CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN EFL CLASSROOMS
Ahmad Syarif
Graduate Program in ELT, State University of Malang, East Java
reeflection@yahoo.com

Abstract
In learning a foreign language, students need to eliminate their errors one by one to attain better communicative language. It is the role of their teacher to correct their errors to help them master the language as well as to avoid fossilization of errors. There are a number of approaches to correcting errors such as recast and explicit feedback. In recast, a teacher implicitly restates an incorrect utterance correctly, while in explicit feedback, a teacher can either simply tells the learner that what he or she said was wrong, or offers meta-linguistic explanation as to what is wrong and why. Regarding explicit feedback, a study revealed a mixed result of the approach. Based on the study this article discusses how to bring corrective feedback in EFL classroom.

Keywords: corrective feedback; explicit feedback; second language acquisition; foreign language teaching

Curriculum Vitae:
Ahmad Syarif earned his undergraduate degree in English Language Teaching from State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau in 2009. Since, 2010, he has been teaching at SMPN 1 Teluk Belengkong, Indragiri Hilir in Riau. He is currently pursuing his graduate study in ELT at State University of Malang.

In second language acquisition (SLA), errors are considered a natural part of the learning process and a sign of students’ efforts to produce the target language. Feedback is defined as an immediate response to learners’ errors and in order for feedback to be effective, it needs to inform the learners whether their answers are correct or not, as well as provide them with enough information and guidance to produce the correct target form (Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010).

For decades, questions about corrective feedback in second language acquisition (SLA) have been ardently debated, giving birth to a great deal of theoretical and empirical research. Some schools of thought like Behaviorism considered errors as taboos in their discourse and believed that they should be immediately corrected by the teacher (Brown, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) while others claimed that corrective feedback was not only unnecessary, but also harmful to language learning (Krashen, 1981a; 1981b). With the emergence of communicative approaches, corrective feedback underwent a radical shift (Nicholas,
Lightbown, & Spada, 2001). CLT advocates created a balance between what Audiolinguists and Cognitivists do and suggested that an error must be viewed as evidence of learners' linguistic development, not as a sin to be avoided. CLT advocates recognized the need for fluency and this allows teachers to leave some errors uncorrected.

Feedback in general is of two types: positive and negative. Negative feedback, also known as corrective feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006), is broadly defined as information following an error produced by the language learner. According to Schachter (1991), feedback can either be explicit (such as a grammatical explanation or an overt error correction) or implicit (such as confirmation checks, repetitions, recasts, clarification requests, and even facial expressions (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

How effective is giving corrective feedback to EFL learners? Regarding the question, the writer would like to review the article written by Miller and Pan (2015) entitled *The Effectiveness of Explicit Corrective Feedback in the Second Language Classroom*. Their study was to understand what they know about the effectiveness of explicit feedback, and to sort out the conflicting results of the studies. It is expected that this review will provide a new insight on how corrective feedback works in helping learners to achieve second language acquisition.

**Miller and Pan’s research findings and propositions**

While various studies have been carried out to scrutinize the effectiveness of corrective feedback in SLA, there is still a debate over whether corrective feedback is effective and if so, what type of corrective feedback is more effective. Miller and Pan (2015) have conducted research that focused on how effective explicit corrective feedback approach is. The meta-analytic review of the current research on explicit error correction in the L2 classroom was conducted to answer the question, does explicit corrective feedback have a positive effect on the learning of a second language?

Explicit feedback can be defined as simply telling the learner that what he or she said was wrong, or offering more a more meta-linguistic explanation as to what is wrong and why or helping the student recall a rule. There is lack of a clear indication about which type of feedback is most effective. However, Miller and Pan (2015) stated that many language teachers default to explicit error correction, as evidenced by the many studies that have examined explicit error correction.
In the study, Miller and Pan (2015) reviewed research reports taken from ERIC, JSTOR, the Social Sciences Citation Index, and Dissertation Abstracts International produced approximately 450 relevant articles and dissertations published between 1980 and 2013, with keywords of “explicit,” “corrective,” “feedback,” and “negative evidence,” and all the possible combinations of these key words. After applying the criteria of inclusion, there were 71 studies in the 22 final articles included in this meta-analysis.

The first criterion for inclusion in their meta-analysis was that the studies measure the effect of explicit corrective feedback on some aspect of a second or foreign language. Additionally, they only included randomized or quasi-experiments, and each study was required to report all of the appropriate information, including the sample size, mean score and standard deviation of both the control and experimental groups.

Miller and Pan (2015) also included in their analysis the first and the second languages of the participants, the linguistic structure that was the target of the study (e.g., knowing when to use simple past tense (preterit) or imperfect), the type of treatment implemented in the study (e.g., information gap), type of experimental group (e.g., randomized, in-tact, etc.), the type of treatment activities (e.g., oral role-play), length of study from the pre- to final post-tests, and the number of treatment sessions. Where there was more than one post-test, they only included the last post-test in their analysis. In particular, they excluded age and gender as the majority of the studies did not report this data.

In the finding of their research, Miller and Pan (2015) revealed a number of considerations that may contribute to the effect of explicit feedback on second language acquisition. The primary and high school settings had shows no significant difference. They stated that this perhaps because there was only single publication on each of them. The two characteristics that are perhaps the most surprisingly different are the “College” and the “Lab” settings. Although the participants in both of these categories are college students, the “College” category is studies where treatment took place in a regular class session, as opposed to the “Lab” category, where the treatment took place in a laboratory setting. The data analysis showed that the classroom setting effect size was small at 0.27 and the laboratory setting was 0.01, showing virtually no effect. These results suggest that participants may have benefitted from the classroom environment more than in a one-on-one laboratory setting.

In terms of first language, French had the highest effect size and the lowest is Dutch. The first language of the participants of the majority of the studies was English or a mixture, which
produced a small to moderate effect. The various results do not really show the real effect since the number of publication on each of the first language was different like the Japanese studies came from only a single publication and the Spanish studies from two publications.

In terms of the second language of the learners the trend is similar to that of the L1, where many of the studies all came from the same publication. The studies with the lowest effect size (Latin) also all come from the same publication, as do the studies with the other L2s, except for Spanish and English. Miller and Pan (2015) stated that it is difficult to determine why there is such a difference between the effect sizes of Spanish and English, but one possibility is that most of the English studies were in English as a Second Language classes, where the participants were learning English in a country where English is the dominant language spoken in society. They are likely to speak English outside of the classroom in daily interactions with their friends in after-school activities. Language learners living in an English speaking society also have unlimited access to television and music in English. These are all variables that a researcher cannot control when the subjects of a study are English learners living in a predominantly English-speaking society.

The target structure for the studies is the one characteristic that has the potential to have the biggest impact on the effectiveness of explicit feedback. The highest effect comes from the study which focused on sociolinguistic rules of the language, namely the use formal versus informal expressions and register in French. The verb tense had the lowest effect size, while the use of direct objects and their placement, and other forms of sentence structure (e.g., adverb placement), and other miscellaneous grammatical structures (e.g., the use of articles and participal adjectives) all had moderate effect sizes. These results may suggest that explicit feedback may be effective at learning some structures of language (e.g., sociolinguistic rules, adverb placement, etc.), but not others, such as verb tense.

When examining the design of the study, there is a significant difference in the effect size of studies that used intact groups and studies that used randomization. However, according to Miller and Pan (2015), these results are not too surprising, because in intact groups it is difficult to control the factors that may give influences on the outcome, such as the ability of the learners. What is more, in many instances, the intact groups were taught by their regular classroom teachers, and most of the random studies were completed in a laboratory. Furthermore, most of the laboratory studies were done with a computer, where the intact groups were given their treatments by a live person, in the context of a regular classroom setting. Therefore, they
concluded that feedback provided by a human has much more impact than that provided by a machine.

To sum up the overall result of the meta-analysis, Miller and Pan (2015) stated that the overall effect size of explicit error correction on second language learning suggests a small effect. Hence, there are still far too many questions that remain unanswered to make any conclusive comments about the effectiveness of explicit feedback, at least on long-term learning or acquisition of a second language. However, there are a number of measures that language teachers can take to enhance instruction, despite the uncertainty of whether such measures lead to acquisition or just surface level language learning. Most explicit feedback, however, does not provide many opportunities to repair language, which is likely to explain, at least in part, the low overall effect size of explicit correction in their analysis.

Miller and Pan (2015) proposed that language teachers must be committed to ensuring that language learners are not only exposed to the L2, but that learners are provided with many opportunities to interact in the L2 and to correct mistakes and errors. They also suggested that while explicit feedback may enhance instruction, it is important to ensure that along with feedback, instructors purposefully monitor learners to ensure that they notice their errors, have opportunities to self-correct, and that feedback be implemented with other instructional techniques.

All in all, Miller and Pan’s research (2015) leaves several confusions. One of them is about to what constitutes explicit error correction in studies. As they stated that any of the studies included in this analysis did not describe exactly how the explicit feedback was provided, whether care was taken to control for certain extra elements (e.g., providing the correct response). This inconsistency could contribute to the variance noted in the effect sizes of the studies, but without better control and reporting in the studies, it is difficult to determine for sure if the way explicit feedback is delivered has a bigger effect on language learning.

Despite the small effect revealed in Miller and Pan’s study (2025), it cannot be ignored that in the body of literature there have been much evidence that language learners require exposure to examples of correct language use (i.e., positive evidence), as well as opportunities to produce language in an interactive setting, where learners are able to repair their language based on the interactions they have with teachers and peers (Swain, 1985). It is also important to note that the research conducted by Miller and Pan focused only on explicit corrective feedback as one of the approaches in providing corrective feedback to learners.
How to treat errors

In the nativist paradigm, the application of corrective feedback has little impact on language learning since it merely affects performance and leaves the underlying competence untouched (Schwartz, 1993 as cited in Rezaei et al., 2011). However, Brown (2015) stated that the feedback that a learner receives from others is one of the key to successful L2 learning. He supported the idea as how research has shown that the quality and quantity of feedback given to learners will affect their linguistic competence.

Error correction is the classroom activity that most people think as one of the language teacher's most important functions (Nunan, 1989, as cited in ukessays.com). This is because most of the time the teacher is the one who corrects. The first and most important step a teacher must take is to determine the aim of the activity. As Ancker (2000) mentioned that if the objective is to develop accuracy, then of course correction is necessary. In this case, the correct approach is to allow the student to self-correct first. If that does not work, teachers should allow peer correction. But if no one seems to know, teachers can give the answer or correct.

Although error correction seems time consuming, it helps students to focus their attention and to reduce their dependence on the teacher, and this reduction of dependence encourages students' autonomy. On the other hand, if the objective of the activity is to develop fluency, then correction may not be necessary (Ancker, 2000). Unless the error has been made many times, then the error correction needs to take place.

There are many major concepts introduced by Corder (1967) in his article "The significance of learners' errors", among which we encounter the following:

1. It is the learner who determines what the input is. The teacher can present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.
2. Keeping the above point in mind, learners' needs should be considered when teachers/linguists plan their syllabuses.
3. Mager (1962, in Karra, 2006) points out that the learners' built-in syllabus is more efficient than the teacher's syllabus. Corder adds that if such a built-in syllabus exists, then learners' errors would confirm its existence and would be systematic.
4. Corder introduced the distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors. Unsystematic errors occur in one's native language; Corder calls these "mistakes" and states that they are not significant to the process of language learning. He keeps the term "errors" for the systematic ones, which occur in a second language.
5. Errors are significant in three ways:
   - to the teacher: they show a student’s progress
   - to the researcher: they show how a language is acquired, what strategies the learner uses.
   - to the learner: he can learn from these errors.

6. When a learner has made an error, the most efficient way to teach him the correct form is not by simply giving it to him, but by letting him discover it and test different hypotheses. (This is derived from Carroll’s proposal (Carroll 1955, cited in Corder), who suggested that the learner should find the correct linguistic form by searching for it.

7. Many errors are due to that the learner uses structures from his native language. Corder (1967) claims that possession of one’s native language is facilitative. Errors in this case are not inhibitory, but rather evidence of one’s learning strategies.

   The matter of how to treat errors is complex. It seems quite clear that learners generally want their errors to be corrected. However, correcting every error is obviously not recommended. We can safely conclude that a sensitive and perceptive language teacher should make the language classroom a happy optimum, which may best be accomplished through a number of different treatment options.

   The first choice that a teacher needs to make is to decide whether to treat an error or to ignore it. Then, if some form of treatment is warranted, consider the following options proposed by Bailey (1985):

   - Treat immediately or delay to a more appropriate moment
   - Treat explicitly or give the students an opportunity to self-correct
   - The teacher initiates treatment or defers to others (students)
   - If the latter, defer to an individual or to the whole class
   - Return, or not, to the original error maker after treatment

   Then if some form of treatment is chosen, quite a number of strategies for treatment are possible. Among those are:

   - Simply indicate that an error occurs
   - Point out the location of the error
   - Recast, using the correct form
   - Indicate the type of error
These basic options and strategies are common and viable modes of error treatment in the classroom. It is important to understand that not all error treatment is error correction. Among the strategies listed above, none of them is an explicit corrective feedback, in which the wrong form is specified and the correct form provided.

Conclusion

The quality of feedback given to learners will affect their linguistic competence. Thus, teachers may not only depend only on one approach of giving feedback. Explicit corrective feedback is one of the approaches in which feedback is given by explicitly telling the learners what error they made and then provide them with the correction of the error. Miller and Pan’s study on effective this approach is, in 2015, has revealed a mixed result. However, the overall result shows that the approach has only small effect.

That learners require exposure to examples of correct language, is one of the reasons why explicit corrective feedback is needed in language instruction. It can also help students to be autonomous as it helps them to recognize their errors immediately so that students can easily eliminate the possibility of making the same errors by time. Explicit correction seems to be necessary if the objective of the language instruction is to develop accuracy rather than fluency. However, mostly, strategies suggested to treat students’ errors are based on implicit feedback.
REFERENCES


