

## PEER CORRECTION AMONG IRANIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** The major objective of this study was to examine how Iranian English language learners correct their peers. English learners from different private language institutes in Iran took part in this research, they were asked to complete a questionnaire containing a situation in which a learner makes a mistake. Based on the frequency or percentage of the options selected by the participants, the provided answers were analyzed and the influence of age, gender, proficiency level and culture on the speech act of correction was discussed in detail. The obtained results proposed that age, gender and culture play major roles in providing peer feedback but proficiency level is somehow different. Moreover, the findings of the current research were compared and contrasted to shed more light on peer correction.

**Key terms:** corrective feedback, peer feedback, speech act, peer correction

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### INTRODUCTION

Language learners are supposed to learn how to communicate in the target language in classrooms; however, learning isolated words and phrases will never serve the communicative purpose, and the sociocultural context of the second language must also be taken into consideration if we want this aim to be fully achieved (Cohen, 1996). ‘Speech act’ is a major field of discourse which has been applied to second language acquisition. In nearly all interactions, learners must be able to put speech acts to good use, so they should be taught not only how to produce but also how to interpret and comprehend a speech act utterance; if not, they may know well what someone says, but not be able to understand it (Johnstone, 2008). However, the strategies applied for realizing speech acts, the frequency of their use and their performance in general, are all disparate in different cultures; so in order to foster communication, both sociolinguistic and sociocultural ability of learners must be given heed to by EFL/ ESL teachers in language classrooms.

One of the speech acts which require to be investigated and has been left somehow untouched is ‘the speech act of correction’. Therefore, in this study we are about to explore how Iranian EFL learners correct their peers if they make a mistake and whether they differ in their speech acts if their age, gender, proficiency level or culture change.

## Theoretical framework

Learners' performance is monitored and assessed by the teacher in order to find out why errors are committed and then to provide corrective feedback (James, 1980). As Brown (2007, p. 379) states, corrective feedback includes responses to learners' produced utterances which "repair" or "call attention" to their errors; Brown goes further to mention that for the corrective feedback to be efficacious, it must be 'optimal' i.e. very few corrections will lead to fossilization, and too many corrections, on the other hand, might prevent the learners from making more attempts to communicate. Therefore, in order to make the best out of correction, teachers can apply the 'Communicative Feedback Model', offered by Vigil and Oller (1976), which helps teachers in approaching learners' errors in language classrooms.

As Chaudron (1988) argues, learners consider correction as a source of improvement, but it is the teacher who determines the most proper time for correction, the best type of that and whether to correct or not. There are different types of correction (Brown, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2001):

- a) Explicit/ Direct: Implicit/ Indirect: When the teacher points out the problem and asks the learner to correct it if possible (Richards & Schmidt, 2002);
- b) Peer-correction: When other learners cannot understand or when they see someone 'gets stuck' (Paulston & Bruder, 1976);
- c) Self-correction: It helps learners in "pushing their output in the direction of improved accuracy" (Swain, 1985, as cited in Celce-Murcia 2001, p. 274);
- d) Clarification request: When the learner is asked to repeat or reformulate (Brown, 2007);
- e) Repetition: When the teacher repeats what the learner had said with a change in intonation (Brown, 2007);
- f) Recast: When the teacher repeats learners' ill-formed utterance with a minute change in form (Brown, 2007);
- g) Metalinguistic feedback: When the teacher gives comments and information or asks questions (Brown, 2007);
- h) Elicitation: When the teacher gives a prompt to help learners self-correct themselves (Brown, 2007).

According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), learners' responses to teacher's feedback will vary, no matter what type of correction is applied, and their reaction to the received feedback from teachers is called 'uptake'. As Lyster and Ranta (1997, p.49) put it, uptake is "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". Therefore, when a learner produces an erroneous utterance, the teacher or peers provide feedback and the learner responds to it.

Correction is not always applied by the teacher. In learner-centered educational settings where collaborative learning is exercised and learner autonomy is highlighted, 'peer-correction' is required, which has been proved essential (Lin & Chien, 2009; Sultana, 2009). However, as Sultana (2009) also suggests, the specific educational context and learners' demands must be examined carefully before the application of any method or technique.

Moreover, if the teacher decides to practice peer correction in class, he/ she must consider both advantages and disadvantages of that. As Rollinson (2005) mentions, peer involvement provides a more supportive atmosphere as the feedback received from classmates is less threatening, and as a result of these the authoritative role of the teacher is no more reinforced. However, there are also some disadvantages; for instance, as Sultana (2009) states, learners' self-esteem and confidence might be dented and they may experience embarrassment and inferiority when corrected by a classmate. They might even be unwilling to correct their peers in order not to harm their relationship, or resist receiving feedback from them since they consider their classmates no better than themselves.

Plenty of research was carried out on speech acts in English so far; moreover, there are various cross-cultural studies which have compared and contrasted English speech acts with those of other languages such as Persian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Turkish. Speech acts such as

compliment (e.g. Grossi 2009, Tang & Zhang 2008), refusal (e.g. Chang 2008, Ken, Lin & Tseng 2006), request (e.g. Kılıçkaya 2010, Jalilifar 2009), apology (e.g. Shariati & Chamani 2009, Afghari 2007), complaint (e.g. Young 2008, Umar 2006), and disagreement (e.g. Guodong & Jing 2005) have been dealt with so far.

A salient point to be investigated in ELT classrooms is teachers' corrective feedback in response to learners' errors. Piles of research are available which have examined teachers' corrective behavior either to find a relationship between learners' errors and teachers' response or to pinpoint a correlation between error correction and accuracy, motivation or acquisition.

Among copious research on correction, we can refer to that of Panova and Lyster (2002) who observed patterns of error treatment in ESL classrooms and tried to find a relationship between feedback type and learners' response. Many researchers highlighted the type of correction favored by teachers and learners and concluded that teachers prefer indirect correction (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Some other researchers such as Vickers and Ene (2006) examined correction in writing who concluded that the most effective type is self-correction since it leads to greater grammatical accuracy. According to Allwright (2005), in nearly all studies on correction or corrective feedback, the social dimension of correction is brought into focus, which means any criticism or praise will both be public. So in order not to make learners feel "absolutely stupid" and to "maintain rapport", teachers need to think deeply when correcting a learner (Szextay, 2004).

What matters most in all mentioned situations is the speech act through which teacher corrects learners or vice versa. However, unfortunately, merely two studies have analyzed the speech act of correction in depth so far and have focused on *learner correction* as well- Takahashi and Beebe (1993) and Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (in press). In these studies only one aspect of learner correction has been investigated and that is learners correcting teachers and not the aspect under study in the current research\_ learners correcting peers.

As Takahashi and Beebe (1993, p. 142) explain in their research, softeners are "down-toning devices integrated in the main body of speech acts". In fact, softening devices are categorized into three groups:

- 1) *Softeners* (e.g. I believe, I think, You may have ...)
- 2) *Questions* (e.g. Did you say ...?)
- 3) *Expressions to lighten the gravity of the mistake or to defend the interlocutor* (e.g. You made one small error in ...).

In the current study, the use of softeners is also taken into consideration.

Another point to be investigated in this research is peer feedback in general. It is quite a long time that researchers deal with this question that whether learners prefer to receive feedback from peers or the teacher. Copious research (e.g. Lin & Chien, 2009; Sultana, 2009) has proved that though it depends on the educational setting, generally learners think that "teachers' corrections cannot be totally replaced by peer corrections" (Lin & Chien, 2009, p. 84).

Although learners prefer to receive the ultimate answer from the teacher, they do not dislike peer correction and even find it helpful in making "learning experience more relaxing, confident, and inspiring" (Lin & Chien, 2009, p. 84). It is also held that since learners are involved when giving feedback to their peers, it can lead to better learning (Gower, Philips, & Walters, 1995 as cited in Sultana, 2009).

### **Purpose of the study**

As mentioned earlier, it seems that a great deal of research has been carried out in other realms of speech acts including refusals, requests, apologies, compliments, complaints etc. However, the speech act of *correction* had remained somehow untouched. Moreover, there are plenty of studies (e.g. Lin & Chien, 2009; Sultana, 2009) which studied the issue of learners' corrective feedback, all focusing on types, time and methods of correction, the impact of peer correction in different skills, and the relationship between age and peer feedback. However, none of these researchers

highlighted the *speech act* through which a learner corrects his/ her peers and whether it makes any changes if they add softeners and positive remarks or not.

Therefore, paucity of research in this realm makes this particular study significant, with the chief purpose of delving into ELT classrooms to discern how EFL learners correct peers, whether the speech act of correction differs among different age groups, whether males and females apply the same speech acts for correction and how culture influences the way learners give feedback to each other.

## METHODOLOGY

### Setting and participants

A community sample of 180 language learners participated in this study, comprising 90 males and 90 females aged between 15 and 45 i.e. 90 teenagers and 90 adults. The sample also comprises EFL learners of three different levels– starter (N=52) intermediate (N=52), and advanced (N=52). They were all EFL learners studying in language institutes in Mashhad, a city in Iran with different social economic backgrounds. In this study, age, gender, proficiency level and culture are the four variables whose role were to be examined.

### Instrumentation

As Cohen (1996) believes, one of the straightforward methods for gathering data on speech acts is through discourse completion questionnaires which will gather a lot of data at full pelt.

Participants in this study were required to complete a questionnaire which was designed based on the guidelines provided by Takahashi and Beebe (1993), Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (in press), and personal teaching experiences. There is a situation where a mistake is made by one of the learners and the participants must pen how they would respond to it. Six options ranging from implicit to explicit were provided to aid the participants, and a space to write their opinion if it was not included (see Appendix 1).

The content validity of this questionnaire was substantiated through a pilot study in which 60 EFL learners took part. On the recommendations of an expert in this field and based on the feedback received from participants, questions were revised and ambiguities were removed.

### Procedure

The process of data collection started in October (2010), beginning of a new semester in language institutes, and ended in December (2010) after 3 months. The designed questionnaires were distributed among EFL learners in different language institutes. Their classes were interrupted for 10 minutes by kind permission of their teachers; some instructions and needed guidance were provided by the researchers before responding. Then, the participants had about 3 minutes to read the situation and options and to decide on their responses. The questionnaires were collected afterwards to be analyzed.

The options selected by the respondents were transformed into tables displaying the frequency and percentage of each, and the tables were analyzed qualitatively through comparing and contrasting the options. Three tables were compiled, each focusing on one of the variables under

study. The participants of each group – males and females, adults and teenagers, starter, intermediate and advanced learners – were compared and the results were discussed.

At the end, Iranians' performance was compared to that of Americans and Japanese to figure out whether sociocultural differences bring about variations in the speech act of correction. It was also investigated what other factors might have had a crucial influence on the way learners responded.

## RESULTS

In the given situation, learners are asked to pen what they would say if another learner made a mistake in answering a question. Considering the participants, there are three different variables to be examined (gender, age, proficiency level) and in this situation, six options to be checked off. The options contain both implicit and explicit answers and for the first part of the analysis, we are to demonstrate whether females' and males' peer-correction differs, and if it does what the differences are.

**Table 1-** Frequency and percentage of answers to each option considering gender

Variables / Options	A		B		C		D		E		F	
male	5	2.7%	8	4.4%	9	5%	21	11.6%	13	7.2%	33	18.3%
female	2	1.1%	11	6.1%	10	5.5%	36	20%	11	6.1%	29	16.1%

As it is indicated in Table 1, most of males (18.3%) preferred option 'F':

*"I'd wait for the teacher to correct, if he/she didn't I would correct."*

It seems that males prefer to let the teacher take action rather than interfering. It may be due to interpersonal reasons rather than intrapersonal ones, i.e. the relationship existing among males differs greatly from that of females, so they might not like to or dare while that is not the case with females, 16.1% of whom selected this option.

The most favored option among females is 'D' (20%).

*"I think it's 'going' not 'goes'."*

Since this option seems not only to be implicit but also contains 'softeners' or 'down-toning devices' such as "I think" (Takahashi & Beep, 1993, p. 142), we can infer that female EFL learners prefer to correct their peers implicitly and at the same time they tend to remove a harsh tone through the application of hedges; however, they do not tend to devolve this responsibility upon the teacher. This option is also the second favored by male learners (11.6%).

The least number of participants opted for option 'A', merely 2.7% of males and 1.1% of females selected this option:

*"I would probably say nothing."*

This indicates that both males and females tend to correct their peers. They may be implicit or explicit in correcting their peers, they may do the job themselves or devolve it on the teacher, and anyhow very few of them tend to keep silent and do not go for correction at all.

Therefore, in correcting peers, female learners tend to be more explicit in comparison to males who mostly prefer that the teacher makes the correction. The results are summarized as follows:

Males	<b>F &gt; D &gt; E &gt; C &gt; B &gt; A</b>
Females	<b>D &gt; F &gt; E = B &gt; C &gt; A</b>

**Table 2-** Frequency and percentage of answers to each option considering age

Variable Options	A		B		C		D		E		F	
	<b>adult</b>	3	1.6%	13	7.2%	9	5%	32	17.7%	7	3.8%	27
<b>teenager</b>	4	2.2%	6	3.3%	10	5.5%	25	13.8%	17	9.4%	35	19.4%

Since the second variable under study is age, we are to examine whether or not it plays any crucial role in the way learners correct peers. As demonstrated in Table 2, option 'E' is selected by most of the adult participants (17.7%), while most of teenagers (19.4%) opted for 'F'. It is concluded that age plays a major role in peer-correction; that is adult Iranian EFL learners tend to be implicit in their reactions to peers' mistakes but they prefer to correct anyhow; however, teenagers tend to wait for the teacher to correct the mistake.

The second most favored option is 'F' for adults (15%), and 'D' for teenagers (13.8%). It shows that adults like to correct their peers themselves in the first place, if not, the teacher should do it. Vice versa, teenagers like to let the teacher correct, if not, they would do it.

The next higher frequency among adults belongs to option 'B' (7.2%), and among teenagers option 'E' (9.4%):

B) *"No, it's wrong."*

E) *"Going!"*

Selecting option 'B' needs more courage and confidence, since it directly points out that the answer is incorrect, so it seems reasonable to be selected by more adults who may be more frank and outspoken than teenagers. Option 'E' is also an explicit way of correction which is not prefaced with any kind of softeners or hedges; however, it seems not as direct as 'B', since it may also be considered as proposing another answer rather than merely correcting explicitly.

The summary of the results obtained thorough Table 2 is summarized below.

Adults	<b>D &gt; F &gt; B &gt; C &gt; E &gt; A</b>
Teenagers	<b>F &gt; D &gt; E &gt; C &gt; B &gt; A</b>

**Table 3-** Frequency and percentage of answers to each option considering level of proficiency

Variable Options	A		B		C		D		E		F	
<b>starter</b>	1	0.5%	9	5%	3	1.6%	20	11.1%	4	2.2%	16	8.8%
<b>intermediate</b>	1	0.5%	3	1.6%	8	4.4%	21	11.6%	7	3.8%	20	11.1%
<b>advanced</b>	4	2.2%	6	3.3%	5	2.7%	12	6.6%	12	6.6%	16	8.8%

Casting a glance at Table 3, we deduce that option 'D' is favored greatly among starter and intermediate learners (11.1 % starter, 11.6 % intermediate). So, learners in these levels prefer to correct peers when making a mistake, but with the help of down-toning devices such as 'I think'. However, most of advanced learners (8.8%) tend to wait for the teacher to correct (option F). It might signify that though the knowledge is expanded when reaching advanced levels, the reliance on the teacher is not diminished.

Moreover, the second favored option is 'F' among starter and intermediate learners (starter 8.8 %, and intermediate 11.1 %), that is they tend to correct the mistake themselves and if not, they wait for the teacher to do that; however, advanced learners opted for 'D' and 'E' with exactly the same frequency, 6.6%. It means that if the mistake is not corrected by the teacher, they would take action and correct it either through an implicit answer embellished with softeners (D), or through a more direct one suggesting another answer (E).

The third selected option with high frequency is 'B' among starters (5%) and 'C' among intermediate learners (4.4%).

B) *No, it's wrong*

C) *You should say 'going' not 'goes'.*

This indicates that at a lower proficiency level, learners prefer to be indirect but correct at the first onset (option D), or to let the teacher correct (option F), and if not, they are inclined to mention there is something wrong (option B) or even dictate what to say (option C) as they shift to a higher level.

Here are the summary of the results considering the proficiency level of learners:

Starter	D > F > B > E > C > A
Intermediate	D > F > C > E > B > A
Advanced	F > E = D > B > C > A

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the current study, both females and males opt for peer correction either by themselves or the teacher; however, females are more outspoken or direct than males as they mostly tend to correct the peers themselves, while males prefer to devolve this responsibility upon the teacher, and if he/ she did not, they would take action. Though females are more explicit in comparison to males, they tend to correct implicitly through adding down-toning devices or hedges. This brings us to the issue previously discussed by Sultana (2009) that some students prefer not to correct their peers as they think it might harm their relationship, it might be true about males in this study.

Considering the age of the participants, it is inferred that the more the age of the learners, the more explicit they would become in correcting peers, i.e. adult Iranian EFL learners are more frank in correcting a classmate, while teenagers tend to let the teacher correct, if not, they would do it. The significant point to be considered is the salient role of age in peer correction, i.e. younger learners are more dependent on the teacher and for teenagers, “the teacher is the ultimate source of knowledge and correction should always come from the teacher” (Sultana, 2009, p. 14).

Learners at starter and intermediate levels seem to have more in common since they mostly prefer to correct their peers when making a mistake, while advanced learners tend to wait for the teacher. It might signify that the reliance on the teacher is not diminished as the level of proficiency increases. A closer look indicates that at a lower proficiency level, learners prefer to be implicit but correct at the first onset or let the teacher correct, and if not, they are inclined to mention there is something wrong, or even dictate what to say as they shift to a higher level.

Another important issue to be discussed is that of cultural differences. In most Asian countries, the authoritative role of the teacher is still preserved and the learners are sole receivers; though there is much effort to highlight ‘learner autonomy’, it is not fully achieved yet. That is why, acceptance of peer correction is context-dependent; for instance, learners of Bangladesh still have the tendency to receive the ultimate answer from the teacher not the peers (Sultana, 2009).

The educational context in Iran is also formal and there is a depersonalized relationship between teachers and students, for instance, learners are seldom called by their first names, especially at the school and university, and they almost never call the teacher by first name either. The teacher has a formal dominant role in class and as a result, the power status plays a crucial role in every aspect. Moreover, due to the existence of religious views, teachers’ job in Iran is considered equal to that of prophets, and therefore teachers are worshiped and highly respected. Overall, there may sometimes be a friendly relationship between a teacher and a learner, though it is often a formal and distant one. In accordance with results previously achieved by Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (in press), the educational context influences peer correction.

The results of this study suggest several implications; first, it will bring about consciousness raising of those involved in EFL/ ESL learning or teaching through informing them about peer correction and learners’ tendencies in different ages, levels or genders. Second, this study examined whether sociocultural differences affect the speech act of correction or not. Hence, it will be of great importance to cross-cultural studies which aim to compare different cultures and figure out the sources of cross-cultural miscommunication or failure. Moreover, this study deepens and enriches our understanding of the way learners correct their peers. Though the subject of peer correction has been widely discussed, the speech act through which learners correct their peers, and how age, gender and proficiency level influence this speech act proposes a lot more to write about.

Considering the interlocutors, there are three types of correction which can be done by learners: *teacher correction*, *peer correction* and *self-correction*. In previous studies (Pishghadam & Kermanshahi, in press), the first type of correction was examined among Iranian EFL learners and they were compared to other groups, and in the current research, the second type –peer correction– was studied. More studies are needed to investigate learners’ reactions in the other situation.



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**APPENDIX I**

You are a student in an English class. Your classmate is reading the answer to a workbook question and you realize it is wrong; instead of 'going' he/she says 'goes'.

- A) I would probably say nothing.
- B) *No, it's wrong.*
- C) *You should say 'going' not 'goes'.*
- D) *I think it's 'going' not 'goes'.*
- E) *Going!*
- F) I'd wait for the teacher to correct, if he/she didn't I would correct.

Something else: .....