Perceptions and Preferences of ESL Students Regarding the Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback in Libyan Secondary Schools

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Abstract: *This study investigates the perceptions and preferences of ESL learners in Libyan secondary schools, regarding the corrective feedback. The results are based on the analysis of the responses to 120 questionnaires administered to the students. It confirms the positive value of corrective feedback, which the body of existing research literature in the field states, and also reveals and provides evidence to the fact that the learners quite often feel offended or embarrassed, particularly in teacher-fronted classes, when the corrective feedback is given in the presence of their peers. And it is, however, also not decisively clear whether the corrective feedback should be given immediately after the error is detected or after the students have finished their tasks. The study also reveals that, often, the learners do not receive their expected feedback*

I. Introduction

Error correction has been an age old practice in language learning classrooms. In Grammar Translation method, the main focus of correction was always the grammatical correctness. In the following Audio-lingual method the emphasis was on pronunciation. But in the 70s, with the emergence of the communicative approach, questions were asked whether these corrections really contributed to the acquisition of oral proficiency of the second / target language. It was then believed that efforts to correct the errors would divert the attention of the learners and therefore the corrective intervention should not be carried out. But over a period of time it was noticed, that the learners would not become aware of the errors they had committed repeatedly, if they were not corrected, and that the non-correction of those errors would lead to fossilization,Selinker, L., & Lakshamanan, U.(1992), of ill-formed structures.

II. Significance of the study

While there have been several studies examining the different aspects of the corrective feedback, one aspect which has not received much attention, which it deserves, is the learners' preferences and perceptions of corrective feedback. Understanding what the learners want and what their perceptions are, will provide essential information to the language teachers on how the problem of corrective feedback should be dealt with in the ESL instructional setting.

Keeping this aspect of corrective feedback in mind the present study aims to fill this gap in the research literature. The result of this study will have important implications for language learning and teaching.

III. Research Questions

The study sets out to answer the following research questions:
a) What do the ESL learners actually think about the role and effectiveness of corrective feedback? And how should this be best provided in the instructional settings?
b) To what extent does corrective feedback emotionally affect the ESL learners?

IV. Literature review

Learners, whether they are the first language learners or the second language learners, always make errors and making errors has now been understood as indicators of the developmental sequences of interlanguage systems that are constantly being restructured and modified when discovering the new language. A great body of literature has dealt with the issue of error corrections and numerous terms have been used in this area. The term 'corrective feedback' is used as an umbrella term to refer to both implicit and explicit negative feedback in natural and instructional settings. Russell & Spada (2006:134) defined corrective feedback as "any feedback provided to learners, from any source, that contains evidence of learner error of language form. It may be oral or written, implicit or explicit". Error correction was the commonly used term until Lyster and Ranta (1997) used the terms *feedback on error*, *corrective feedback*. Corrective feedback takes the form of responses to learner utterances that contain error. The responses can consist of (a) an indication that an error has

been committed, (b) provision of the correct target language form, or (c) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or any combination of these".

Teachers and researchers can learn a lot from learners´ errors by discovering the common learning difficulties and problems that most learners experience when discovering the new language as well as identifying the cognitive strategies or mechanisms employed when processing the new language data. Additionally, learners´ errors reveal how far they have progressed over the time and what remains to be learned. Therefore the learners´ errors should not be seen as signs of failure or serious obstacles to be learning, because they actually constitute an important aspect of language learning. It should, on the contrary, be considered as a sign of achievement or progress in language learning and as part of language creativity as well. Given that learning takes time and that nobody learns a language without making mistakes, errors are then viewed as a developmental phenomenon and are consequently unavoidable in the discovery of a new language (James, 1998) and as such they should be treated in a flexible and rational manner. Brown (2000), claims that errors, far from being bad, represent a natural, indispensable and even necessary phase of L2 learning. He further adds 'that it needs to be remembered that L2 learning, like L1 learning, is a process of trial and error, because learners need to constantly make inferences and guesses about the functioning of the new language. Generally SLA constitutes a slow, gradual and often arduous process'.

4.1 How helpful is corrective feedback to the learners?

In the last two decades several studies have been conducted to determine the value of corrective feedback in second language learning. While there appears to be a general consensus that the corrective feedback is beneficial**,** there are considerable number of studies which show that it is and can be emotionally harmful.

Firstly, the argument in favour of error correction. The overall effectiveness of corrective feedback in classroom settings has been demonstrated in terms of empirical classroom research as well as theoretical perspectives. Most research studies advocate the facilitative role and/or effectiveness of corrective feedback in classroom settings (e.g., Roberts, 1995; Lyster and Ranta, 1997**;** Lyster, 1998; Panova and Lyster, 2002; Ellis et al., 2005; Bitchener and Knoch, 2009;). In addition, several meta-analyses have confirmed its effectiveness (Russell & Spada, 2006; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Shaofeng, 2010;). However, there still exist many challenges and complexities still to be explored regarding corrective feedback effectiveness (Truscott, 1996, 2007;). The research evidence from several classroom studies reveals that corrective feedback can be helpful for L2 learning or rather supports the potential benefits of error treatment (Lyster, 1998; Russell & Spada, 2006). Corrective feedback –whether oral or written- is believed to facilitate L2 learning by providing learners with two types of input: positive and negative evidence. Certainly, learners need to receive negative evidence or corrective feedback (information about ungrammaticality) when they are not able to discover themselves how their interlanguage differs from the L2.

What is the contrary view? There are some scholars and researchers who believe that corrective feedback should be avoided, because it can have potentially negative effects on learners´ emotions and, consequently, on SLA (Krashen, 1982; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 1996, 1999). Despite making it clear that corrective feedback may be useful for monitored written production, but not for spontaneous oral production, Krashen (1982:75) argues that corrective feedback is not only unnecessary, but also potentially harmful to language learning because it "has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive". Likewise, Schwartz (1993) believes that corrective feedback is only useful in effecting superficial and temporary changes to L2 learners´ performance, not to their underlying competence. In fact, its negative and harmful effects may discourage and demotivate learners. In short, these researchers argue that SLA depends solely on positive evidence, and thus negative evidence is not necessary and might even be harmful for interlanguage development.

4.2 Differences in opinion concerning oral and written corrective feedback.

It becomes more evident in the debate between Truscott and Ferris, because Ferris argues that corrective feedback depends on the quality of the correction, that is, if the correction is clear and consistent it would actually work. According to Ferris (1995), corrective feedback should be provided unless its ineffectiveness and harmfulness have been conclusively proven. In this sense, Ferris (1999) states that we are at present unable to confirm that error correction actually works because there are too many methodological flaws in the design and analysis of the published studies. However, recent studies, some of which have already been referred before, have shown that written corrective feedback can result in acquisition. Thus, the debate on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of feedback on errors still continues and generates much controversy among SLA researchers.

However, the effectiveness of corrective feedback has been justified from different perspectives. The role of corrective feedback is grounded in Schmidt's (1990, 2001) `noticing hypothesis´ which suggests that in order to learn anything that is new, noticing is essential. For this reason, the degree of explicitness of corrective feedback is necessary to promote noticing (Russell & Spada, 2006). The proponents of the Noticing Hypothesis advocate the benefits of corrective feedback in stimulating noticing, or rather, in drawing learners' attention to form (Ellis, 1994; Robinson, 1995).

4.2 Raging controversy regarding corrective feedback

Several controversial issues have been extensively discussed in the last two decades, concerning corrective feedback, by both SLA researchers and language teachers (see, for example, Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The five *most important controversies* concerning corrective feedback are: (1) which corrective feedback actually contributes to L2 acquisition?, (2) which errors should be corrected?, (3) who should correct? (the teacher or the learner him/herself/), (4) which type of corrective feedback is the most effective?, and (5) when is it better to do corrective feedback (immediate or delayed)? What is actually questioned by language teachers is why students go on making the same errors over and over again even when such errors have been repeatedly explained to them. One of the most frustrating tasks for L2 teachers is that of constantly correcting the same errors.

In fact, many teachers simply do not understand why their students are unable to use the linguistic forms taught by them correctly and, thus, many of them somehow feel guilty. Certainly L2 teachers seem to be hesitant to use corrective feedback for fear of interrupting the flow of communication in some activities and of inhibiting the learners´ participation. In response to the dilemma of whether or not errors should be corrected, the fact is that leaving students' errors untouched might lead to the fossilization of ill-formed structures. No matter what the teachers do, some students will benefit from corrective feedback, while others will not (Guenette, 2007). Teachers have confirmed this fact again and again in classroom in their empirical studies. The amount of time and effort teachers spend in providing corrective feedback somehow suggests that error treatment is very important for many teachers as well (Ferris, 1995). Ideally, corrective feedback *should be individualized*, even though this would evidently involve an enormous challenge for L2 teachers. The question is how and how much? It has been shown that overcorrection can become counterproductive since it may discourage learners, even though too little can be equally negative. Ur (1996) suggests the idea of investing better time in avoiding errors than in correcting them, which most teachers agree. Corrective feedback generally involves a time-consuming and exhaustive activity of the teacher´s job. A meaningful observation is that checking every single error does not make any sense. Corrective *feedback should be provided selectively,* as many researchers recommend. This necessarily implies that errors should *be prioritized. Additionally, quick corrections are not useful, unless they are about something repeatedly worked on in class.* The fact is that students require quick correction of mistakes but not to stretch it for a long time. Although corrective feedback is desired and accepted by most L2 learners who need feedback on how well they are doing (Ur, 1996), the fact is that they do not always receive the corrective feedback that they expect and/or prefer.

4.3 The affective factors

Does corrective feedback affect the learners' emotions and feelings? Research studies, as pointed before, show that it does. In spite of the fact that the corrective feedback has a positive role in second language teaching and learning, and the learners do desire that their errors be regularly corrected, the fact that many of these learners also find the corrections embarrassing and in varying degrees has also been reported by researchers. Truscott (1999), strongly believes that feedback on error does not actually work and, consequently, should be abandoned because corrective feedback may cause embarrassment, frustration, inhibition, and feelings of inferiority among learners. This is the reason why he reached this conclusion: `Correction is a bad idea´. In addition to describing error correction as a traumatic experience and not at all helpful for students, he even suggests that teachers´ time and effort should be better spent on *other aspects of teaching.* What language teachers cannot actually do is to make learners feel embarrassed or frustrated when being corrected. In addition, many learners neither notice nor understand all evidence of corrective feedback until they are explained in a direct way by the teachers themselves (Ferris, 1995; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). The fact is that a great deal of teacher feedback is unnoticed on the part of learners. What really matters is that learners are aware of being corrected and understand the nature of the correction as well (Roberts, 1995). Accordingly, the real challenge for teachers is to make sure that their corrective feedbacks are actually noticed and understood on the part of learners.

Numerous investigations have been undertaken to explore a variety of factors that may influence the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Learners´ individual differences (personality, attitudes…) and affective factors need to be seriously taken into consideration in all aspects of teaching. In fact, second language pedagogy has highlighted the importance of positive feedback or reinforcement in providing affective support to the learner and stimulating motivation to continue learning. However, negative evidence provided through corrective feedback may seriously damage learners´ feelings and attitudes (Martínez, 2008). Therefore, the potential affective damage which the corrective feedback can cause, needs to be taken into consideration seriously. In short, learner individual characteristics and affective aspects may affect or influence the effectiveness of corrective feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

The complexity of error treatment as an instructional practice and interactive phenomenon as well as a potential tool for language acquisition deserves special emphasis. What is really true is that corrective feedback is a complex issue that needs to be carefully examined. As a matter of fact, research on corrective feedback provides us with valuable information about the effectiveness of this instructional practice as well as knowledge about how language learning actually occurs (Panova and Lyster, 2002). Both SLA research and L2 pedagogy have convincingly shown that learners can greatly benefit from corrective feedback in communicative classrooms, or rather, corrective feedback actually works in the language classrooms (e.g.Lyster, 2004; Russell & Spada, 2006**;** Ellis et al., 2005; Bitchener and Knoch, 2009; Lyster & Saito, 2010**;** Shaofeng, 2010).

4.4 Unsystematic approach to corrective feedback

Administering appropriate corrective feedback needs proper teacher education in this area. But unfortunately the lack of teacher training also contributes to the learners' negative responses to the corrective feedback. Several research studies have shown that teachers' feedback can often be imprecise, arbitrary, idiosyncratic, ambiguous and unsystematic. In recent years the research has moved from addressing whether corrective feedback actually works to examining what type works best. It is a known fact that the feedback on errors can be provided in a wide variety of ways, and the learners respond to them in different ways. The most comprehensive classification of corrective feedback is the one proposed by Lyster and Ranta (1997): explicit correction, recast, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, repetition and clarification request. Research examining the effectiveness of certain types of feedback is till inconclusive. The debate is still going on to determine what types of corrective feedback are more effective, which obviously means that it is not easy to decide which type of feedback is the best for all contexts (Ellis et al., 2005; Russell & Spada, 2006;). Lyster & Saito (2010) remind us that the teachers need to adapt and adjust to a wide variety of corrective feedback techniques to the particular learner´s cognitive and affective needs.

V.   Method

5.1 Participants

The present research study was conducted at secondary schools located in Misrata, the financial capital of Libya. 130 Students studying in their final year of their secondary education, specializing in English, participated in the study. To obtain more comprehensive and varying responses, two groups each from two different schools were randomly selected. The average age of the students was 17 years, ranging from 17 to 19. The participants in the study had studied English for 6 years. They all spoke Libyan Arabic as their 1st language and came from the same cultural background. Except in the classrooms, English is not used anywhere, either for social or official communication in Misrata. Some students were exposed to English language programmes on TV. No one had visited any English speaking country.

5.2 The instrument and data collection

Data collection took place during the scheduled class time in October 2014. A survey was made using a questionnaire with 13 specific questions (taken from Valdeón (1999)**.** Additionally, two more open-ended questions were added, in order to gather their preferences on corrective feedback and how they would emotionally react when they received the feedback. Slight modification was made for responses- Yes, No, Not sure - so that, the respondents could give unambiguous and straight forward answers. After distributing the questionnaire to 130 students, the researcher personally explained to them what each question meant. After reminding the group of informants of the importance of giving honest answers, they were assured of the confidentiality of the data. The participants completed the questionnaires, anonymously, in one and a half hours' time and returned them to the researcher. After receiving the completed questionnaires, the researcher discarded 10 of them, as they were incomplete. Accordingly, the response rate was 93.30%. Of the 120 participants, 70(58.33%) were females and 50 (41.66%) were males.

5.3Analysis and discussions of results
Table displays the results of descriptive statistics.

	Questions	Yes	No	Not sure	Total
1	Is error making an essential part of the learning Process?	85.%	13.26	1.74	100%
2	Do you resent it when you make mistakes?	58.30%	39.95%	1.74%	100%
3	Is error correction an essential part of the teaching process?	80.91%	17.76%	1.33%	100%
4	Do you resent being corrected by the teacher?	30.81%	63.12%	6.07%	100%
5	In speaking activities, do you expect the teacher to correct you?	70.00%	25.35%	4.65	100%
6	Should the teacher interrupt you when you make a mistake ?	53.56%	45.86%	0.58%	100%
7	Should he/she correct you once you have finished?	60.30%	35.37%	4.33%	100%
8	Should he/she correct you once the exercise is finished so that the whole class can learn from your mistakes?	75.07%	19.70%	5.23%	100%
9	Should he/she correct you in private?	23.35%	75.07%	1.58%	100%
10	If you answered the previous question in the affirmative, why? A. Otherwise, you feel embarrassed 35.55% . B. Your mistakes are of no interest to other students 35.55% C. When corrected in public, you do not pay much attention to it 28.90%	-100%			
11	In writing activities, should the teacher use a red pen?	80.56%	15.37%	4.07%	100%
12	Do you feel corrections in red have a negative effect on you?	29.58%	70.42%	0.00%	100%
13	Would you prefer the teacher use the same colour as you?	10%	81.%	9%	100%

14	What do you expect the teacher to do? a)to provide you with all the information or 75.58% b) use a code to tell you the type of mistake you have made and check it yourself? 24.42%	100%
15	Which method will help you most to understand the reason why you have made the mistake and, consequently, to avoid it in the future? A. Explanations 12.04% B. Examples 17.45% C. A combination of both 61.30% D. Mere correction of the mistake without any explanations 2.07% E. Eliciting students to self-correct their own mistakes 7.14%	100%

The table above, shows the results reduced to statistical data, obtained from the responses of the respondents. Regarding making errors, (Question 1), though the vast majority of respondents (85%) believed that it is an essential and necessary phase for second language learning, nearly 58.30% of the participants resented when making mistakes in the classroom (Question 2). Although they accept the nature of errors as an essential part, they also view them as an unpleasant aspect. As regards the facilitative role and effectiveness of error treatment in the classroom context, most of the respondents 80.91% stressed the importance of corrective feedback (Question 3) as an essential instructional practice to improve second language learning. Surprisingly, 63.12% two thirds of the participants acknowledged not feeling resentment when being corrected by the teacher inside the classroom (Question 4), because they find teacher feedback highly necessary and helpful.

Questions 5 to 10 are mainly concerned with oral corrective feedback in class-fronted situations, which seem to generate certain kind of anxiety among some learners. 70% of the participants preferred or expected to be corrected by teachers (Question 5). However, more importantly, the timing of correction seems to be unclear because while more than half of the subjects 53.56% believed that the teacher should interrupt them and correct them immediately when they make errors (Question 6), about 60.3 (Question 7) felt that the correction should be done when they have finished the exercise. Also, 75.7% believed that if the correction was made after all have finished the exercise, the rest of the classmates could learn from the errors(Question 8). Accordingly, the correction at the end of the class was assessed as the best alternative. While the vast majority of the respondents 75.07% preferred to be corrected in front of the classmates in the classroom, only 23.35% preferred to be corrected in private (Question 9), among other reasons (Question 10), because they might feel embarrassed (35.55%) or considered that their mistakes were their concern and nobody else´s (35.55%) or did not pay much attention to corrective feedback when being corrected in public inside the classroom (28.90**%**). As it can be seen, Questions 7 to 9 propose several alternatives to immediate corrective feedback (Question 6). Unlike oral corrective feedback in class-fronted situations, written mistakes seem to be more private, not subject to general scrutiny. Questions 11 to 13 focus on written corrective feedback. The vast majority of the participants (80.56%)

preferred that the teacher used a red pen when correcting written activities (Question 11). Additionally, nearly 70.42% disagreed with the idea that corrections in red could have a negative effect on them (Question 12). In fact, approximately 81.21% of the subjects would not prefer the teacher use the same colour as they (Question 13). The data obtained somehow suggest that the informants consider the red pen a tool to bring their attention to specific points rather than a method to discourage them from learning. Accordingly, the use of a red pen, or rather, corrections in red do not seem to have the negative effect that has been assumed it has, at least for this sample of population surveyed. In Question 14, two possible correction methods or techniques are provided. While about 75.58% of the subjects surveyed would prefer the teacher to provide them with all the information, only 24.42% believed, in contrast, that the teacher should use a code to indicate students the type of mistake they have made and check it themselves. Surprisingly, most respondents preferred the traditional approach rather than the option proposed by the communicative approach. As regards the last question (15), in which the participants were requested to state their preferences for possible corrective feedback techniques, the combination of both explanations and examples obtained the highest percentage (61.30%) being the preferred option, followed by a mere provision of examples (17.45%). On the contrary, both direct correction without any explanations and self-correction are believed to be unhelpful at least for this sample of population surveyed.

In the light of these findings, it can be said decisively that the corrective feedback does play a facilitative role in second language acquisition. The sample of population surveyed supports the effectiveness of corrective feedback by stating their preferences for being orally corrected even in public inside the classroom. However, the resulting data also suggest that corrective feedback may at times inhibit or discourage L2 learners because some of them may feel seriously inhibited and embarrassed, particularly when being orally corrected in class-fronted situations.

VI.   Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out whether the ESL learners perceived corrective feedback as beneficial and what they thought about it and what their expectations were. Overall, though the corrective feedback has been found to be beneficial and desirable, it is, however, not decisively clear whether the corrections should be made immediately when they are doing the exercise or after they have finished doing it. Additionally, learners´ attitudes towards corrective feedback should not be neglected because those who constantly receive negative comments from teachers seem to have more negative attitudes towards language learning than those who receive positive feedback. It is also decisively clear that the corrective feedback can do affective damage. It means that the corrective feedback per se is not harmful, but it is the manner in which it is done can prove to be harmful. Obviously the teachers should become sensitive to the learners' emotional state and understand their individual differences. Learners' negative or positive attitude towards the corrective feedback does depend upon the way it is done in the classroom settings.

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