Iranian EFL Learners and Their Teachers' Preferences For Oral Error Correction

Ahmad Mohseni [1]*; Leila Edalat pour[2]

[1] Islamic Azad University- South Tehran Branch
[2] Islamic Azad University- Bandar Abbas Branch

ABSTRACT
This study aimed at investigating oral error correction preferences of Iranian EFL learners, and the degree of teachers' awareness of them. To this end, one hundred and fifty language learners (males and females) from intermediate and advanced levels of instruction and different ages (15-45), studying at five language institutes took part in this study. As a further step, fifty teachers were asked for cooperation. This article discusses the findings of a questionnaire that utilized 5-point Likert-scales, and investigated 1) students' preferences for "how", "when", "who", "which", and "should" of correcting oral errors; and 2) teachers' awareness of these preferences. The results showed that students had generally positive attitudes toward teacher correction of oral errors. They also liked immediate correction of pronunciation errors and delayed correction of grammatical errors the results also indicated a preference for teacher correction and self-correction of errors over peer correction. Furthermore, they preferred correcting pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary errors over other types of errors. The teachers were aware of the students' preferences of some cases, but unaware in some other.

Keywords: EFL students, Error correction, Oral errors, Students' preferences

Introduction

SLA researchers have focused on learners' needs during the recent years. Different approaches of teaching have appeared to meet a variety of learners' needs and to let them achieve their purposes of language learning. Among these needs, error correction and the ways learners like their errors to be corrected is not an exception on this rule i.e. an issue that should not be ignored in the area of language teaching.

With a shift from an instructional paradigm to a learner-oriented approach towards language learning/teaching, understanding students' attitudes for correcting the errors that they make during oral activities in classroom seems to be of crucial importance. It is apparent that learners' errors have been dealt with differently during the history of language learning and teaching. In the era of audio lingual method, the learners' errors were those points to be avoided. However, in the era of communicative approaches, instead of expecting learners to produce error-free sentences, the learners were encouraged to communicate in the target language.

To achieve a desired learning outcome, teachers should provide learners with teaching activities and practices that are compatible with the ways through which learners like to be corrected while they are involved in speaking activities. When mismatches exist between students' desired

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*Corresponding Author' Email: ahmadmohseny@yahoo.com

ways of correction of their oral errors and the teachers' practices of correcting those errors, students may become frustrated, inattentive, and unwilling to talk and take part in communicative activities and therefore, it can result in unsatisfactory learning outcomes (Horwitz, 1988; Nunan, 1987; Schulz, 2001).

Teachers, therefore, need to discover their students' attitudes to correcting their oral errors. This way they can accord their correction practices in ways that are appealing to most students, if not all, and perform what are best for them. Therefore, it is hoped that this study can help teachers, in general, and Iranian EFL teachers, in particular, to be more effective in dealing with their students' errors.

Literature Review

Basic questions regarding correcting oral errors

Regarding the oral communication and also based on Hendrickson's (1980) investigation of error correction, there are five basic questions which are most commonly asked. Allwright and Bailey (1991) also discuss these questions about teachers' treatment of oral errors: **How** teachers react, and the decisions that need to be made on **whether** to treat oral errors, **when** to do so, **which** errors should be treated, and **who** will treat oral errors.

Should errors be corrected?

Historically**,** all errors in oral production were considered bad and in need of correction (Brooks, 1964). In recent years, language learning specialists have adopted a more balanced view when answering the question, "should errors be corrected?" They do not abandon error correction altogether and do not insist on correcting every single error. Long (1996) also states that corrective feedback in the form of negotiating for meaning can help learners notice their errors, create meaning connections, and thus aid acquisition.

Some researchers (Bolitho, 1995; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994) and language teachers maintain that students need and want feedback on their production and believe that it is useful.

Which errors should be corrected?

According to Corder (1967), it is the errors that should be corrected not mistakes. Further-

more, Hendrickson (1980) asserts that local errors should not be corrected since the message is clear and the correction by teacher may interrupt the flow of communication. On the other hand, the global errors of forms (such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary) need to be treated in some way since they impair communication, i.e. the understanding of the message would be under question and therefore incomprehensible.

Freiermuth (1997) also refers to those errors which occur due to learners' nervousness in the classroom, due to their stress or the pressure of having produced accurately a linguistic form in L2, as examples of non-serious errors that should not be corrected. Moreover, the errors that significantly impair communication followed by errors that occur frequently, errors that reflect misunderstanding or incomplete acquisition of the current classroom focus, and errors that have a highly stigmatizing effect on the listeners, are said to be in need of correction (Freiermuth, 1997).

How errors should be corrected?

In a study done by Lyster and Ranta (1998), six different feedback types were distinguished: explicit correction, recasts, clarification request, metalinguistic clues, elicitation, and repetition. Feedback can be explicit (e.g. grammatical explanation or overt error correction) or implicit. On the other hand, Harmer (2001) states that all oral production should not be dealt with in the same manner. That is to say, the reaction toward the oral production of learners is heavily contingent on the phase of the lesson, the kind of activity, the type of mistake made, and learners with all their personality and knowledge factors. In fact, implicit-explicit dichotomy of error correction types is a super-dimension that encompasses all other aspects which are not included here for the purpose of limiting the scope of the current study.

When should errors be corrected?

The two kinds of feedback regarding the time of correction involve immediate feedback and delayed feedback. Immediate treatment is said to interrupt learners' flow and may not be positively effective (Vigil & Oller, 1976). However, postponing correction to a future lesson will be less effective, as time elapses between the error and the treatment (Chaudron, 1977, 1988; Long, 1977). According to Moss (2000), the nature of activity during oral production needs to be consi-

dered. For example, if learners are practicing a pronunciation of a word or phrase, they should be stopped immediately when they make a mistake. However, if the teacher wants to encourage self-correcting, giving sufficient time to learners to do so, seems more logical. Harmer (2001) also states that the best time for correction is as late as possible. Many teaching recommendations also favor delayed feedback (Edge, 1989) arguing that learners should not be interrupted "in the middle of what they are saying"(Bartram & Walton, 1991: p 41).

Moreover Kelly (2006) states that the time of correction depends on many interrelated factors including learner sensitivities, learning intuition, and learning purpose of task type. Generally, it is said to be essential for teachers to exercise careful judgments with these factors in mind if error correction is to be useful.

Who should correct errors?

Essentially, three basic forms of error correction regarding "who" question were presented in the literature: Self-correction = S, Peer correction = P, Teacher correction = T.

Self-correction is said to be the most effective form in which learners realize and correct their own mistakes and therefore more effectively internalize the language. The next most desirable and effective form is said to be peer correction in which learners collectively recognize and correct their mistakes and they actually help each other without any affective filter to interfere with their developing of English language skills (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Finally, correction of errors by the teacher is said to be an effective means, but it should be used as the last and the least frequent form of error correction (Krashen, 1983, cited in Lynch, 2008).

Objectives of the Study

The present study intended to investigate the language error correction preferences of the Iranian EFL students and the extent of teachers' awareness of them. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the Iranian EFL learners' preferences for correction of oral errors?

2. To what extent, if any, do teachers practice their students' preferences for error correction?

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty language learners from intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency and also fifty teachers working with the same students took part in the study. The data were collected from 15 classes of five language schools of Farhang, Mehrdad, Shokooh, Kish, and Iran.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study which was a 30- item essay type questionnaire was developed, based on a literature review of previous studies of learner errors and teacher feedback on errors. The original questionnaire was constructed in English and then translated into Persian. Both versions were modified several times based on the results of a pilot study. This study employed the Persian version.

The questionnaire was delivered to both groups of teachers and students; in which, the students were asked to determine their correction preferences and the teachers were supposed to determine their actual reaction to the students' errors while they involved in oral activities. Since one of the objectives of the study was to examine the degree of agreement between teachers and students in terms of error correction preferences, this questionnaire was employed due to the fact that it had two versions (persian and English), taking into account both teachers' and students' responses.

Procedures for data collection and analysis

The researchers distributed the questionnaires among the participants and their teachers. Both teachers' and students' versions of the questionnaire included the required instruction for filling them out. The students and teachers were asked to bring the questionnaires back in two weeks in order to have enough time to study and complete it. The students and teachers were also informed that the focus of study was only on preferences for oral errors.

Frequency distributions were calculated to analyze the Likert-scale responses for students' and teachers' preferences for correction of oral errors, in order to define the significance of the difference between the responses.

Results and Discussion

The researchers briefly as well as statistically represent the five basic questions of correcting oral errors . However, it should be noted that for the purpose of not making this paper lengthy, only the tables showing the results of preferences for pronunciation errors are included. Regarding "How question**"** of grammatical errors which are shown in Table 1 below, the results of this study are parallel with those of Jean and Kang's (2004). They found that students desired a more explicit and direct method of correction. As long as the students' preferences for the methods of correcting grammatical errors are concerned, the findings of the study yielded the same results. Some methodologists like Krashen & Terrel (1983, cited in Brown, 2000) assert that there should be no direct treatment of errors, and the justification for that is what happens in real life situation. In contrast, learners have always wanted direct correction on the side of the teacher (Table 1).

Table 1 : How Question of Grammatical Errors: Frequencies of responses

Items	How to correct grammatical errors:		A	S	N
1	Using a questioning look to draw the attention to the error and giving the opportunity to self-correct.	S	69	21	10
		T	56	36	8
2	Explaining why the sentence is incorrect.	S	82	15	3
		T	38	36	26
3	Indicating the error and presenting the correct form.	S	88	5	7
		T	62	20	18
4	Indicating the error by repeating a part or the full sentence.	S	73	14	13
		T	68	32	0

A= always   S= sometime   N= never

Riazi and Riasati (2006) investigated "**when question"** as a subcategory of language learning style preferences. They found that only 37% of the learners preferred to be corrected later in pri

vate i.e. their study showed that students were against delayed correction and the reason was concluded to be in the fact that students think that immediate correction to be more effective than delayed correction. The findings of the present study seem to be partly congruent with the ones identified by Riazi and Riasati as long as students' preferences are concerned. In the study 45% of students liked the teacher always correct them immediately and in front of the other students while 66% of teachers were against immediate correction. However, regarding delaying correction until after completing the oral activity, both students and teachers showed disagreement (Table 2).

Table 2: When Question of Grammatical Errors: Frequencies of responses

Items	when to correct grammatical errors:		A	S	N
5	Correcting the error immediately and in front of the students.	S	45	17	38
		T	8	26	66
6	Delaying the correction until after completing the oral activity.	S	55	24	21
		T	26	46	28
7	Correcting later in private.	S	23	15	62
		T	6	26	68

The present study is in contradiction with Bada and Okan's (2000) study but compatible with Ur's (2006) study in which students did not like being corrected by peers. In this study, peer correction received the lowest percentage among both students and teachers, again meaning that they did not like peer correction of errors. However, it is in consistence with their study regarding self-correction. This study, too, showed students' and teachers' priority for self-correction of errors (Table 3).

Table : Who Question of Grammatical Errors: Frequencies of Responses

Items	who should correct grammatical errors:		A	S	N
8	Correcting by the teacher.	S	64	23	13
		T	28	48	24
9	Asking the peers to correct.	S	15	37	48
		T	28	46	26
10	Asking the student to self-correct.	S	75	20	5
		T	46	34	20

Regarding "Which question", the results of this study is partly compatible with Ur's (2006) study in which grammatical errors were stated to be the error types most frequently in need of correction by both students and teachers. In the current study, "pronunciation errors" and "the errors which are regularly repeated by students" were also of the error types for which students and teachers respectively indicated their preferences for correction over other types of errors (Table 4).

The surprising point in the current study is that while 51% of students never disagreed with error correction in speaking, 52% of teachers indicated that they always disagreed with error correction in speaking (Table 5). The reason for the students is probably that they want to improve their accuracy in English and the reason for the teachers may lie in the fact that they do not want their students to lose confidence and therefore to be reluctant to take part in oral activities for the fear of making errors.

Table4 Which Question of Errors: Frequencies of responses

Items	Which errors to correct more often:		A	S	N
21	Grammatical errors	S	83	10	7
		T	78	18	4
22	Pronunciation errors	S	84	12	4
		T	90	4	6
23	Vocabulary errors	S	82	15	3
		T	46	40	14
24	The errors that impede the flow of communication.	S	82	13	5
		T	90	8	2
25	The errors which are regularly repeated by the students.	S	78	17	5
		T	100	0	0
26	The errors which their language forms have not been taught yet.	S	52	29	19
		T	6	18	76
27	The errors which would be fossilized if not corrected.	S	74	18	8
		T	92	8	0
28	The frequent slips of tongue.	S	51	21	28
		T	14	14	72
29	Correcting all types of errors.	S	65	27	8
		T	24	52	24

Table 5 : Should question of errors: Frequencies of responses

Item	should errors be corrected:		A	S	N
30	No error correction while speaking.	S	30	19	51
		T	52	36	12

Conclusion

This was a descriptive-qualitative study based on a survey research. The study aimed at identifying students' oral error correction preferences as well as the teachers' real correction practices on oral errors in class to find out whether teachers practice their students' preferences for correction of oral errors. The study showed that certain differences seem to exist between the students' preferences and the teachers' pedagogical practice.

Some major points concluded from the study are summarized below:

1.Regarding *"How Question"*, the results of the study revealed that students prefer direct ways of correction like 'indicating error and presenting the correct form' and 'explanation of the error' better as long as correction of grammatical errors are concerned, but teachers did not use these ways of correction as frequently as students liked. Concerning pronunciation errors, students placed much greater emphasis on checking mispronunciations in dictionary as a way of correcting their mispronunciations than what their teachers really did practically. The Students also liked teachers to use a questioning look to draw their attentions to mispronounced words while teachers did not practice this indirect way of correcting pronunciation errors much in their classes.

2.Regarding "When Question", students do not mind to be corrected immediately in front of their classmates. They sometimes like correction to be delayed until after completing speaking activity and they also strongly disagree with correcting later in private, both in grammar and pronunciation.

3.Regarding "Who Question", students like to be guided to correct their grammatical errors themselves (self-correction) and also they like teacher's correction of errors while they do not like peers to correct their errors in speaking. Regarding their pronunciation errors they prefer teacher correction to self-correction and peer correction respectively.

4.Concerning "Which Question", students preferred pronunciation errors, grammatical errors, vocabulary errors and the errors that impede the flow of conversation respectively in order to be corrected more often**.**

5.Regarding "Should Question", students were overwhelming in favor of being corrected in speaking while majority of teachers did not agree with correcting errors in speaking. The reason for the students may be the fact that they like to learn English accurately and the teachers do not probably want to interrupt their students and try to encourage them to keep on talking.

Nunan (1987) argues, "One of the most serious blocks to learning is the mismatch between teacher and learner expectations about what should happen in the classroom" (p.177). Agreeing on the fact that matching students' and teachers' expectations is important for learning a language successfully, it can be hoped that teachers will consider their students' attitudes toward their practices in class. Therefore, the findings of the study can provide us with some information about students' attitudes or preferences for correction of their oral errors.

Pedagogical Implications

1.If teachers are aware of general preferences of students for oral error correction, what they feel about teachers' correction of their oral errors, what they feel about their teachers' error correction experiences , generally, and **whether** they like to be corrected in speaking, **who** they like to correct them, **what errors** they like to be corrected more, **what methods** of correction they prefer, and **when** they like to be corrected particularly, they would be able to facilitate desired error correction outcomes for students in the classroom.

2.Furthermore, learners must be encouraged to express their error correction preferences both for themselves and teachers. Doing so would allow learners to consider why they are being corrected in certain ways, by certain people, in certain times or they have more correction on certain errors, and they also would consider how all these ways of correction help them learn English and what use they can make of them both for academic purposes and outside of the classroom.

3.Teachers should know that they should behave like a researcher in class as well as being a teacher. This would help them identify their students' individual differences and adjust these differences in ways that could satisfy the needs of all students. Of course, adopting correction techniques that will satisfy the needs of all learners might be

difficult but if teachers become sensitive to their students' preferences and balance correction by using a variety of techniques for different people in the classroom, they can almost be sure that they have treated the students equally.

4.Teachers should hold a discussion session with students talking about their desires and preferences for error correction practices in class and sharing their ideas with students on deciding what techniques they think would be useful to apply more in class.

5.Concerning the implication related to material designers and syllabus developers it can be stated that they should definitely work in cooperation with both students and teachers. Together with teachers, they should decide what they need to identify regarding correction of students' errors, and how they can be aware of their preferences for correction of different kinds of errors in class. Curriculum developers need to allocate enough time in curriculum designing for teachers to conduct researches on error correction in their classes.

6.The findings of the study are helpful to students in demonstrating the importance of error correction preferences identification. Students are recommended to identify the best ways through which they can have feedbacks on their errors more fruitfully. Knowing this will enable them to learn a language better and more accurately. This also gives students self-confidence to achieve their goals of learning the language since they would feel more comfortable by identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

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Ahmad Mohseni is an assistant professor at the Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch. During the 28 years of teaching EFL and ESL courses, he also carried out a number of research projects, composed, translated and edited a couple of books and articles, and took part in a number of conferences and seminars inside and outside of the Country. He is appointed as an invitee professor of American Global University (college of Education) in the State of Wyoming, USA, (from 2002 and still continues).

Leila Edalatpour holds an MA in TEFL from Azad University, Bandar Abbbas Branch. She has been teaching in many language institutes and is currently teaching various courses at Islamic Azad University and Elmi Karbordi University in Bandar Abbas.