciation as well as push them to repair.

Lexical and discourse errors invite more output-prompting CF than phonological errors. Unlike the implicit input-providing feedback following phonological errors, such feedback following lexical and discourse errors “risk[s] being perceived as alternative yet equally correct forms” (Lyster, 1998b: 206). Sometimes teachers may offer a synonym to
enrich students’ vocabulary. In the present research, for example:

Example 4.2:

S: …and Lincoln was murdered.
T: Assassinated, actually.

In other situations, the teachers may reformulate students’ utterance in a better way though there is no error (see Example 4.3).

Example 4.3:

S: …the young people are very tired. They need some fun.
T: …the young people in Hong Kong are really stressed so they need some fun.

Similar findings have also been noted in L1 contexts. Marcus (1993), for example, argued that implicit input-providing feedback does not indicate whether the corrective reformulation is simply a stylistic variant or synonym or the learner’s utterance is unacceptable. To avoid such potential ambiguity the teachers may have spared more time to prompt students in addition to providing them with the correct form.

4.3 Corrective Feedback and Learners’ Uptake

4.3.1 General picture of uptake following CF

Learner response that follows teachers’ corrective feedback is coded as either uptake or no uptake.

**Table 4.6** Frequency and percentage of uptake and repair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Uptake</th>
<th>No uptake</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Repair</td>
<td>Needs-repair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>36 (59%)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 (42.6%)</td>
<td>10 (16.4%)</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29 (54.7%)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>24 (45.3%)</td>
<td>5 (9.4%)</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28 (52.8%)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>24 (45.3%)</td>
<td>4 (7.5%)</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19 (47.5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>6 (15%)</td>
<td>13 (32.5%)</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>112 (54.1%)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4.6 and Figure 4.2, about half of the corrective feedback was followed
by student uptake (54.1%). Most of the uptake turned out to be successful error correction (80 out of 112, or 71.4%), which accounts for 38.6% of all the feedback moves. Where total errors (294) are concerned, 27.2% of all students’ initial errors were repaired.

The results reveal that corrective feedback, in a broad sense, proves not very effective in eliciting students’ response, let alone students’ repair. However, the accuracy rate of uptake is relatively high, and this means that students were prone to successful correction if there was any uptake.

Figure 4.2 Total number of turns with errors, CF, uptake and repair

4.3.2 Relationships between CF types and students’ uptake

As shown in Table 4.7 and Figure 4.3, implicit output-prompting feedback is most likely to lead to uptake (91.3%) while explicit input-providing feedback is most probably followed by no uptake (72.2%). Implicit input-providing feedback (recast), the most popular feedback technique, induces uptake 42.7% of the time, much lower than explicit and implicit output-promoting feedback (85.7% and 91.3%). Output-prompting feedback techniques, whether explicit or implicit, are similar in that they are not very effective at eliciting repair from students (54.3% and 52.2%). Explicit and implicit input-providing feedback moves, though with lower rates of repair (16.7% and 35.1%), are less likely to lead to needs-repair (11.1% and 7.6%) than the other two types of feedback (31.4% and 39.1%).

Table 4.7 Distribution of each CF type across different students’ responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CF types</th>
<th>Uptake</th>
<th>Repair</th>
<th>Needs-repair</th>
<th>No uptake</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/input</td>
<td>Explicit correction</td>
<td>5 (27.8%)</td>
<td>13 (72.2%)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/input</td>
<td>Recast</td>
<td>56 (42.7%)</td>
<td>75 (57.3%)</td>
<td>131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46 (35.1%)</td>
<td>10 (7.6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit/output</td>
<td></td>
<td>30 (85.7%)</td>
<td>5 (14.3%)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19 (54.3%)</td>
<td>11 (31.4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CF types</th>
<th>Repair</th>
<th>Needs-repair</th>
<th>No uptake</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elicitation</td>
<td>22 (91.7%)</td>
<td>2 (8.3%)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 (54.2%)</td>
<td>9 (37.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic</td>
<td>7 (77.8%)</td>
<td>2 (22.2%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 (55.6%)</td>
<td>2 (22.2%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal signals</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/output</td>
<td>21 (91.3%)</td>
<td>2 (8.7%)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 (52.2%)</td>
<td>9 (39.1%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>request</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>9 (81.8%)</td>
<td>2 (18.2%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 (54.5%)</td>
<td>3 (27.3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.3** Distribution of each CF type across different students’ responses

In order to get a clearer picture of how CF types influence students’ uptake, all the CF moves are put into two major categories (as shown in Tables 4.8 and 4.9) and examined closely.

**Table 4.8** Uptake following explicit and implicit feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Explicit</th>
<th>Implicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uptake</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Repair/needs-repair)</td>
<td>(22/13)</td>
<td>(58/19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No uptake</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.8 shows a comparison of uptake between explicit and implicit feedback. Implicit feedback leads to uptake 50% of the time while explicit feedback is twice likely to lead
to uptake than no uptake. In other words, explicit feedback is more effective at eliciting uptake than implicit feedback.

Table 4.9 Uptake following input-providing and output-prompting feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Input-providing</th>
<th>Output-prompting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uptake</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Repair/needs-repair)</td>
<td>(49/12)</td>
<td>(31/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No uptake</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.9 displays a comparison between input-providing and output-prompting feedback. Output-prompting feedback techniques were more effective at inducing uptake from students (88%). It involved uptake with a more even distribution between repair and needs-repair (53% and 35%) than input-providing feedback (33% and 8%). In other words, the uptake following input-providing strategies is more likely to be successful in correction of errors.

4.3.3 Discussion

The present research showed a relatively low rate of uptake against all feedback moves, the result of which is much similar to those from Lyster and Ranta’s study (1997) and Lyster’s research (1998b). But the rates of uptake and repair appeared much lower than those showed in New Zealand ESL classroom (Ellis et al., 2001) and Korean EFL classroom (Sheen, 2004). If there was any uptake to CF, the students were very likely to repair the errors in their response. Repair was much more prevalent in the present setting with senior and college learners than in the immersion settings with children in Canada (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) and in the ESL setting with less educated learners (Panova & Lyster, 2002) (which were only 48.9% and 33.9%, respectively). It seems that learners with higher proficiency are more likely to attend to teachers’ feedback and thereby notice the gap between the erroneous output and teachers’ correct form. Sheen (2004: 291) reported similarities and differences in teachers’ CF and learners’ uptake across different instructional settings and concluded that “the extent to which learners produce uptake and repair may reflect their previous experiences of responding to CF in classrooms”. Philp (2003) suggested that learners’ proficiency may influence their ability to perceive teachers’ feedback. Mackey and Philp (1998) also pointed out that lower-level students cannot locate the errors to be attended to.

According to this researcher’s observation, one reason for the low rate of uptake is that sometimes the teachers correct student errors and then continue the topic without offering any opportunities for the students to make response. It is likely that the teachers feared that the flow of communication might be interrupted when the students were expressing their opinions and expecting to hear the teachers’ comments. In the interviews afterwards, some teachers said that it was time-consuming to wait for students’ response every time after a feedback move, especially when the errors were taken as “not very
serious” (for example, the students may use the form correctly in writing but make a mistake orally) and there was no need to do so as long as the students had clearly noticed the gap.

To explore other underlying reasons, each type of CF should be carefully examined on how different types of CF influence student uptake.

• Explicit and implicit feedback

The finding from the present research shows that implicit feedback types were used extensively and these types tended to yield lower rates of uptake than explicit types. The fact that explicit feedback techniques reach a comparably high level of uptake indicates that these feedback moves tend to be noticed by students, as “uptake may be related to learners’ perceptions about feedback at the time of feedback” (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000: 492). Implicit feedback may serve a better communicative function in classroom discourse in the way that it helps keep students’ attention focused on content and move the lesson ahead, while explicit feedback enables learners to notice problems in their output.

• Output-prompting and input-providing feedback

Like the previous studies, output-prompting feedback moves, including elicitation, repetition, clarification request, metalinguistic explanation and nonverbal signals, are more successful in eliciting students’ uptake and repair. Such feedback moves, also coded as negotiation of form in the previous studies, “push[es] them [the learners] to modify their output themselves” (Lyster, 1998b: 207) by inciting them to notice the errors in their utterance and leaving them no place to steer away from self-correction. On receiving such feedback, the students were actively involved in error correction as they had to answer the teacher’s question or complete the teachers’ utterance (as in Example 3.3).

Example 3.3:

T: How about the trip in Suzhou?
S: The consumption is very expensive.
T: What do you mean by consumption? (Clarification request)
S: I spent more money than I expected. (Needs-repair)

In this case, the student had to reformulate what she had said in order to make clear what she had meant. It is possible that the teacher had understood her when hearing “The consumption is very expensive”, but she kept the whole conversation smooth by way of raising a request for further clarification so that the student was driven to repair her utterance without being disturbed. In Example 4.5:

S: The letter instructed that—
T: The letter instructed. Any other word? In the text. (Repetition and elicitation)
S: stated. (Repair)

In response to the student’s error, the teacher repeated the utterance to indicate that there was an error and gave a hint to encourage the student to self-repair. Data of this study
show that repetition was sometimes used together with other feedback moves. Without a rising tone, repetition in multiple feedback could function as a signal to the students that there was an error and could give some time for them to re-examine what they had just said. Elicitation in the present study often took the form of an open question (also see in Example 3.5) which forced the students to take a turn to speak.

Despite its effectiveness in eliciting uptake from students, output-prompting feedback accounted for about one-fourth of all corrective feedback. The low frequency of such feedback could be attributed to the small amount of uptake in the data of the present study.

Input-providing feedback, namely explicit correction and recast, works less effectively to draw students’ uptake. In such feedback strategy, students may hesitate to speak out the correct forms again which have already been provided by teachers. Sometimes the students are reluctant to admit that they have committed errors in front of their peers and as long as they know how to correct the errors it seems redundant to correct openly.

Compared with explicit correction, recast fared better, but still less than half of it led to uptake. Recast, as the predominant feedback type, tends to cause ambiguity among students. Along with frequent non-corrective repetition in classroom discourse, recasts provide or seek confirmation or additional information related to the learner’s message (Lyster, 1998a). Recasts risk being perceived as “alternative or identical forms fulfilling discourse functions other than corrective ones” (Lyster, 1998b: 207). Sometimes, recast can be expressed as a question as in the following example. In such situations, recasts seem more like a confirmation check and force students to reply (see Example 4.6).

Example 4.6:

S: I will find a place, dreaming.
T: Daydreaming?
S: Yes.

In spite of the low rates of uptake, input-providing feedback moves are more likely to induce successful recoding of errors from students than output-prompting feedback. If the students responded to such feedback as explicit correction and recast, as the study shows, they were very likely to repair them successfully because the correct forms had been provided.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Major Findings
This study investigated the provision and effectiveness of teachers’ corrective feedback in Chinese EFL classrooms. It examined what CF strategies teachers use, how error types influence CF and how CF strategies work in eliciting students’ uptake. The study yielded the following findings:

• In Chinese EFL classrooms, teachers may use a new type of CF, namely, nonverbal
signals. With nonverbal signals, teachers use gestures or facial expressions to indicate the existence of errors in students’ utterance. Teachers provided seven types of CF in senior middle school and university EFL classrooms: explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, repetition and nonverbal signals. All of the seven CF types can be explicit or implicit, input-providing or output-prompting. Implicit input-providing feedback dominates in the different CF types.

• Different error types lead to different choice of feedback strategies. Teachers closely attend to discourse errors but show much more tolerance for syntactic errors than for other types of error. Recasts are used most frequently in treating all the error types while teachers may prompt students’ self-correction when lexical and discourse errors occur.

• Output-prompting feedback is more effective in eliciting learners’ uptake than input-providing feedback, but input-providing feedback yields a lower needs-repair rate, which means students can do self-correction more successfully when offered input-providing feedback.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications
The findings provide EFL teachers with information as to how to deal with students’ linguistic errors properly. Error correction will not always impede the flow of communication. When errors appear, teachers can respond to them in a natural way and that will also facilitate language learning.

Teachers may choose from different CF strategies when treating learners’ errors. Recasts are the first choice in correcting all the types of errors, but in order to avoid ambiguity, teachers may adopt some output-prompting strategies such as elicitation and clarification requests in correcting lexical and discourse errors.

When providing corrective feedback, teachers may offer opportunities for learners to react. For example, they may give some hints so as to elicit learners’ self-correction or spare one or two seconds for learners to repair.

As the most widely used strategy, recast is least effective in drawing learners’ notice but very successful in leading to their self-repair. Learners tend to ignore teachers’ recasts or mistake them for confirmation checks. Therefore, teachers may recast students’ erroneous utterance with the help of rising intonation, stress and even some gestures to make the correction more salient to students. By repeating the errors first, they may give learners some time to reflect on what they have said so that they can pay attention to the reformulative expressions.

5.3 Limitations
Given the specific learning context and the relatively small sample size, the present study leaves room for improvement.

First of all, the four teachers were all female and their ages ranged from 26 to 33, and this affects the generalizability of the results. Teachers may have different teaching methods and personalities. In the absence of comparison between the teachers, the present study has its inherent limitations.

Second, the student participants may have different needs and preferences, but such
needs and preferences were ignored even when their proficiency levels and educational backgrounds were taken into consideration.

Third, the study focused on a narrow range of activities in a comprehensive English course but ignored other activities in which the students were involved. Free discussion and problem-solving tasks may trigger different patterns of CF from teachers.

Fourth, the identification and categorization of errors were largely based on the researcher’s own judgment, and such judgment may not be accurate and appropriate in all cases.

Fifth, the study only employed as instruments of data collection observation and teacher interviews, which cannot reveal many unobservable activities in the learning process. In future studies, student interviews can be used, and they may give a more reliable picture of how various CF strategies work.

Finally, the present study examined the immediate result (uptake and repair) of the teachers’ corrective feedback. The long-term impact, if any, remains unknown. As a result, the study cannot fully reveal whether and how CF helps students develop their second language.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research
Despite its various drawbacks, the present study sheds some light on future CF research.

Future research may take social and institutional contexts into consideration. Affective needs of learners can also be taken account of. One type of CF (e.g., explicit or output-prompting CF) is not inherently more effective than another type (e.g., implicit or input-providing); what is best for one learner in one context may not be best for the same learner (or another learner) in a different context. The different results from the previous studies, as well as the present one, imply that CF needs to be situated and dynamic.

Other aspects of CF should also be examined in future research, such as the timing of CF, delayed impacts of CF and CF at different proficiency levels.

Future studies may adopt other research techniques such as diary studies to explore how CF influences students’ unobservable language learning.

References


Xu Shanshan

Language Acquisition, 20, 51-81.


(Copy editing: Duncan Sidwell)