

An Investigation into Teachers' Feedback on Learners' Errors: Gender and Teacher Experience

Reza Pishghadam (Ph.D.)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Email: pishghadam@um.ac.ir

Paria Norouz Kermanshahi (MA.)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Email: paria.pk@stu-mail.um.ac.ir

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Abstract: *This study seeks to scrutinize how Iranian EFL teachers correct learners; in other words, the speech act of correction they employ when providing feedback on learners' errors is examined in this study. Due to the fact that teachers are different considering their gender and teaching experience, these two variables are taken into account in the current research. To achieve this purpose, a questionnaire was distributed among 180 Iranian EFL teachers of both genders (male and female), with different teaching experiences (0-5, 5-10, and above 10 years). At the end, teachers' responses to each option were transformed into tables and bar graphs displaying their frequency to be analyzed afterwards. Finally, the results were discussed and some suggestions were made.*

Key words: *corrective feedback, speech act theory, speech act of correction, EFL*

1. Introduction

According to Brown (2007, p. 379), one of the teacher's major roles is to provide responses to learners' produced utterances which "repair" or "call attention" to their errors; in other words, the teacher monitors and assesses learners' performance to know the reasons why errors are committed, and based on that s/he can provide the appropriate corrective feedback.

Learners consider correction as a source of improvement (Chaudron, 1988), but it is the teacher who determines what is the best type of correction, when is the most proper time for that, and whether to correct or not. As Brown (2007) argues, for the corrective feedback to be efficacious, it must be "optimal"; that is, when there are too many corrections, learners may make no more attempts to communicate, and when there are very few corrections, it may lead to fossilization.

Correcting learners or providing feedback on their errors has long been a controversial issue among researchers (e.g. Brown, 2007; Chaudron, 1988). The methods, types, and time of correction have been dealt with in copious studies and books; however, the speech act through which learners are corrected by their teachers has remained untouched so far. Therefore, in this study we are about to explore how Iranian EFL teachers perform the speech act of correction when correcting learners.

2. Theoretical Background

Based on the tasks and the situations in which errors occur, teachers might apply different types of correction such as:

- a) Explicit/Direct: When the teacher indicates an error and supplies the correct form (Brown, 2007).
- b) Implicit/Indirect: When the teacher points out the problem and asks the learner to correct it if possible (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).
- 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) Peer-correction: When other learners cannot understand or when they see someone "gets stuck" (Paulston & Bruder, 1976).
- e) Recast: When the teacher repeats learners' ill-formed utterance with a minute change in form (Brown, 2007).
- f) Clarification request: When the learner is asked to repeat or reformulate (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 (Brown, 2007).
- i) Repetition: When the teacher repeats what the learner had said with a change in intonation (Brown, 2007).

When an error occurs, teachers must decide at first whether to "treat" or to "ignore" the error learners make (Brown, 2001, p. 292) which is to some extent affected by their view of language; if they consider language as a "perfectible grammatical system", they would correct all errors, but if they view language as a "functional communicative system", they would focus on comprehension and meaning of learners' utterances (Chastain, 1988, p. 283). Then, if treatment is called for, there are various options to be considered such as when and how to correct (Brown, 2001).

Based on the aim of the activity, the teacher can decide about the time of correction (Scrivener, 1994). If the objective is "accuracy", "immediate correction" is appropriate; however, if the focus is on "fluency", "later correction" is called for. He goes further to claim that "interrupting an activity in order to correct a student could kill the activity" (Scrivener, 1994, pp. 110-111).

In the same vein, McDonough and Shaw (2003) uttered that when the teacher is encouraging fluency in learners, regular corrections may lead to timidity of silent learners.

Another factor which must be taken into consideration in correction is the type of error learners make. As Hendrickson (1980) states, "local errors", which are not obstacles to understanding, do not call for correction, but "global errors" which may result in perplexing messages must be corrected immediately.

Considering various methods of correction, teachers' application of any method is to some extent designated based on their approaches to language teaching; in other words, if teachers adopt a traditional view, they believe that every error must be corrected, but considering the current view, they merely correct when the output is not intelligible or the intended meaning is not conveyed (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Therefore, teaching methods also have a great influence on teachers' corrective behavior.

Scrivener (1994, pp. 112-113) proposes 14 methods for correcting students:

- 1- Telling them
- 2- Wearing a facial expression
- 3- Taking on a facial expression combined with a gesture
- 4- Providing finger correction
- 5- Repeating the sentence up to error
- 6- Echoing
- 7- Asking a one word question
- 8- Drawing a time line on the board
- 9- Drawing spaces or boxes
- 10- Writing the problem sentence on the board
- 11- Exploiting the humor in the error
- 12- Using the phonemic chart
- 13- Forming a chain in which all students are involved in correcting
- 14- Reformulating

Whether teachers respond to learners' errors through immediate or delayed correction and whatever type of correction they adopt, the *speech act* of correction is by far the most important, since if correction is carried out insensitively, the results may be converse. As Harmer (1998) points out, correction must be accompanied by some encouraging words or expressions such as good, well-done, fantastic, and excellent. Therefore, in this research, attempt was made to carefully examine the correcting behavior in ELT classrooms and inquire into the applied speech act.

Copious studies are available which have investigated teachers' corrective feedback either to find a relationship between learners' errors and teachers' response or to pinpoint a correlation between error correction and accuracy, motivation or acquisition. For instance, observing patterns of error treatment in ESL classrooms, Panova and Lyster (2002) 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 examined correction in writing such as Vickers and Ene (2006) who concluded that self-correction is the best in writing since it leads to greater grammatical accuracy.

In nearly all studies done on correction or corrective feedback, it is brought into focus that error correction has a social dimension, which means any criticism or praise will both be public (Allwright, 2005). So according to Szesztay (2004, p. 133), teachers need to think deeply when they correct a learner in order not to make them feel "absolutely stupid" and to "maintain rapport".

Moreover, piles of research have been done on speech acts in English, and also cross-cultural studies which aimed at comparing and contrasting English speech acts with those of other languages. The speech acts, which have been examined thoroughly so far include 'request' (Kılıçkaya, 2010; Jalilifar, 2009), 'apology' (Shariati & Chamani, 2009; Afghari, 2007), 'suggestion' (Pishghadam & Sharafadini, 2011), 'persuasion' (Pishghadam & Rasouli, 2011), 'gratitude' (Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011), 'correction by EFL learners' (Pishghadam & Kermanshahi, 2011), etc. However the speech act of correction performed by teachers has remained untouched. Therefore, in the current research, we are about to examine the speech act of correction employed by teachers in ELT classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Setting and Participants

A community sample of 180 EFL teachers participated in this research, which was carried out in several language institutes in Mashhad, a city in Iran. The participants consisted of 90 males and 90 females with different teaching experiences: 0-5 years (N=48), 5-10 years (N=48), and above 10 years (N=48). To facilitate the job, we assumed a code for each group of participants.

Gender:

Female= f

Male= m

Teaching experience:

(0-5)= Group 1

(5-10)= Group 2

(above 10)= Group 3

In addition to studying the variables such as gender and teaching experience, it was momentous to the researchers to find out how culture makes differences in the speech act of correction. Nevertheless, since there was no access to participants of a different culture, the results were compared with those of Takahashi and Beebe (1993) as to compare and contrast Iranian and American teachers.

3.2. Instrumentation

Based on the guidelines provided by Takahashi and Beebe (1993), a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was devised to be distributed among teachers. As Cohen (1996) believes, one of the straightforward methods for gathering data on speech acts is through DCT which will gather a lot of data at full pelt and contain a prompt and a space for a response. The designed questionnaire; therefore, contained a situation in which the participants should have imagined themselves and 8 choices were available plus one to pen down what they would say if their answer was not included in the previous eight options. The content validity of the DCT was substantiated through a pilot study in which 60 EFL teachers 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.

3.3. Procedure

The process of data collection started in January 2011, took around two months, and ended in March 2011. The DCTs drawn up for teachers were distributed among them, took about 5 minutes of their time, and the needed information was collected. The options selected by the respondents were transformed into tables and bar graphs displaying the frequency and percentage of each, and the tables were analyzed through comparing and contrasting the options. Therefore, for

analyzing the results, two tables were drawn up to compare and contrast teachers regarding their gender and teaching experience. At the end, Iranian EFL teachers' performance was compared with that of Americans to figure out whether sociocultural differences bring about variations in the speech act of correction.

4. Results

The EFL teachers taking part in the research penned what they would say or how they would react in the proposed situation, when correcting learners. Considering the number of responses to each option and the group to which the respondent belongs, the obtained results are delineated below:

Situation- You are an English teacher and you teach adult intermediate learners. During the conversation class, one learner makes a mistake in a grammar point that they had already learned; instead of '2 years ago' he/she has said 'last 2 years'. What would you say/how would you react?

4.1. Teachers' Responses Considering Gender

Table 4.1.

Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Answers to Each Option, Considering Gender

Variable Options	A		B		C		D		E		F		G		H	
Male	12	6.6%	6	3.3%	2	1.1%	29	16.1%	3	1.6%	31	17.2%	5	2.7%	7	3.8%
Female	19	10.5%	10	5.5%	3	1.6%	25	13.8%	21	11.6%	28	15.5%	4	2.2%	17	9.4%
Total	31	17.2%	16	8.8%	5	2.7%	54	30%	24	13.3%	59	32.7%	9	5%	24	13.3%

Option A- *I would probably say nothing.*

Based on the frequencies displayed for option "A", we can deduce that more females (10.5%) tend not to correct the learner in this situation; however, the number of them is not so considerable neither males nor females. Since it is a conversation class and the focus is not on accuracy, it would be better not to stop the learner and hinder the flow of conversation; that is, when the objective of the task is "accuracy", "immediate correction" is appropriate, on the contrary, if the focus is on "fluency", "later correction" is called for (Scrivener, 1994).

Option B- *Well-done! You just made a small mistake, did you notice?*

According to Harmer (1998), correction must be accompanied by some encouraging words or expressions such as good, well-done, fantastic, and excellent. Among the teachers who preferred to have immediate correction (option B), 5.5% of females and 3.3% of males preferred to add encouraging words to that.

Option C- *I'm sorry...?*

One of the methods of correction is through asking for clarification (option C) and according to the obtained results, very few teachers (2.7%) apply this method in the mentioned situation. That might signify that even if teachers tend to correct

learners' errors when it is not necessary, they very rarely ask for clarification and might provide them with the correct form, either in statement form or with a questioning intonation.

Option D- *Oh, 2 years ago?*

Casting a look at the percentages, we can infer that 30% of the teachers (16.1% of males and 13.8% of females) provided learners with the correct form (option D) rather than making them think and find it themselves; that is, the more the teachers offer the correct answer, the more they spoon-feed the learners.

Option E- *Last 2 years?!*

As it was previously mentioned, according to Brown (2007), one method of correction is through repetition where the teacher repeats what the learner had said with a change in intonation (option E). Based on the frequencies displayed in Table 4.10., females (11.6%) apply this method of correction about seven times more than males (1.6%).

Option F- *Yeah, good you mean '2 years ago'?*

Option F is an example of explicit or direct method of correction; that is, when the teacher indicates an error and supplies the correct form (Brown, 2007); moreover, it is also accompanied with an encouraging word (good). More males (17.2%) and experienced teachers (13.1%) prefer correction through this specific speech act.

Option G- *I'd ask other students: 'is it correct'?*

The results show that encouraging peer-correction (option G) is not very much preferred by teachers in this situation; that is, almost the same number of males and females, and merely 5% of all teachers apply this method and rely on other students to react.

Option H- *Thank you, but you should say '2 years ago'.*

Comparing males and females, it seems as if female teachers were more authoritative; since 9.4% provided the answer accompanied with the modal 'should' (option H).

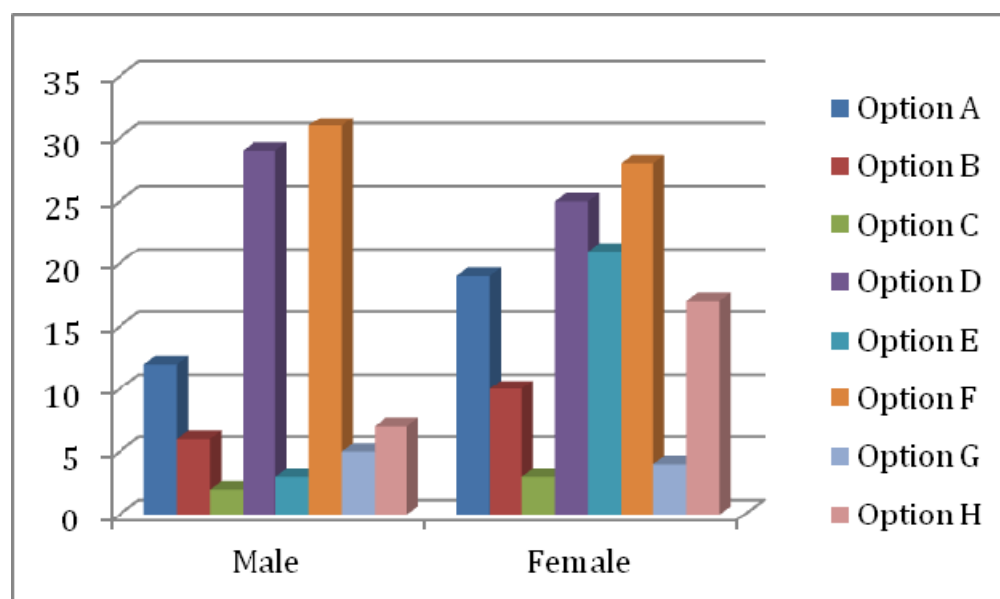


Figure 4.1. Frequency of Teachers' Answers to Each Option, Considering Gender

4.2. Teachers' Responses Considering Teaching Experience

Table 4.2.

Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Answers to Each Option, Considering Teaching Experience

Variable Options	A		B		C		D		E		F		G		H	
	0-5 years	6	4.1%	6	4.1%	1	0.6%	18	12.5%	6	4.1%	11	7.6%	0	0%	2
5-10 years	11	7.6%	4	2.7%	1	0.6%	14	9.7%	6	4.1%	17	11.8%	3	2.08%	3	2.08%
Above 10 years	10	6.9%	3	2.08%	2	1.3%	16	11.1%	8	5.5%	19	13.1%	4	2.7%	15	10.4%
Total	27	18.7%	13	9.02%	4	2.7%	48	33.3%	20	13.8%	47	32.2%	7	4.8%	20	13.8%

Option A- *I would probably say nothing.*

It was previously mentioned that correcting learners when 'fluency' is highlighted acts as an obstacle to learning. As it is expected, the more experienced the teachers are, the better they react to this situation. Teachers in group 2 (7.6%) and Group 3 (6.9%) who have more experience keep silent when the focus is on fluency.

Option B- *Well-done! You just made a small mistake, did you notice?*

As it was previously discussed, Harmer (1998) believes that correction must be accompanied by some encouraging words or expressions such as good, well-done, fantastic, and excellent. Results show that the more experienced the teachers become, the less they use these words.

Option C- *I'm sorry...?*

When teachers tend to correct learners' errors even if it is not necessary, they very rarely ask for clarification and might provide them with the correct form; that is, only 0.6% of teachers in Group 1 and Group 2, and 1.3% of the ones in Group 3 ask for clarification through this specific speech act.

Option D- *Oh, 2 years ago?*

Providing the correct form without making the learner think and challenge is similar to the idea of spoon-feeding which makes learners slothful, and according to Table 4.11., teachers with less experience (Group A) does this more often (12.5%).

Option E- *Last 2 years?!*

Correcting through repeating the ill-formed utterance with a change in intonation is slightly more favored by experienced teachers (Group C = 5.5%) in comparison with inexperienced (Group A = 4.1%) and experiencing ones (Group B = 4.1%).

Option F- *Yeah, good you mean '2 years ago'?*

Option F includes explicit correction or direct method of correcting learners which is indicating an error and supplying the correct form (Brown, 2007). According to Table 4.11., the more the experience of the teachers is, the more the use of this method would be.

Option G- *I'd ask other students: 'is it correct'?*

Encouraging other learners to correct their peers' mistakes would result in making them actively involved in the course of learning. Considering that, in comparison to other groups, experienced teachers (Group C) make use of this method more than others (2.7%).

Option H- *Thank you, but you should say '2 years ago'.*

Using the modal 'should' in the speech act of correction conveys a sense of authority to the addressee though the use of 'thank you' mitigates it a bit. Comparing three groups of teachers, it is apparent that the more they gain experience, the more authoritative they become.

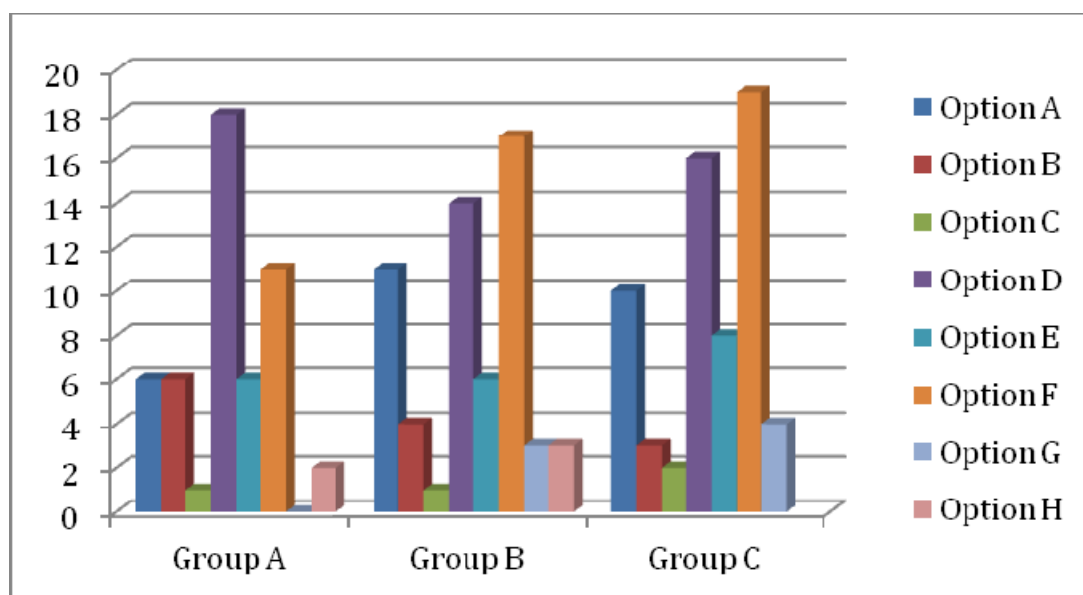


Figure 4.2. Frequency of Teachers' Answers to Each Option, Considering Teaching Experience

5- Discussion

Based on the obtained results, most teachers were not tolerant of mistakes and preferred immediate correction even if it was not necessary. This is compatible with the results achieved by Sheorey (1986), who claims that native and nonnative teachers differ with regard to error-tolerance; nonnative teachers must pay more attention to lexical errors and less to spelling ones to be native-like. In the same vein, low tolerance of errors was obvious in the current research. However, experience of teachers seemed to be having a profound effect on their method of correction; that is, the more experienced they were, the more tolerant of errors they became.

As it has been previously mentioned, correction must be accompanied by some encouraging words or expressions such as good, well-done, fantastic, and excellent in order not to de-motivate learners (Harmer, 1998); nevertheless, less than half of Iranian EFL teachers tended to preface their correction with a positive remark.

Based on the research by Takahashi and Beebe (1993), 64% of the American teachers speaking English preferred correction with at least one positive remark.

e.g. That was very good, but ...

Iranian EFL teachers seemed to be more similar to English speaking Japanese who seldom preface their responses with positive remarks (23%) and do it even less in their mother tongue.

Analyzing the results, we can deduce that teachers' experience played a crucial role in the applied correction method and speech act; experienced teachers tended to deploy authoritative speech act of correction (e.g. you should say...) more than others, they seemed to be more tolerant of mistakes, spoon-fed learners less than others and encouraged peer correction and consequently involved other students.

The results of this study can have several implications. First, language teachers are expected to monitor their learners' mistakes, trying to provide them with the appropriate feedback. Second, since the idea of teacher feedback is of great importance in shaping the learners' confidence in language learning, teacher trainers are recommended to make prospective teachers acquainted with feedback analysis. Third, Iranian teachers are expected to use more positive remarks in correcting the learners' mistakes.

Since this research was carried out on Iranian EFL teachers and the speech act through which they correct their learners was investigated, other studies are called for to probe how EFL teachers correct themselves and their colleagues. Moreover, the data of the current research was accumulated through DCT and the participants might act differently in real situations; therefore, it would be quite advantageous to gather naturally occurring data as well, and compare and contrast participants' performance.

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