Errors, corrective feedback and repair
Variations and learning outcomes

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Introduction

Though it is obvious that most second language (L2) learners make errors in classroom settings, it is not always clear, from the teacher’s perspective, how to deal with these errors. In a very early review of error correction in foreign language classrooms, Hendrickson (1978) posed five questions regarding error correction and ultimately called for more research to systematically answer these questions. They are:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which learner errors should be corrected?
4. How should learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?

These questions, according to Lyster and Ranta (1997), turned out to be “deceptively simple”, because answers are only now becoming clear after nearly four decades of research. There has been “a considerable amount of research on CF [corrective feedback]” (Lyster et al., 2013: 3), and in this chapter we try to examine how close the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has come to answering Hendrickson’s fundamental questions as well as what else we have learned about error correction in foreign language settings (see Ellis and Shintani, 2014, for a recent review of how ELT manuals and guides have dealt with these issues over the years with respect to spoken and written corrective feedback).

This chapter examines the types of errors that L2 learners make when speaking, the feedback they receive from their interlocutors in classrooms (both their teachers and each other) and the ways in which learners can use that feedback to modify their original utterances and, hopefully, develop their interlanguage in the direction of the target language. We believe it will be helpful for English language teachers to consider what research has to say in relation to when, why and how feedback works. Using SLA research as one source of information (and reflecting upon
their own experiences as another), teachers may garner a deeper understanding about how errors can be efficiently handled in instructional settings to promote L2 development.

Key definitions

In this chapter, we use the word *error* to refer to non-target-like utterances produced by learners. Although historically a distinction has been drawn between ‘errors’ and ‘mistakes’ (Corder, 1967) on the basis of whether incorrect utterances are systematic or slips of the tongue, this chapter makes no such distinction because this difference is most likely imperceptible in an authentic classroom setting.

Errors are, without a doubt, an inevitable part of language learning. There are many different kinds of errors that a learner can make, and these affect the kinds of feedback and repair that can follow. Errors vary according to linguistic form; for example, there are lexical errors, where the word used is incorrect; grammatical errors, where morphosyntax or word order is incorrect; and phonological errors, where pronunciation is incorrect. Pragmatic errors often violate some convention of meaning, even when the grammar is correct. The amount and type of errors that learners make depend on several factors, such as their level of L2 development and the amount and type of language they are producing at the time. Some errors may be due to some sort of transfer from the learner’s L1 (e.g. Spada and Lightbown, 1999; Odlin, 2003), while others arise as part of the developmental stages that learners of all backgrounds progress through when learning a particular language (e.g. Dulay and Burt, 1974; Goldschneider and DeKeyser, 2001).

In this chapter we use the term *corrective feedback* to mean teacher (or peer/interlocutor) responses to learner utterances that contain errors, actual or perceived (see Ellis, 2006; Ellis and Shintani, 2014). According to Lyster et al. (2013), corrective feedback is “an inherent part of classroom practices in which teachers engage to achieve instructional objectives that include consolidation of students’ L2 knowledge” (p. 2), and it “plays a pivotal role in the kind of scaffolding that teachers need to provide to individual learners to promote continuing L2 growth” (p. 1). In other words, corrective feedback is a tool that teachers use to turn errors into opportunities for L2 development. Corrective feedback provides negative evidence by signalling that a learner’s utterance contained an error, but it can also provide positive evidence if the feedback contains the target form (e.g. in recasts, as we discuss later in the chapter). However, we should bear in mind that some researchers, for example, Ellis and Shintani (2014), argue that feedback is only effective if learners perceive it as corrective — that is, when learners see the feedback “as constituting negative evidence” (p. 261). Other researchers believe it is possible that learners may benefit from correction even if they do not seem to be aware of it at the time (Mackey, 2007). There are a number of different types of corrective feedback, which are described in detail later in this chapter.

Feedback can provide a connection between error and repair if it results in learners’ responding in some way to the error, which has often been termed ‘uptake’ (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). For example, feedback may prompt learners to notice the gap or the distinction between their own non-target-like utterances and their teachers’ correct utterances (Schmidt and Frota, 1986), and thus change their utterances to be more target-like. However, uptake does not necessarily lead to repair (e.g. a learner may simply acknowledge feedback without repair, or repair a different error), since the changes learners make to their utterances can take many forms (e.g. Mackey and Philp, 1998).

While the goal of this chapter is to help teachers understand when, why and how to use corrective feedback in the classroom, the research that informs this chapter comes from both
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Classroom and laboratory studies. Corrective feedback has been shown to promote L2 learning in both settings (Mackey and Goo, 2007; Li, 2010). Although findings from classroom studies may translate more easily to real-world language classrooms, findings from controlled laboratory studies can provide more nuanced and deeper understandings of how error, feedback and repair work together in interactive settings.

In this chapter, we tackle the questions of how, when and why English language teachers should use corrective feedback in their classrooms, exploring learners’ and teachers’ perceptions about feedback as well looking at how effective feedback is in promoting learning. We explore different types of corrective feedback and present findings from research to help teachers make informed decisions about which types of feedback might be most effective in their classrooms. Finally, we caution against using a one-size-fits-all approach to corrective feedback by providing an overview of the various factors, particularly linguistic targets and individual differences, that can influence how effective feedback can be.

Should teachers correct errors?

One of the questions some teachers wonder about is whether errors should be corrected at all in the language classroom. Teachers’ opinions vary quite widely on this and often differ depending on their training and classroom experience. Teachers who subscribe to a non-interventionist approach to error correction (see, for example, the natural approach proposed by Krashen and Terrell, 1983), which gained some popularity in the 1980s, tend to believe that the primary intended focus of instruction is learning to communicate and that if communication of meaning is successful, correcting errors is not necessary. In other words, how one says something is less important than getting the intended message across. If meaning is successfully conveyed, errors are overlooked. From this perspective, positive evidence (sometimes termed ‘input’) alone is sufficient for language learning, and a learner error only receives attention if it hampers comprehensibility. Teachers who ascribe to these views often also believe that overt correction can harm learners’ self-confidence as well as heighten their anxiety levels to an extent that is detrimental to language learning.

Turning to the other end of the continuum, in part because of worries that this approach to error led to learners who were ‘fluently ungrammatical’, research over the last few decades has looked into more form-oriented instruction, asking how effective it can be in L2 development. A convincing rationale for error correction can be found in this sort of research, seen in contemporary language teaching methods and theoretical approaches to learning, such as the interaction hypothesis (Mackey et al., 2012) and task-based language teaching (Ellis, 2005; Norris, 2010; Robinson, 2011; see Van den Branden, this volume), which view feedback as an integral part of making form-meaning connections in the course of communication.

Following these perspectives, most practitioners would agree that correcting all errors is not useful, realistic or possible, but that appropriate corrective feedback is likely to facilitate L2 developmental processes in two ways. First, corrective feedback can play a facilitative role in drawing learners’ attention to discrepancies between their own interlanguage and the target language, a process that is central to restructuring of the interlanguage system (Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001; Ellis, 1991; Gass and Varonis, 1994). Corrective feedback in its more explicit forms (e.g. explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback) directly points to such disparity by supplying negative evidence that signals learners’ incorrect use of target language. In the case of more implicit error correction such as recasts (i.e. reformulated versions of a learner’s original incorrect utterance), it can present contrastive evidence in the form of models, without directly and overtly drawing learners’ attention to errors. Long (2007: 4) points out that the provision of a recast after a learner
error juxtaposes incorrect and correct utterances, thereby allowing “the learner to compare the two forms side by side, so to speak, and to observe the contrast”. Once learners recognise the gap between their production and the information in corrections, they may be better able to modify their existing L2 knowledge towards the target norm.

Besides the fact that corrective feedback can serve as a catalyst for noticing-the-gap reference, it can also provide output opportunities for learners. Correction strategies that do not supply the target form (e.g. elicitation, clarification requests, confirmation checks) may prompt modified output (i.e. production by learners after instances of feedback, which may or may not be correct) and self-generated repair, allowing learners to reformulate their original incorrect utterances. The process of rephrasing one’s original utterances in response to feedback is believed to facilitate L2 development in various ways (see Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005; Ellis and He, 1999; Izumi, 2003; McDonough and Mackey, 2006). For instance, corrective feedback enables learners to reflect on their original language and determine which part of their utterance was problematic. Through such self-monitoring processes, learners can gain more control over those target features and eventually enhance their fluency and automaticity of L2 processing. According to Swain’s output hypothesis (1985, 1995, 2005), production also requires learners to engage in syntactic processing, which is not necessitated by comprehension of input. Swain notes that L2 learners “can fake it, so to speak, in comprehension, but they cannot do so in the same way in production” (1995: 127). In other words, self-correction in response to feedback can trigger deeper and more elaborate processing of L2 forms, helping learners establish memory traces that last longer.

In addition to theoretical support for the idea that learners benefit from correction, there is empirical support from recent research syntheses and meta-analyses (e.g. Keck et al., 2006; Russell and Spada, 2006; Mackey and Goo, 2007; Li, 2010; Lyster and Saito, 2010). These reviews synthesised the findings of primary research that examined the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback either in their entirety or in part, with the overall conclusion being that corrective feedback is beneficial to L2 development. Lyster and Saito (2010), who exclusively focused on the effects of oral corrective feedback in classroom settings, found that corrective feedback was moderately beneficial for learners’ L2 development in comparison to the control group that received no corrective feedback, irrespective of instructional settings (second or foreign language classrooms). Mackey and Goo’s findings also support the notion of developmental benefits for feedback. Interestingly, meta-analyses suggest that the effect of corrective feedback is maintained over time, without any significant differences between learners’ scores on immediate and delayed posttests. These findings demonstrate the long-term pedagogical value of corrective feedback, suggesting that teachers’ use of corrective feedback in the classroom should be encouraged.

As well as this empirical evidence that substantiates the utility of corrective feedback, research into learner and teacher preferences about corrective feedback is also positive. Research of this kind examines learners’ and/or teachers’ evaluations in relation to how corrective feedback should be treated in the classroom. Findings (e.g. Cathcart and Olsen, 1976; Oladejo, 1993; Schulz, 1996, 2001; Jean and Simard, 2011) demonstrate that there is a mismatch in learners’ and teachers’ beliefs regarding corrective feedback. Notwithstanding teachers’ concerns that corrective feedback may provoke learner anxiety and impact their motivation and self-confidence in a negative manner, corrective feedback is typically appreciated and welcomed by learners. For instance, Cathcart and Olsen’s (1976) study indicated that adult English as second language (ESL) learners not only expressed a strong preference for corrective feedback, but they also wanted to be corrected more frequently than their teachers deemed necessary. More recently, Brown (2009) revealed that correcting oral errors was considered one of the effective teacher behaviours by university students from various language courses, suggesting that learners regard error correction as an essential part of the foreign language classroom. Although learners’ beliefs
about corrective feedback do not necessarily predict or guarantee their reactions to it, this line of research in teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about feedback nevertheless lends support to the idea that the provision of corrective feedback is helpful for another reason – it is important for teachers to meet the needs and expectations of learners in the classroom. As Nunan (1995:140) puts it, “teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn” in order to yield successful learning outcomes.

Altogether, then, the research suggests clear evidence to support teachers using corrective feedback in L2 development. Corrective feedback not only aids the processes of language acquisition, but it also meets learners’ needs and expectations of the teacher. Once teachers decide to correct errors in the classroom, though, it is important to determine how those errors should be corrected. That is, what types of feedback are available to language teachers, and when should they be used?

**Different types of corrective feedback**

Over the years, a number of taxonomies of oral feedback strategies have been proposed (Allwright, 1975; Chaudron, 1977; Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Seedhouse, 1997; Ranta and Lyster, 2007; Sheen and Ellis, 2011). For example, Sheen and Ellis (2011) suggest nine feedback types on the basis of six basic strategies originally identified by Lyster and Ranta (1997). These feedback techniques are separated along two dimensions: 1) input-providing vs. output-prompting and 2) implicit vs. explicit. The former distinguishes feedback types on the basis of whether feedback provides or elicits (i.e. input-providing and output-prompting, respectively) the correction, while the latter has to do with the explicitness of the corrective force.

There are four feedback moves that are input-providing: conversational recasts, didactic recasts, explicit correction and explicit correction with metalinguistic explanation. These strategies provide both positive and negative evidence and demonstrate to learners how their incorrect utterances can be correctly reformulated. Recognising that recasts are “elastic in nature” (Mackey and Goo, 2007), Sheen and Ellis (2011) distinguish between conversational recasts (i.e. implicit) and didactic recasts (i.e. explicit). Conversational recasts (i.e. when the error, or phrase containing an error, is repeated back to the learner in its corrected form) are implicit in nature in that they occur when a learner’s incorrect utterance causes a communication problem and that they usually take the form of confirmation checks. In contrast, if recasts occur when there is no communication breakdown, and the primary focus is on form, they are seen as serving a didactic function. In addition to didactic recasts, corrections (e.g. It’s “she walks to school”, not “walk”) and corrections with metalinguistic explanations (e.g. It’s “she walks to school”, not “walk”. You need -s on the verb because “she” is third-person singular) are also classified as explicit input-providing feedback strategies.

Output-prompting feedback strategies, on the other hand, provide negative evidence to learners by signaling that their utterances are problematic. Learners are given an opportunity to self-correct their errors and produce modified output. Five strategies fall into the category of this sort of feedback: repetitions, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, elicitations and paralinguistic signals. Repetitions (e.g. She walk to school?) and clarification requests (e.g. What?, Huh?) prompt learners to respond without breaking the communication flow. These are considered to be negotiation for meaning. On the other hand, the corrective force of metalinguistic clues (e.g. You need past tense), elicitations (e.g. Say that again?) and paralinguistic signals (i.e. a gesture or facial expression to indicate that the learner has made an error) is overt in that learners clearly recognise that their utterances are being corrected.

A number of studies have compared different types of corrective feedback in an attempt to investigate which feedback works best in the classroom. While some studies claim that there were
no significant difference across different feedback types (e.g. Ammar and Spada, 2006; Loewen and Nabei, 2007; McDonough, 2007), others found different types of feedback had differential effects on L2 development (e.g. Long et al., 1998; Iwashita, 2003; Leeman, 2003; Ellis et al., 2006). A meta-analysis of oral corrective feedback with 33 studies in both classroom and laboratory contexts revealed that explicit feedback (i.e. metalinguistic feedback, explicit correction) was generally more effective than implicit feedback (i.e. recasts, negotiation such as clarification requests, elicitation and repetition) in the short term, while implicit feedback had more impact on L2 learning in the long term (Li, 2010). Another meta-analysis by Lyster and Saito (2010) examined oral corrective feedback in the classroom, with slightly different findings for efficacy of different feedback types (they looked at recasts, explicit correction, and prompts). They found prompts were more helpful than recasts, while the effects of explicit correction were indistinguishable from the other two feedback types.

However, this does not mean that recasts are not effective in the classroom. Goo and Mackey (2013) point out various problems inherent in making comparisons of recasts to other types of feedback (e.g. prompts) and suggest that the findings of ‘apples-to-oranges’ comparison studies must be interpreted with caution. For instance, in some recast-versus-prompt studies (e.g. Lyster, 2004; Ammar and Spada, 2006; Ammar, 2008; Lyster and Izquierdo, 2009), form-focused instruction was included as a part of the experimental treatment, making it difficult to conclude from these studies that any differential effects between prompts and recasts are free from the moderating role of the form-focused instruction. Also, modified output opportunities were not controlled for in quite a few of the studies comparing recasts and prompts (e.g. Lyster, 2004; Ammar and Spada, 2006; Ellis et al., 2006; Loewen and Nabei, 2007; Ammar, 2008; Yang and Lyster, 2010). In other words, prompts naturally elicit more modified output opportunities, while recasts naturally do not. We know that modified output is helpful for L2 development (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005); thus the recast-versus-other-types-of-feedback comparison when participatory demands of the two feedback types are different is again one that gives an output advantage to non-recast types of feedback. In practice, however, such comparisons may be missing the mark in terms of providing practical considerations for language teachers.

To that end, researchers (Goo and Mackey, 2013; Lyster et al., 2013) have begun to express skepticism about comparing the relative efficacy of different feedback strategies, suggesting instead a need for a change of direction in corrective feedback research. They point out that it may not be worthwhile to make attempts to identify the single most effective feedback type when all feedback techniques are likely to play some facilitative role in L2 learning, and no researchers have suggested teachers should exclusively focus on one feedback type to the exclusion of others. Far from it; most researchers recognise that teachers need to have a variety of feedback tools in their toolbox. So, it is helpful to try to understand what feedback type is best employed when and where; in other words, to investigate in which conditions one can maximise the effectiveness of different feedback types so that teachers can be better informed about when to use what. Since variety in instructional practices may increase learners’ interest as well as “the depth and the transferability of learning” (Lightbown, 2008: 40), we interpret current research to suggest that teachers can be encouraged to implement various feedback strategies in their teaching instead of adhering to one type of feedback – even if they think one kind is the most effective.

Factors that impact the effectiveness of feedback

There are a number of factors that can influence the degree to which corrective feedback is effective for language learning, and teachers should be aware of these factors so that they can assess the roles that they play in their own classrooms. Here we focus mainly on linguistic
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targets and individual differences before noting other factors that affect the efficacy of corrective feedback.

Linguistic targets

As mentioned above, the types of errors that learners make are quite varied linguistically, and teachers often struggle to determine which errors to correct. One thing to consider with respect to feedback and linguistic targets is that although mastery of an L2 is often associated with advanced morphosyntactic and pragmatic abilities in that language (e.g. Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson, 2003), successful communication may depend more on lexical and phonological skills, which are crucial to an interlocutor’s ability to be understood. Mackey et al. (2000: 493) suggest that “issues of pronunciation and accurate lexical usage” in their study “had more potential to seriously interfere with understanding”, and thus feedback on lexical and phonological errors was more accurately perceived as such than morphosyntactic feedback “due to the lack of importance of morphosyntax in comprehension”. Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012) found that the importance, or relative lack thereof, of morphosyntax in comprehension was related to learners’ L2 lexical and pronunciation skills. Lexical and phonological errors always had a general negative effect on learner comprehensibility, but morphosyntactic errors only hindered communication in learners that had otherwise good lexical skills and pronunciation. Therefore, focusing feedback on these more salient features of high communicative value may be the way to go in language classrooms.

Interestingly, research suggests that teachers provide most of their feedback on morphosyntactic errors (Lyster, 1998; Mackey et al., 2000; Carpenter et al., 2006; Kim and Han, 2007), possibly because some of the most difficult aspects of a second language fall within this domain (see DeKeyser, 2005). However, learners are less likely to accurately perceive the corrective nature of such feedback or subsequently successfully repair morphosyntactic errors compared to feedback on other utterances, such as those containing lexical or phonological mistakes (Mackey et al., 2000; Lyster et al., 2013). This was also a finding in Mackey and Goo’s (2007) meta-analysis, which demonstrated that feedback in interaction is more effective for lexical than grammatical development.

However, this does not mean that corrective feedback does not play a role in morphosyntactic development, though efficacy of feedback may be related to feedback type. For instance, the efficacy of recasts on morphosyntactic development seems to depend, at least in part, on the saliency of the grammatical form and therefore of the recast (Ellis, 2007; Yang and Lyster, 2010). For example, since the past tense -ed morpheme is a particularly non-salient form, a recast correcting *He watch a movie* to *He watched a movie* might go unnoticed by a learner. For such non-salient forms, a metalinguistic explanation that explicitly provides learners with information on why their utterance was incorrect (Ellis, 2007) or a prompt that encourages learners to work out the error on their own and self-repair (Yang and Lyster, 2010) might be more beneficial. On the other hand, recasts modeling correct vocabulary (Egi, 2010; Dilans, 2010) and pronunciation (Saito and Lyster, 2012a, b; Saito, 2013) might be more salient than those targeting grammar and therefore can contribute to L2 development, particularly when learners are given the opportunity to practice the correct form after hearing a target-like model. Even so, other types of corrective feedback, like prompts and clarification requests, may increase the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge beyond the effect of recasts, presumably because they force learners to self-repair (Ellis and He, 1999; Dilans, 2010). However, it is important to note that the apparently added benefit of these sorts of feedback might simply be due to their more explicit nature as compared to recasts. When level of explicitness is held constant, recasts have been shown to be
more effective (Mifka-Profozic, 2012). For pragmatic targets (e.g. requests, refusals, apologies, invitations), studies suggest that explicit instruction is more conducive to L2 development than implicit instruction (Kasper and Rose, 2002; Jeon and Kaya, 2006), but while focused research on corrective feedback shows some benefit for explicit over implicit feedback (Koike and Pearson, 2005; Takimoto, 2006), implicit feedback also seems to have a role in promoting L2 pragmatic development (Koike and Pearson, 2005; Nipaspong and Chinthokul, 2010). However, this area is relatively under-researched, so it is difficult to make clear recommendations in relation to feedback on pragmatic errors.

In general, therefore, when considering different linguistic targets and types of feedback, it is important to keep in mind that how effective feedback is may depend on many things, including the type of error. Teachers need to carefully assess the types of errors that their students make and plan their feedback accordingly. In addition to this, knowing their students and their unique abilities helps teachers to effectively implement appropriate feedback techniques in the classroom.

**Individual differences**

Besides linguistic targets, the effects of corrective feedback are modulated by individual differences amongst learners (see MacIntyre, Gregersen and Clément, this volume). Long (1996: 452) highlights the importance of “internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention” in negotiation for meaning and L2 acquisition. Similarly, Trofimovich et al. (2007: 192) suggest that the “cognitive constructs of attention, memory, and language aptitude ‘shape’ L2 interaction on a minute-by-minute basis”. In language classrooms, learners need to balance multiple resources to effectively communicate and develop their interlanguage, including maintaining representations of input and output in short-term memory, accessing L2 knowledge from long-term memory, processing feedback and making comparisons between their own utterances and target-like utterances, and forming modified representations of L2 knowledge in long-term memory. Some researchers have suggested that during interaction, L2 learners are exposed to more information than they can process and therefore need a way to sort through all of the input and extract the most relevant information (Gass et al., 2003; Gass and Mackey, 2007).

Helpfully, research so far on how individual differences such as working memory (WM; see also Collins and Marsden, this volume, for further discussion) are related to the relationship between interaction and L2 development suggests some clear trends. First, of the studies that have looked at the relationship between WM and corrective feedback, most have found a positive relationship between WM or phonological short-term memory (a part of WM) and some aspect of language learning, whether it be noticing of feedback (Mackey et al., 2002; Sagarr, 2007), production of modified output (Sagarr, 2007), or L2 development (Goo, 2012; Mackey et al., 2002; Payne and Whitney, 2002; Sagarr, 2007). One study conducted by Trofimovich et al. (2007) did not find a relationship between WM and interaction, but this could be because effects of WM are often not seen until a delayed posttest that takes place around two weeks after treatment (Mackey et al., 2002; Payne and Whitney, 2002), and the delayed posttest in Trofimovich et al.’s (2007) study was two to twelve minutes after treatment. Second, the effects of WM interact with other factors, such as context of feedback (e.g. computer-assisted language learning appears to level out the effects of WM; Payne and Whitney, 2002; Sagarr, 2007) and the types of feedback that learners receive (Goo, 2012). Third, there is evidence that other individual differences relate to feedback, interaction more generally and L2 development, including anxiety (Sheen, 2008), creativity (McDonough et al., 2015), attentional control and analytic ability (Trofimovich et al., 2007), but these factors need more research. Finally, most of this research is done on college-aged students, and more research is needed on other populations, such as children (see
Ando et al., 1992 for a working memory study) and older adults (Mackey and Sachs, 2012, also for working memory).

So, this line of research suggests certain patterns exist in the relationship between individual differences, corrective feedback, and L2 development; we should note, though, that as yet it is not conclusive. Many of the studies have very small sample sizes, and the authors recommend caution in drawing conclusions from this experimental data. Additionally, many of these studies focus on one or two aspects of the relationship between individual differences, feedback and L2 development. It is also still not entirely clear exactly how individual differences like WM promote L2 development. Is it because having more working memory capacity can help learners to notice feedback? Or does good working memory lead to successful repair? Do certain individual differences give learners a general advantage in communicative tasks? How do other factors like motivation (see Lamb, this volume) – which is likely to be related to cognitive processes and strategies, reasoning, problem solving and decision making, and therefore is likely to be related to language learning outcomes (Dweck et al., 2004) – interact with how different learners approach and/or benefit from corrective feedback in classrooms? These are all highly interrelated questions that need to be teased apart. However, what these studies clearly show is that learners differ in multiple ways, and these may impact how learners respond to feedback in the classroom.

**Additional considerations**

A few other factors, in addition to linguistic targets and individual differences, that may influence the efficacy of corrective feedback have been studied. For example, children might be more sensitive to corrective feedback than older learners, particularly when it guides them to notice errors (Oliver, 2000; Mackey and Oliver, 2002; Lyster and Saito, 2010). This suggests that teachers should choose feedback moves particularly carefully based on the age of their learners. Additionally, while the teacher is often the only fully competent speaker in the room, this does not mean that teachers should be the only ones providing feedback. Peer feedback may be particularly important for language development, as it “benefits both providers and receivers” (Mackey, 2012), giving learners the opportunity to both receive feedback, as they do with teachers, and provide it, which draws on a different set of autonomous language skills.

**Conclusion**

In the years since Hendrickson (1978) first raised the questions of whether, when and how to provide feedback, research has proliferated, both experimental and classroom-oriented. There is now general consensus that a wide range of different types of feedback, including the most implicit kind (i.e. recasts), are developmentally effective. These effects are mediated by contexts and target forms. Overall, therefore, research suggests that there is no single most effective feedback type and that the best strategy for approaching learner errors should involve a mixed bag of feedback moves.

However, there are still a number of open questions for teachers in relation to feedback in the classroom. Most importantly, perhaps, the efficacy of feedback may depend on the characteristics of a particular classroom and the students in it. And while teacher feedback may have obvious value for learner L2 development, emerging research suggests that training learners to provide peer-feedback can be beneficial as well (Fujii et al., 2011; Sato and Lyster, 2012).

In conclusion, we have aimed to provide language teachers with a practical overview of corrective feedback informed by empirical findings from SLA research. However, it is important to
keep in mind that each classroom is different, and what works for one group of students may not work as well for another. Only the teachers themselves understand the unique dynamics of their own classrooms.

Discussion questions

- How are errors treated in your classroom, and why are they treated in this way?
- To what extent do your learners expect explicit, teacher-led corrective feedback, and why?
- Are there any particular errors (e.g. morphosyntactic, phonological, lexical, semantic errors) that you believe are relatively easier for (a) teachers to correct, and (b) learners to notice?
- To what extent does task type affect the quality and quantity of corrective feedback in your classroom?

Related topics

Classroom talk, interaction and collaboration; Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Individual differences; Language awareness; Task-based language teaching.

Further reading


References


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