Learners’ Attitudes Towards Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

An investigation on the extent learners' attitudes towards corrective feedback (CF) may mediate learning was carried out in an English as a second language (ESL) experimental classroom. Two types of CF, recast (R) and metalinguistic information (MI), were used during oral interactional tasks. The experimental groups were compared to a task only group with no CF. Pre-intermediate Saudi adult participants (n= 36) were randomly assigned to complete three hours of communicative oral tasks over four successive weeks and to fill in an attitudinal questionnaire (k=21), at the post period of testing time. Correlation between participants’ attitudes and the effectiveness of the selected corrective feedback was measured by an attitudinal questionnaire and learners’ knowledge was measured by oral and written test battery. The results suggested learners’ preference to error correction, the interactional activities, and the different types of CF. It also suggested, to certain extend, the significant role of learners’ attitude in mediating language accuracy.

Keywords: ESL classroom, attitudes, corrective feedback, oral interactional tasks

1. Introduction

To understand the role of CF in ESL classrooms, it is essential to determine whether individual differences such as apprehension and learners’ attitudes influence the effects of different kinds of CF. Learners' attitudes, which could be influenced by their cultural and educational background towards error corrections (amongst other factors), may affect learning outcomes. Oxford and Shearin (1994) claim that six factors have an impact on language learning: attitude, beliefs about self, goals for learning, involvements or participation in the process of language learning, environmental support, and personal attitude.

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It has been suggested by (Gass and Selinker, 2008) that "in any learning situation, not all humans are equally motivated to learn languages, nor are they equally motivated to learn a specific language" (p.165). Thus, teachers should be sensitive to students' attitudes to language, particularly to error correction although it might be argued that learners' preference may not be what is actually best for acquisition (Truscott, 1996).

1.1 Professional Experience

Based on the professional experience of the author (19 years of teaching at the university level) in Saudi Arabia, the situation of teaching generally focuses on teachers as the only source of knowledge, therefore "Saudi students find it difficult to accept a teacher who does not play a dominant leading role" (Alahmadi, 2007, p.4). The provision of explicit feedback, including metalinguistic information, is very frequently used in Saudi teacher-centred classrooms. EFL classroom teachers frequently repeat the rules and provide examples, with a great emphasis on form rather than meaning and therefore students are not prepared for communication (Al-Awadh, 2000). Interactional meaningful activities are absent in most Saudi classes for structural and cultural factors such as the large number of students and the lack of experienced and trained teachers. The small contribution of students, if there were, to the classroom discussion is "pre memorized and should not necessarily stem from communication breakdown" (Alahmadi, 2007, p.4). In contrary, although recasts type of CF are less frequent than explicit type of CF in most EFL Saudi classrooms, it is the most frequent feedback type used by teachers in ESL classrooms (e.g., Sheen 2004; Suzuki, 2004). Oral interaction is also available in most ESL classrooms as it is believed that learners are given the chance to use and practice the language in a classroom, and / or everywhere and with everyone from the waiter to the grocer, and / or the bus driver. Given that types of CF are embedded in most ESL classroom interactional activities, I provide a brief review of some of the research that has looked at learners’ attitudes to error correction, corrective feedback, and classroom interactional tasks.

1.2 Literature Review on Learners’ Attitudes toward Error Correction and Corrective Feedback

Research has shown that social and psychological variables- attitude and motivation- play a key role in learning a second / foreign language. For example, (Gardner, 1985) developed his socio-educational model “Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMBT)” to assess various variables related to individual differences. However, motivation in second or foreign language learning embraces three main elements: a desire to learn the language, effort expended towards learning the language, and favourable attitudes towards learning the language (Gardner, 1990). It has been argued that corrective feedback can assist or hinder the processing and developing of learning a language depending on learners’ and teachers’ attitude towards error correction and the type of CF. A few studies have found discrepancies between teachers' and students' attitudes to CF. For example, (Schulz's, 1996) study revealed that 90% of the learners had a positive attitude towards error correction and grammar instruction more than their teachers’ attitudes. In the same vein, (Ancker, 2000) surveyed teachers' and students' perception in 15 countries, focusing on whether teachers should correct every error students make when using English. The results showed 25% positive response for teachers and 76% positive response for the students. The negative impact of correction on students’ confidence and motivation was the teachers’ concern though the students wanted corrections to speak English correctly.

Given that CF could be provided implicitly, explicitly, or together, it is of interest to find out whether learners have different attitudes and perceptions about the types of corrective feedback. Another, larger, body of research has pursued "how learners perceive feedback and whether their perceptions affect their subsequent L2 development"(Mackey et al.2000, p.471). (Sheen, 2006) designed a questionnaire, using a (1-6) Likert scale, to measure language anxiety, attitudes towards error correction, and grammatical accuracy and whether learners perceive teacher's correction as helpful and important. The results showed that positive attitudes towards error correction and grammatical accuracy were stronger in the explicit group than in the implicit group. Accordingly, learners benefitted more from metalinguistic feedback than recasts. In other words, Sheen argued that attitudes towards error correction and grammatical accuracy cannot be expected to have any mediating effect if learners are not aware they are being corrected.

More preference for explicit CF was also revealed in a study by Amador (2008) who surveyed twenty-three
beginners of English from the University of Costa Rica’s School of Modern Languages. Students were presented with twenty different correction techniques for errors that took place in interactional dialogue between teacher – student or student- student. Students were asked to indicate their preference by circling the letter of their choice. The results were in line with (Sheen's, 2006) study, indicating a preference for explicit corrective feedback techniques.

In the contrary, exploration of learners' attitudes toward implicit CF, (Philp, 2003) examined the extent to which non-native speakers (NNSs) notice native speakers’ (NSs) reformulations of their interlanguage grammar through recasts in dyadic interaction. The study involved thirty three adult ESL learners participating in oral communication tasks in NS-NNS dyads and received recasts of their non-target like question forms. It was found that learners did not always notice recasts, and if they noticed them, they often did not notice every detail. The authors suggested that a variety of learners' variables may account for how students perceive recasts, if they are noticed at all, such as: limitations in working memory, unfamiliar input, multiple corrections, complex changes in the recast, learners' level, processing biases of the learner, and grammatical forms in the recast that were beyond the learners' interlanguage grammar.

An investigation was carried out by (Egi, 2010) to examine the relationship between learners' perceptions of recasts and their responses to the recasts. Twenty four foreign language learners of Japanese engaged in task- based interactions during which they received recasts of their errors. Each learner then watched video clips of the recast episodes and commented on them. Analysis was taken in relation to learners' responses to the recasts: uptake, repair, and modified output. In recast episodes where they produced uptake, their reports indicated that they perceived the recasts as corrective feedback significantly more frequently compared to cases where they did not produce uptake.

To examine the relationship between learners' characteristics such as proficiency level, verbal intelligence, and attitude towards correction and the success of CF, (Havranek and Cesnik, 2001) conducted a comprehensive developmental study with two-hundred-and-seven native German speakers studying English as a foreign language. They compared the effects of recasts, repetition + recasts, and elicitation by measuring the success of error correction on learners' performance in a subsequent test. The study reported that corrective feedback was likely to benefit learners who had a positive attitude towards error correction and high language proficiency.

The nature and the target of the feedback could have influential impact on learners' attitude and the effectiveness of the CF. In line with previous research, (Mackey et al., 2000) examined this issue by collecting data from ten learners of English as a second language and seven learners of Italian as a foreign language. It was found that learners were more accurate in their perceptions about lexical and phonological feedback than in their perceptions about morphosyntactic feedback. The authors suggested that this might have been because morphosyntax often does not interfere with understanding in the same manner as incorrect pronunciation or inaccurate lexical items. Based on these results, (Mackey et al., 2000) argued that both the nature and the target of the feedback might affect the accuracy of learners' perceptions.

Learners' attitude towards the interactional tasks might affect the accuracy of learning a language. A body of research into task-based teaching and learning has demonstrated that tasks can elicit interactional features, negotiation of meaning, and attention to form (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Van den Branden, 2006). (Loewen et al, 2009) investigated second language (L2) learners' beliefs about the role of grammar instruction and error correction. Seven-hundred-and-fifty-four L2 students at an American university completed a questionnaire consisting of thirty-seven Likert-scale items and four open ended prompts. Six underlying factors were used to investigate differences in beliefs among learners studying one of fourteen target languages (TLs): efficacy of grammar, negative attitude toward error correction, priority of communication, importance of grammar, importance of grammatical accuracy, and negative attitude toward grammar instruction. Differences were found between the ESL and foreign language learners in the area of attitudes to practice and speaking.

Practice or speaking in grammar instruction was not favoured by the ESL learners, whereas it was by foreign language learners, particularly with the Less Commonly Taught Languages, Arabic and Japanese. ESL learners were less convinced about the need for grammar instruction and error correction and were keener to improve communicative skills than were foreign language learners. It was also found that learners of Chinese and Arabic were more positive about grammar instruction and error correction than were learners of other languages. "This difference might be attributable to the fact that these two languages are non-Indo-European languages and are
perceived to be more challenging than languages such as German or Spanish" (Loewen et al., 2009, p. 102).

The availability or lack of contextual support might make a difference in terms of task difficulty and attitudes to task. (Revesz, 2009) administered an exit questionnaire to half of the participants after completing the post-test to obtain information concerning the participants’ perspectives on the test task. In response to the question about whether the presence or absence of photos made the description task easier, the large majority of participants (twenty nine of thirty three) reported that they found it less difficult to describe the photos when they were able to view them. The rest of the participants (12.1%) felt that the availability or lack of contextual support did not make a difference in terms of task difficulty. The majority of the participants felt that describing the photos without contextual support was more difficult because it forced them to simultaneously focus on speech production and memorization, which, in turn, made it more challenging to concentrate on task completion.

The extensive literature available on the topic of correction and corrective feedback is considerably beyond the scope of this study, which is based mainly on the impact of learners' attitudes towards two types of CF and its potential effectiveness on language accuracy. It is clear, though, that both language researchers and teachers have long shown interest in the implications of error correction and CF research. However, there is still a need to determine which CF techniques are the most preferable and successful at dealing with learners’ oral errors.

2. Research Questions

The current study aims to answer the following research questions: a. What are learners’ opinions about the interactional activities, error corrections, and the different feedback techniques in the form of metalinguistic information and recast? b. Is there any correlation between learners’ attitudes and their language accuracy?

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection and instruments

Although the attitudinal questionnaire for the current study replicated the one used by Sheen (2006), there were some differences in the content areas and the response format. Sheen (2006) used a Likert six alternative response format and focused on measuring language anxiety and attitudes towards CF and grammatical accuracy. The questionnaire for the current study is a Likert five alternative response format consists of twenty-one question items ascending from strongly disagree to strongly agree and covered three constructs: content of the activities, learners' opinions about error correction and accuracy generally, and learners’ opinions about the CF techniques used during the intervention as shown in Table.1. To measure the validity of the questionnaire, it was first piloted on participants from the same cohort population for the main study. The questionnaire was administered in English as this study was measuring learning of English language for Saudi learners and it was undertaken in an English language centre in the United Kingdom. In case of English lexical difficulties, an Arabic translation was made by the researcher. In addition, some open questions designed to elicit biographical data (not included in this paper) recounting to age, gender, educational background, prior exposure to English, residency in the host environment, degree of contact with English outside the classroom, and attendance of English classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Learners’ opinions about the content of the activities</th>
<th>Q: The actual questions: 1. The activities are interesting. 2. The activities are not up to my level. 3. The activities are easy. 4. The activities are short. 5. I need to finish the activities fast so I can attend my other classes.</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learners’ opinions about error correction generally</td>
<td>Q: The actual questions: 1. I feel it is my teacher’s duty to correct my errors all the time. 2. I feel frustrated when you correct me. 3. I feel discouraged when I repeat the same errors. 4. I feel nervous about speaking after you have corrected my errors. 5. I feel it is better for me to know the corrections of my errors. 6. Having my errors corrected is the best way to learn English. 7. I think the most helpful way is correcting my errors directly. 8. I need a lot of time to think about my mistakes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Learners’ opinions about the different CF techniques</td>
<td>Q: The actual questions: 7. I feel better when you give me the rules. 11. I feel that I am not used to being corrected when I do grammatical mistakes. 12. I feel that this way of correction is new for me. 13. I am benefiting from your corrections. 15. I feel most comfortable with your direct corrections. 16. The corrections you have been providing are not important. 17. I prefer providing me with rules and information. 21. What you are doing does not improve my English.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
3.2 Coding and Scoring

To code the attitudinal questionnaire, each group was given a number for example metalinguistic group was coded 1, recast group was coded 2 and task only group was coded 3. In addition, each participant was also given a number, e.g., S1, S2, S3 ....... etc. In regards to the different questions, each question was also given a number from 1-21. Each response was also coded depending on the format of the scale which starts from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

In terms of scoring the questionnaire, for each attitude construct, several questions were used to improve the validity and reliability of the measures. To obtain the scores for these three constructs, the following procedure was followed: 1) To calculate the mean scores, responses were added up for each survey response then divided the total sum by the total amount of questions. 2) Some questions may be counted as reverse points. They should be marked as five instead of being marked as one and so on. In this case, questions two, eleven, sixteen, and twenty one were reversed.

3.3 Analysis of the data and results

Each set of scores in the three constructs of the questionnaire is analysed to investigate group differences, using a one-way ANOVAs. In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between the attitudinal mean scores and the immediate post-test mean scores on the different oral and written battery of tests for all groups were calculated as the questionnaire was carried out at post testing time only. For the purpose of elucidation, those tests are: oral picture description (PD), gap fill (GF), and timed grammaticality judgment (TGJT). They were designed to assess learners’ language development in the focused target structure. To measure the validity and reliability, all three measures were piloted on native and non-native participants. Tests administered in three different testing times, pre, post and delayed post intervention, more information on the design and implementation of the tests materials could be found in (Faqeih, 2012).

3.3.1 Descriptive Statistics on Attitudinal Questionnaire

This section presents the descriptive statistics for the three attitudinal constructs: learners' opinions about the content of the interactional activities, learners' opinions about error correction, and learners’ opinions about the CF techniques used during the interventional sessions. The results are summarised graphically in Figure.1.

1. Learners' opinions about the interactional activities

The descriptive statistics for the scores of learners’ opinions about the intervention activities (k=5) indicated that the average scores for learners' opinions towards the intervention activities ranged from 3.22 to 3.46 with the metalinguistic information group achieving the lowest score (representing less positive opinions) and recast group attaining the highest (representing more positive opinions). However, a one-way ANOVA test indicated no significant differences between these groups F (2, 35) = 0.64, p = 0.54.

2. Opinions about error correction

Based on the descriptive statistics for the scores of learners' opinions about error correction generally (k=8), the average scores for learners' opinions towards error correction generally ranged from 3.33 to 3.46 with the task only group achieving the lowest score (representing less positive opinions) and recast group attaining the highest (representing more positive opinions). However, a one-way ANOVA test indicated no significant differences between these groups, F (2, 35) = 0.16, p = 0.86.

3. Opinions about corrective feedback during intervention

The descriptive statistics for the scores of learners’ opinions about corrective feedback (k=8), during intervention indicated the average scores for learners' opinions towards the different CF techniques ranged from 3.61 to 3.81 with the recast information group achieving the lowest score (representing less positive opinions) and metalinguistic information group attaining the highest (representing more positive opinions). However, a one-way ANOVA test indicated no significant differences between these groups, F (2, 35) = 0.44, p = 0.65.
3.3.2 Correlation between attitudes and post-tests scores

This section provides correlational analysis between the post-test mean scores on the different battery of tests and the results of the attitude questions for the three groups as summarized in Table2. The result for the two experimental groups, recast and metalinguistic information, indicated no significant relationship between the mean post-test scores on PD and TGJT tests and any of the three attitudinal constructs except for metalinguistic information group and the GF test toward the CF intervention. Whereas, the task only group showed a significant correlation between the mean post-test scores of the PD and GF tests with the general opinions towards error correction.

4. Discussion

Generally speaking, to answer the first research question, the descriptive results on the three constructs of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated learners’ preference in all groups, for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques as displayed in Figure 1. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the implicit group (recast) scored higher than the other two groups in their attitudes toward the different interactional activities and their preference for their errors to be corrected, though it seems closer to the other two groups. This could be true as 89% of the participants preferred having their errors corrected and think that error correction is absolutely the best way to learn English.

This result is, in one hand, in line with (Loewen et al, 2009) who found learners of Chinese and Arabic with more positive attitude about grammar instruction and error correction than were learners of other languages. It also lends support to (Schulz’s, 1996) who found 90% of the participants had a positive attitude towards error correction. On the other hand, the result, in the current study, is different to (Sheen’s, 2006) who suggested stronger positive attitudes towards error correction in the explicit CF group than in the implicit CF group.

The notable attitude (Figure 1) for the recast group toward the interactional activities and error correction could be due to task familiarity, in which corrections are mainly embedded in an interrupted communication flow, especially in an English speaking environment. However, the low mean scores for the recast group in their attitudes towards the CF intervention might lend support to (Philp, 2003) suggesting that learners did not always notice recasts, and if they did, they often did not notice every detail. On the contrary, the highest mean score in the attitudes towards the CF intervention for the metalinguistic information group could be attributed to the explicit CF saliency, learners’ awareness, and familiarity of this type of CF.

To answer the second research question, by and large, the relationship between language accuracy and learners’ attitude in the three content areas of the questionnaire, the attitudes for the metalinguistic information group in the CF intervention correlated negatively with the mean scores of the GF test as shown in Table2. This result could be attributed to the fact that the explicit information provided may have raised learners’ awareness during the interventional tasks to the wrong forms and thus assisted them during their tests; or learners may have been fatigued.

| Table2. Correlation between attitudinal constructs and post-tests scores |
|----------------|--------|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Group         | N     | Tests                     | Activities     | Error Correction | CF intervention |
|               |       |                           | (k=5)          | (k=8)            | (k=8)            |
| Metalinguistic| 13    | Picture Description       | 0.41           | 0.32             | 0.18             |
| Recast        | 13    | Gap fill                  | 0.34           | 0.17             | 0.3              |
| Task Only/control | 10 |                           | 0.12           | *0.72            | 0.05             |
| Metalinguistic| 13    | Timed Grammaticality      | 0.12           | 0.23             | *0.55            |
| Recast        | 13    | Judgement                 | 0.31           | 0.24             | 0.5              |
| Task Only/control | 10 |                           | 0.23           | *0.71            | 0.25             |
| Metalinguistic| 13    |                           | 0.09           | 0.17             | 0.03             |
| Recast        | 13    |                           | 0.37           | 0.32             | 0.02             |
| Task Only/control | 10 |                           | 0.26           | 0.46             | 0.32             |

* P<0.05
of taking tests and therefore their answers were not accurate in the questionnaire, which was administered after the post testing time. The negative significant relationship between the explicit type of measure (GF) and the explicit type of CF suggested that Saudi learners' might have preferred metalinguistic information because they were used to be instructed via traditional teaching methods in most language classes in Saudi Arabia (as reviewed earlier).

Of course the non-significant association between tests mean scores and the CF intervention for the task only group is likely to be due to the fact that there was no CF during the intervention sessions. The significant positive associations between the mean scores on GF and PD post-test and the mean scores on the attitudes toward error correction for the task only group suggested that task familiarity and the meaningful interactional activities could have raised learners’ attention to the test tasks, or it could be attributed to the students’ strong desire to have corrections. This result could be supported by (Ancker’s, 2000) survey who found 76% positive response for the students’ desire for error correction as they wanted to speak English correctly.

The non-significant relationship between learners’ scores on the TGJT and the attitudinal constructs does not mean that learners have not benefited from the interactive activities and the types of CF but time pressure could be a factor in hindering their language progress as indicated in their exit questionnaire.

The divergent results displayed in Figure 1 and Table2 suggest that corrective feedback was likely to benefit learners in the two experimental groups. It could also be suggested that learners who had positive attitude towards error correction and interactional activities may have been benefited from Form/meaning tasks in developing their language accuracy.

5. Summary and Implication

In summary, the study indicated 89% of the participants prefer to have their errors corrected, however, learners’ attitudes towards the interaction tasks alone scored (73%). This result could be because practising and using the language in a native environment may have made the tasks familiar to them. The presence of oral interactive activities may also have raised learners’ desire to interact freely and made the experimental tasks more enjoyable due to their novelty. It is believed that teachers’ and learners’ sensitivity to error correction is an important factor in selecting the most influential CF types. Thus the current result may emphasise the necessity for different types of CF during meaningful interactional activities to meet learners’ needs and endorse their language accuracy. It is recommended for language teachers to realize learners’ preference and attitudes in order to design classroom activities that focus on form and meaning. It might be of a remarkable contribution to second language acquisition research to find out the impact of contexts, cultural and educational background towards learners’

Mean Scores attitudes to error correction and CF. The sample size of the participants may play a crucial role in
conducting a research, thus it could have been of a great importance to include larger sample size than the one selected for the current study.

References


