

# Feedback in Second Language Teaching and Learning

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Feedback is an essential part of language learning and teaching that influences students' learning and achievement. Feedback helps both the teachers and their students meet the goals and instructional means in learning and teaching. In this review, feedback for motivation and for language correction is discussed on theoretical and practical grounds. Concepts of feedback and reviews of evidence associated with types of feedback as well as their positive and negative impacts are discussed in this paper. Furthermore, the reviews of supporting research evidence address how different types of feedback yield different levels of effectiveness in language learning.

*Keywords:* feedback, motivation, correction, second language learning

## Introduction

Feedback is a vital concept in most theories of learning and is closely related to motivation. Behavioral theories tend to focus on extrinsic motivation such as rewards (Weiner, 1990). In language learning and teaching, varying types of feedback can be provided to students. As in other disciplines, feedback that motivates students' language learning should receive particular attention. On practical grounds, feedback for motivation and language correction are a key concern for language educators.

Feedback can be defined from various perspectives. Based on Hattie and Timperley's (2007) work, feedback can be defined as "information provided by an agent with respect to one's performance or understanding" (p. 81). However, feedback also encompasses the consequences of performance. Hattie and Timperley (2007) explained further:

A teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response. (p. 81)

In teaching schemes, feedback should provide information specifically relating to the learning process so as to assist learners in understanding what they are learning and what they have just learned. Winne and Butler (1994) stated that "Feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies" (p. 5740).

Based on research results, some researchers postulate that feedback in learning and teaching is beneficial for learners (Bitchener, 2008; Evan, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause, 2011; Leki, 1991). Giving effective feedback is a

crucial concern for teachers. Feedback affects the learners' motivation in many different ways. Learners can receive feedback both in the form of rewards such as stickers and awards as contingencies to activities (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). With respect to learning theories, behavioral theory tends to focus on extrinsic motivation such as feedback and rewards (Weiner, 1990). Receiving a reward or feedback for an action usually increases the likelihood that the action will be repeated. Feedback can help shape students' learning and performance. Learners who succeed at a task and continue to work hard are likely to expect future success and be motivated to expand their effort. Contrary to a behaviorists' argument, feedback can potentially also have a negative effect on learning. Learners who do not work hard and perform poorly on a task may not benefit from feedback (Chaudron, 1988). By understanding the effects of feedback on students' language learning, the theoretical aspects and related research studies are discussed.

### **Feedback for Motivation**

Gass and Selinker (2001) stated that motivation is a social psychological factor and a predictor of success in L2 (second language) learning. They (2001) stated further, "It makes sense that individuals who are motivated will learn another language faster and to a greater degree" (p. 349). Since numerous studies have provided evidence that indicate types of feedback to motivate language learning, feedback is therefore considered as a way to motivate students' learning especially in L2 learning.

Burnett (2002) and several researchers have focused on both effort and ability feedback (Dohrn & Bryan, 1994; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Schunk, 1984). Weiner (1979; as cited in Schunk, 2003) stated that "Effort is internal, unstable, and controllable, which is quite favorable for motivation" (p. 2). Schunk (1983; as cited in Schunk, 2003) defined effort feedback as oral or written feedback by others which link performance outcomes with effort. Learners who are successful with good performance on a task are likely to continue to work. Learners who poorly perform on a task or do not work hard are likely to continue their performance.

Early research on effort feedback showed some interesting results. Schunk (1982) found that effort feedback for past achievement led to more rapid progress in skill development and high percepts of self-efficacy. Schunk (1984) investigated how the sequence of effort feedback influences children's motivation, attributions, self-efficacy, and skillful performance. During the problem solving, one group of children periodically received ability feedback (defined as the ability-ability feedback condition), a second group received effort feedback (effort-effort condition), a third group was given ability feedback during the first two sessions and effort feedback during the last two sessions (ability-effort condition), and, for a fourth group this sequence was reversed (effort-ability condition). The results show that children who initially received ability feedback (ability-ability and ability-effort conditions) developed higher ability attributions compared with subjects in the effort-ability and effort-effort conditions.

Regarding F. Hyland and K. Hyland's (2001) study, praise can be considered in terms of its functions as feedback. Praise is performed in different ways and for different purposes. Mueller and Dweck (1998) stated that feedback for effort can affect students relative to both their goals and their attributions. First, effort-related feedback could "lead children to focus on the process of their work and the possibilities for learning and improvement that hard work may offer" (p. 34). Since it places emphasis on efforts, students may focus on the

development of their skills through the mastery of new material. The students may focus on their achievement and continue displays of persistence, enjoyment, and good performance in the face of setbacks. Second, children praised for their hard work may learn to improve their performance to achieve their goals regardless of their poor performance which is considered as a temporary “lapse in effort rather than as a deficit in intelligence” (Mueller & Dweck, 1998, p. 34). Burnett stated further that praise for hard work or effort could lead students to display more adaptive achievement attributions after failure than those praised for intelligence. A previous study carried out by Mueller and Dweck found that fifth grade students praised for intelligence or ability were found to pay more attention to performance goals associated with learning goals than students praised for effort. After failure, the students praised for ability also displayed less task determination, less task enjoyment, more low ability attributions, and worse task performance than students praised for effort. Burnett (2002) summarized Mueller and Dweck’s findings, stating that effort feedback is preferred to ability feedback when it comes to the consequences of student failure.

### **Corrective Feedback**

Researchers have suggested that CF (corrective feedback) is associated with L2 learning, because it leads learners to notice L2 forms (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009). CF can be explicit or implicit. An alternative way of categorizing feedback types is to differentiate between “input-providing CF (corrective feedback) and output-pushing CF” (Ellis, 2006). For example, input-providing CF provides the correct reformulation through recasts; output-pushing CF withholds the correct reformulation and promotes students’ self-repair through prompt (Lyster, 2002, 2007; Lyster & Mori, 2006, 2008; Ranta & Lyster, 2007). We will discuss these types of feedback in a later section.

#### **Explicit CF or Direct Feedback**

Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) defined explicit CF in general as “the process of providing the learner with direct forms of feedback” (p. 83). In writing scheme, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) claimed that explicit correction provides for correction of linguistic form or structure at or near the linguistic error. They explained further that this feedback can be the crossing out of a word, phrase, or morpheme, the provision of grammar rules, or the oral clarification of written meta-linguistic explanations. To address oral performance, teachers may point out that the learners’ utterance is wrong. As such, they directly identify their students a specific point of error (Carroll & Swain, 1993, as cited in Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009).

Some debates rose against grammar correction. Some researchers found grammar correction was not helpful (Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1999). To discover if learners benefit by having grammar errors corrected by their teachers, researchers have produced some interesting findings. For example, Leki (1991) found that ESL (English as a Second Language) tertiary students had wished that their writing teachers would have provided them direct feedback on their writing. Likewise, Ferris (1995; as cited in Hyland, 1998) found that ESL tertiary students were interested in comments on grammar and content. Recently, the Bitchener’s (2008) study investigated the extent to which WCF (writing corrective feedback) can help low-intermediate ESL learners to improve their correct use of the English articles *a* and *the*. The results show that learners who received WCF significantly outperformed those who did not receive WCF. They also retained their level of accuracy for two

months on average. Evan et al. (2011) found that ESL undergraduate students who were taught using dynamic WCF showed significant improvement in linguistic accuracy in L2 writing, while those who received traditional process writing instruction showed some declines in linguistic accuracy. Nevertheless, more research studies are still required to investigate the effectiveness of direct feedback in improving linguistic accuracy, to facilitate the acquisition of error correction (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Evan et al., 2011; Hyland, 1998; Truscott, 1996). In oral correction, explicit feedback is “the teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student said was incorrect” (Lyster & Mori, 2006, p. 271). In a conventional classroom setting, oral correction tends to either be formal or provided on the form of praise (Schachter, 1983, as cited in Lynch & Maclean, 2003). In an informal conversation (Carroll, 1996, as cited in Lynch & Maclean, 2003), “Feedback is intrinsically inferential in nature. Even in the classroom, where teachers expect and are expected to provide feedback, learners’ responses to teacher feedback are bound to be filtered through their individual interpretations of the teacher’s intention” (p. 3).

However, there is no uniformly agreed conclusion that feedback has a direct impact on learners’ oral performance. Truscott (1999) claimed orally direct correction has no impact on learners’ grammatical accuracy in speech. However, SLA (second language acquisition) researchers have developed a framework to analyze the influence of feedback on conversational performance (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 1995). Methodologists increasingly emphasize the extension of correction feedback beyond language forms (Mendelsohn, 1995) and types of correction associated with speech genres (Lynch & Anderson, 1992). Scholars who have discussed feedback from pedagogic perspectives seem to have much concern regarding the individual effects of feedback, including the anticipation of response with its effects on individual learning (Byrne, 1987; Harmer, 2001), and learners’ perceptions (Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000). Lynch and Maclean’s (2003) work investigated the effect of teacher feedback on changes in spoken language of a group of advanced learners of English attending an intensive ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course in the Netherlands. This study examined whether students became aware of language problems that were identified as well as not identified by a teacher in the form of feedback, and whether they were aware of changes in their language performance. The finding showed that the learners’ awareness of their language use increased, as seen in their positive comments found in questionnaires. They also reported an improvement in English language over time. The datasheets showed more emphasis on phonology than on grammar in tutors’ feedback notes.

### **Implicit Feedback or Indirect Feedback**

Implicit feedback or indirect CF is defined as furnishing the type of error that has been made but not providing a correction (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). In their writing, Bitchener et al. (2005) claimed that the means of implicitly correcting errors could include underlining or circling an error and recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line. Coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, with the type of error involved indicated with a code. Bitchener et al. illustrated the use of coded feedback in correcting an English tense. For example, PS means an error in the use or form of the past simple tense. They (2005) defined uncoded feedback as “instances when the teacher underlines an error, circles an error, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error” (p. 193).

Giving implicit CF can be performed as a recast (Egi, 2010; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Naeini, 2008; Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009). Nicholas, Lightbown, and Spada (2001) defined a recast as “the teachers’ correct restatement of learners’ incorrectly formed utterance” (p. 720). A recast, to Naeini (2008), serves “the dual purpose of a clarification request and a correction, and thus fit quite naturally into the conversation” (p. 126). According to Long (1996), the functions of a recast can include both a confirmation of the meaning of the student’s utterance and a correction of forms. A recast will be of benefit if learners notice it (Schmidt, 2001). Regarding noticing, Schmidt (2001) described it as a “first step in language building” (p. 31). This happens when the learner notices input that holds potential for learning (Schmidt, as cited in Loewen & Philip, 2006). In the work of Loewen and Philip (2006), focus is on the incidence and effectiveness of recasts in the adult L2 classroom. In the pedagogic context, recasts are considered as an expeditious form of feedback. This is advocated by Long’s (in press; as cited in Loewen & Philip, 2006) work which indicates that a recast is time-saving, less threatening to student confidence, less disruptive of the flow of interaction than elicitation of self-repair, and contingent on the learners’ intended meaning. Unlike explicit feedback, recasts retain the focus on meaning. By implementing recasts, teachers can maintain control. It is reasonable to assume that for these reasons, recasts are so frequently used in many language classrooms (Ammar & Spada, 2006, as cited in Sepehrinia, Zarea, Moghaddam, & Nasiri, 2011; Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

A recent study carried out by Abdollahzadeh and Maleki (2011) investigates the effect of recasts in task-based grammar instruction on conditionals and relatives. A total of 114 Iranian adolescent and adult EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners participated in the study. The findings show that the recast is efficient in establishing new grammatical knowledge. Among different types of corrective feedback, the recast was the most frequently used in oral correction. Furthermore, adults benefited more than adolescents from recast in their learning of conditionals and relatives. The teacher’s corrective recast was found to be very effective in removing erroneous structures from the students’ language. Interestingly, Abdollahzadeh and Maleki (2011) stated that “Leaving learners’ errors unnoticed might result in the fossilization of erroneous structures; hence, they should not be neglected, instead learners’ errors should be corrected either on the spot as in this study or with delay” (pp. 64-65).

Loewen and Philip (2006) found that recasts were widely used and were beneficial at least 50% of the time. As suggested, “learner repetition of recasts may not be a good indication of learning” (Loewen & Philip, 2006, p. 551). The findings show that short recasts with few changes and with interrogative intonation are likely to be more advantageous than those of declarative intonation. Likewise, Doughty and Varela (1998) found that by use of intonation in corrective recasts, that is, repetition of the error with rising intonation so as to draw the students’ attention and then providing the correct L2 forms, were greatly effective in increasing the learners’ use of past tense forms in both oral and written science reports.

However, there are controversies on the effectiveness of recast. Some researchers found recast to be ineffective compared with other types of feedback. For example, Lyster (2004) and Ammar and Spada’s (2006) findings show that prompts promoted SLA more effectively than did recasts. Previous studies on recasts and other types of corrective feedback have shown that recasts are less clear than other types of corrective feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Lyster, 2004; Yang & Lyster, 2010). These studies compared recasts with other types of

corrective feedback such as prompts and showed that learners who received prompts outperformed those who received recasts.

In the prompting approach, the teachers “withhold correct forms and instead offer learners an opportunity to self-repair by generating their own modified response” (Lyster, 2004, p. 405). In prompting, a teacher gets students to self-correct. In doing so, the correction process involves a “deeper mental processing” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Lyster (2004) suggested that the students should have latent knowledge of structure. He stated further that prompting will not be useful if the students are not familiar with the grammar structure and the vocabulary.

Drawing on Yang and Lyster’s (2010) study, 72 Chinese undergraduate EFL students attended three intact classes with a treatment condition: recast, prompt, or control. This study compared the effects of feedback treatments via analyzing both oral and written test scores for tests on English regular and irregular past tense forms. The findings show that statistically the prompt group showed relatively large effect sizes in comparison to the recast and control groups. In addition, the prompt group significantly outperformed the control group in accurate use of irregular past tense forms in the posttest.

In the investigation of the effects of form-focused instruction and feedback type on learning, Naeini (2008) measured the corrective feedback in the form prompts. The participants were 32 Iranian EFL learners at a language school. The participants in the treatment group received prompts, while the control group received the same instruction and materials without any feedback. The participants in the treatment group reported that they enjoyed being corrected and they were satisfied with the feedback given in the form of prompts. The learners in the treatment group outperformed those in the control group. Prompts had statistically significant effects on the learners’ writing skills.

### **Conclusions**

In reviewing studies pertaining to CF in language teaching and learning, this paper presents knowledge of feedback by providing definitions of different kinds of feedback, explaining types of feedback, and determining the effectiveness of feedback from empirical studies. In the first section, concepts of feedback were discussed and several learning theories were presented. In this paper, the types of feedback related to language learning and teaching were described and illustrated. In language learning, feedback approaches may involve either or both effort and ability feedback via oral and/or written means. In this case, several studies yielded interesting results. In the author’s teaching experience, learners do not have opportunities to use English in their daily lives, because English is not their native language. Too often, the learners perform poorly on a task. A written and/or oral comment on their performances, in the author’s experience, is a valuable source of feedback. Successful learners who received effort feedback were likely to continue to work on a task. On the other hand, those who received ability feedback focused on performance goals related to learning goals. In the author’s opinion, language teachers need to step back from their daily practice to reflect upon their learners’ performance and teaching strategies. It is vital that some attention to giving feedback be a major concern for both experienced and new teachers. The second section focused on CF, including explicit and implicit feedback. Explicit feedback or direct CF involves correcting linguistic form or structure at or near the linguistic error, crossing out a word, phrase, or morpheme, or verbally clarifying in written metalinguistic explanations. Implicit feedback or indirect CF

involves confirmation checks, clarification requests, or recasts. Explicit and implicit feedback creates cognitive ability to detect an erroneous point. At the same time, learners can elicit self-correction. Research contexts provide us with information about learners from several countries with different educational background and instructional settings. In some cases, SLA variables require further research. Nonetheless, feedback evidently has a great impact on learners' development and on an ability to learn an L2.

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