

Exposure to Corrective Feedback Strategies and Attitudinal Shift

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Abstract

Corrective feedback (CF) and its different types have long absorbed many scholars and practitioners. As Ellis (2009) mentioned some experimental studies need to be carefully designed to discover the relative effectiveness of each of these CF techniques. The goal of this qualitative study was to discover whether the employment of different CF strategies could bring about an attitudinal shift. To this end, 132 learners were randomly assigned to six different groups each receiving a different kind of corrective feedback. The participants' responses were compared before and after the treatment to find out how their attitude changed over the course of correction. The results suggested that different kinds of feedback strategies have their own proponents. The participants voiced their views on those feedback strategies. The implications of the findings are discussed at the end.

Keywords: CF Strategies, direct feedback, indirect feedback, focused feedback, unfocused feedback, reformulation, attitudinal shift, IELTS

INTRODUCTION

Corrective Feedback (CF) in one form or another has always fascinated teachers and applied linguists. What, however, is intriguing is not whether to have it or not but when to have it, how to have it, how often to have it and one thousand and one other questions as to how to carry it out. As Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 1) held "Even though students themselves are positive about written feedback and appear to value comments and corrections on all aspects of their texts, its contribution to students' writing development is still unclear."

Numerous studies have been carried out to figure out what type of feedback is more fruitful with language learners. The aim of this research was to find out what type of feedback works best with Iranian IELTS candidates who are preparing themselves for this high-stakes test. Thus far no

research has been carried out that encompasses all the different types of CF (Ellis, 2009):

There is an obvious need for carefully designed experimental studies to further investigate the effects of written CF in general and of different types of CF in particular. A typology such as the one outlined in this article provides a classification of one of the key variables in written CF studies – the type of CF. It makes it possible for researchers to conduct research that systematically examines the effect of distinct types and combinations of CF. (p. 106)

Although the researchers in this study are using an adaptation of the classification proposed by Ellis, they were not focusing on the effect of these feedback strategies in this study, but rather they focused on how the participants' attitude changed towards those CF strategies after they were employed.

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Review of the Related Literature

In form-focused instruction, a number of terms have been used by different researchers (Ellis, 2001; Lyster, 2004). There is, of course, some disagreement as to what corrective feedback, negative evidence and negative feedback mean and whether these can be used interchangeably. Not everybody agrees with Schachter (1991), who claimed that such terms as CF, negative evidence, and negative feedback are used in the fields of language teaching, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology respectively. Most scholars believe that these terms can be used interchangeably.

Whatever it is called, a number of scholars promote the idea of feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008; Bley-Vroman, 1986; Gass, 2003; Lee, 2008; Pica, 1988; Schachter, 1991). They claim that in their deductive mode of learning, learners form hypotheses which are later tested to be either rejected or confirmed with the help of the language they are exposed to and the feedback they are given. This in turn will lead to the relinquishment of the previous hypotheses and the formulation of new ones. In view of research findings, these researchers believe that positive evidence alone does not suffice and that learners will have to be reminded from time to time what the correct forms are and what they will have to avoid.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) held that no matter how we let our students know that they are using the language incorrectly, we are using CF. Feedback could, therefore, include the various responses that the learners get from their teachers. Teachers can provide feedback to a wrong statement like, "He go to school everyday", by being explicit, namely, "No, you should say *goes*, not *go*" or by being implicit "Yes, he goes to school every day", or with metalinguistic information, for example, "Don't forget to make the verb agree with the subject" (pp. 171-2). To have a clearer picture of different corrective feedback strategies, the typology proposed by Ellis (2009) is mentioned very briefly:

I) A typology of CF

Feedback enjoys different classifications. Lyster and Ranta (1997) divided feedback types into six different categories, namely, "clarification request, explicit feedback, recasts, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition." Although with a little modification this classification can be

used for students' writing activities, in these categories mostly learners' oral activities are taken into consideration. In another classification attempt, Burke and Pieterick (2010) categorized types of feedback into evaluative and advisory where the former refers to a kind of feedback that provides the learner with a grade on his/her past performance--backward-looking--while the latter denotes a type of feedback that is intended to improve learner's future performance in a particular language skill--forward-looking.

Among others, the CF typology put forward by Ellis (2009) provided an all-encompassing one in that it has all the teachers could do while giving CF. This list mentions six different strategies for providing CF and includes direct CF, indirect CF, metalinguistic CF, focused and unfocused CF, electronic feedback, and reformulation, which are briefly discussed below:

Direct CF. In this kind of feedback, the teacher gives the exact form. Ferris (2006) said this could take different forms from omitting a word to writing the correct form for the erroneous one. Ellis (2009) believed that direct CF has the advantage of telling the learners directly the wrong from the right. Ferris and Roberts (2001) believed that direct CF works better with elementary students but the downside is that the learners might not spend as much time reflecting on the errors as they do when they are corrected indirectly.

Indirect CF. In indirect CF, the student's error is indirectly taken care of. The teacher may underline the inaccurate grammatical structure in the learners' written work. This kind of correction could take any of two forms, that is, either the teacher underlines the error or marks the line which contains the error without locating the exact location of the error.

Ferris and Roberts (2001) claimed that the processing of the CF is a lot more than that of the direct CF and this is what they consider as an advantage. This advantage is because learners spend some time reflecting on the corrected linguistic form. Lee (as cited in Ellis, 2009) tried to find out which type of feedback is more fruitful and claimed that learners in the group whose errors were indicated and located outperformed those whose errors were just indicated.

Metalinguistic CF. When the teacher explicitly comments on the error the students make, s/he is

using metalinguistic CF. In this kind of feedback which could take different forms, the teacher does not directly correct the inaccurate form but rather through different coding techniques attracts the learners' attention to the problematic area. Ellis (2009) said:

By far the most common is the use of error codes. These consist of abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors. The labels can be placed over the location of the error in the text or in the margin. In the latter case, the exact location of the error may or may not be shown. In the former, the student has to work out the correction needed from the clue provided while in the latter the student needs to first locate the error and then work out the correction. (pp. 100-101)

Focused versus unfocused CF. Should teachers correct whatever inaccurate form, they discover in a student's written work, they are using the unfocused CF. Conversely, if they choose to work on certain types of errors rather than all, then they are using the focused type of CF. The broadness of the error range in the unfocused type of feedback makes the processing of the errors a strenuous task for the learners. As regards this downside, the focused CF seems to be more effective, although it is claimed that unfocused CF works better in the long run.

Electronic feedback. Students can benefit from a range of different electronic software at their disposal. All the corpora of written English are available electronically and students can employ them to their advantage. Concordancing programs can give learners the feedback they need. Other than that there are some other kinds of software which could take the burden of correction off the shoulders of the teacher. These types of software usually work best for lexical items than grammatical ones.

Reformulation. The final type of feedback is reformulation which is similar to the use of concordances because it aims at giving the learners a resource that they can use to correct their errors but places the responsibility for the final decision about whether and how to correct on the students themselves. One way to do so is to locate the problematic area and then provide teacher feedback by reconstructing the whole phrase, rephrasing it or even changing the whole sentence. In

reformulation the whole idea is preserved, that is, no change in the meaning should occur. In other words, the form changes but the meaning remains constant. Sachs and Polio (2007) compared reformulation with direct error correction. They reported that those in the reformulation group did not perform better than those in the correction group, whose errors were treated using direct CF. Sachs and Polio believed that reformulation helps with higher order corrections like correction of stylistic problems.

There are many scholars either commenting or conducting investigations on the effectiveness of each oral correction technique. While some supported one or some of the techniques (Carroll and Swain, 1993; Long, Inagaki, and Ortega, 1998; Lyster, 1998), others rejected the importance of feedback (Chaudron, 1988; DeKeyser, 1993; Fanselow, 1977; Truscott, 1996; Zobl, 1995).

A.Importance of Attitudinal Study in Writing

The rush of immigrants into the United States with a lot of them having a language other than English brought about some unintended consequences such as forming different attitudes ranging from positive to negative towards the American way of life and culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This is clearly ostensible in their children's written pieces and could lead to these children's underachievement and even aversion to writing (Wu & Rubin, 2000). The report by Wu and Rubin substantiates the attitudinal studies in literacy skills, particularly writing. They, therefore, put that such studies could be advantageous for EFL learners. Nieto (2002) also claimed that learners from different ethnic backgrounds and linguistic milieu would benefit from attitudinal studies and literacy practices because teachers might thus become familiar with their needs. Through these findings, instructional and contextual factors can be identified to support their school achievement.

Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick (1998) developed a scale to quantify students' self-perceptions as writers. Their scale requires students to assess their overall progress; progress in specific areas such as focus, organization, and style; comparisons between themselves and peers; social feedback such as students' perceptions of their teachers' views; and their inner feelings during the writing process. Despite the fact that few studies have employed their scale, Isernhagen and Kozisek (2000) reported utilizing

it along with a specific writing program and found healthy transformations in fifth-grade students' attitudes toward writing.

Studies (See Bottomley, Henk, & Melnick, 1998; Isernhagen, & Kozisek, 2000; Nieto, 2002) have found that students' beliefs about writing can affect their efficacy, and that grade level and gender, as well as attitudes towards writing may predict prospective writing achievement (Pajares & Valiante, 1999). These studies show that there is a relationship between attitudes and achievement, though further research is encouraged to examine attitudes and practices of writers in specific contexts.

Attitudinal studies are not only limited to the correlation between achievement and attitude and deals with learners' perceptions in general. It could encompass a wider context and can include such areas as writing conventions and/or other ones like audience and creativity. A year-long case study carried out in a second- and third-grade classroom focusing on the interaction between students' strategies and the teacher's instruction revealed that children attend to various aspects of writing events, including reactions of classmates, textual features, and the requirements of particular genres. Haneda and Wells (2000) asserted that the effort students exert to produce effective texts is essential for students to see writing as a means of knowledge building. Effective teaching can help students modify their definitions of good writing from a focus on mere conventions to a focus on audience and creativity (Kos & Maslowski, 2001). Bomer and Laman (2004) examined the ways in which students perceived themselves in relation to the texts they generated as well as to each other. The authors asserted that writing development is more than a sequential development of cognitive skills, but rather it is a social process that includes many affective ingredients as well. All this could then trigger the importance of attitude; hence, a reason to find out whether our attitude could change as a result of the treatment we are exposed to.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Research Question: *Is there a shift in the attitude of the learners towards writing after the employment of the CF strategies?*

H 0 There is no shift in the attitude of the learners towards writing after the employment of CF strategies.

Method

The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate attitudinal shift towards writing among Iranian EFL learners preparing themselves for an IELTS exam after the employment of some corrective feedback strategies.

Participants

The participants in this study were from among bachelor's degree and master's degree students studying at different universities across the country, preparing to attend different universities abroad, where the medium of instruction is English. The participants were chosen from different institutes where preparation courses were held.

I) Instrument

Because this research was part of a larger research project, the participants were asked to answer a few questions regarding how they felt towards different CF strategies. For the purpose of this research only the corresponding questions for the same CF strategy the students were exposed to were analyzed both before and after the employment of the six CF strategies.

I) Procedure

To achieve the purpose of the study, certain stages were required. Because this study entailed the phenomenology of attitude towards feedback strategies both before and after the introduction of different CF strategies, the researchers first ran a proficiency test to find out about the learners' level of proficiency to pick only those in Band 5, 6, and 7 according to IELTS scoring system. After that, the questionnaires and interview questions were administered and the questions relevant to the purpose of this research were studied. Then, the CF strategies were randomly assigned to the different groups and the students in the six groups were treated differently as far as the error correction strategy was concerned. However, the strategies used to teach writing were the same in all the groups. The participants were then given the interview questions again to detect any attitudinal shift after they were exposed to the same type of CF strategy. The findings were then analyzed qualitatively and also percentage-wise to detect the attitudinal changes.

Findings

Participants in six different groups were given feedback on their writings. The participants were

asked a very simple question to find out about their attitude towards the kind of feedback they were going to be exposed to. After the project was over, the same question was asked to find out the participants' shift of attitude. The participants' responses in the six categories and the way the learners felt towards correction after they received that special kind of feedback are presented below. The six categories were reformulation, direct feedback, indirect feedback, error coding, metalinguistic feedback and peer feedback. The participants' responses are analyzed and followed by only one or two quotations for brevity. The quotations by the learners are presented verbatim. Therefore, there might be some errors as you read them.

Reformulation. Reformulation was the kind of feedback which was most attractive to the learners. By the end of the research, the students evinced a sense of excitement about this feedback strategy, and they almost unanimously wanted the project to go ahead. There was not a single student who had negative attitude towards the feedback strategy. All (100%) of the participants who answered the question, "Do/Did you like the feedback strategy?" said they did like it.

I like this way of revision. with [sic] regarding the fact that my writing at times changed completely because I have been criticized of [sic] my "colloquial" wiring [sic] at university (tell [sic] you the truth I can't get their points) so I have always thought if my Iranian professors don't like my writing let alone a native educated one [sic]. This way of correction encouraged and make [sic] me interested in writing (at least a 5-paragraph essay) that I hated before. (L. 3)

I hate a marks [sic] on my paper, but this is different from any other kind [sic] of feedback I have had up to now. Some of the things which were corrected would not have been corrected had ... it not been for this model of correction. (L.6)

For Learner 17, the experience was an exceptional one. It seemed that the experience got the best out of him. He said he would venture new sentences and would dare to take risks. Apparently, he seemed unimpeded to risk his neck out because he implicitly claimed that the feedback was non-judgmental. Therefore, he poured out even the structures he was unsure of.

Fabulous. After you told us about the way we should write something, revising of a whole sentence and saying how a native speaker says the same thing. I trusted you ... and I was *no more worried* [Italic added] of [sic] making mistakes. I always wanted to get the wrong expressions out of me that [sic] I started making new sentences that I was not even aware of. I wish we could have it as long as possible. (L. 17)

Like a lot of other feedback strategies which were different from the conventional ones, novelty seemed to be a major reason why some learners like reformulation. The responses suggested that 23% of the participants liked this feedback strategy for its unconventionality:

Most of my previous teachers did not correct my compositions, but when they did they underlined one word and wrote the correct form on it but this was different. You sometimes changed the whole sentence. (L.7)

It was different than the correction I have had so far. (L. 24)

Direct Feedback. Direct feedback, to some, appeared to be the only model of giving feedback. One student even asked whether there were other ways of providing feedback. This feedback strategy seemed to be the conventional one in most language classes in Iran because when one starts asking students how their errors are/were treated, the finger of blame is directed at this feedback strategy. Unlike reformulation, direct feedback aroused both positive and negative attitude towards itself. The words *positive* and *negative* are used to refer to the learners' attitude to the different strategy types:

Positive. Like reformulation, this kind of feedback was also attractive to the learners. Many participants thought their writing improved as a result of using this correction technique. A large number of the participants (86.36%) retained their positive attitude towards this model of feedback after the project:

I think my writing revision is the best way which one essay can be revised. When students can see the correct form of their writing and then they have to rewrite it again in correct form [sic] it could help them to knowing [sic] the problem and practicing [sic] more. I firmly believe that prac-

ting is the best way to improve the writing [sic] and it could be better if the teachers provide [sic] supervision on their writing. (L. 6)

Negative. The participants (13.63%) who had negative feelings about direct feedback would have probably shown the same kind of feeling even if they had been given any other kind of feedback. Their problem was not the feedback type employed but rather their lack of self-esteem or simply having a negative attitude towards writing, which are presented below:

I hate anything about writing. Writing itself, paragraph development, feedback. Now I can tell you that I through the corrected form in the nearest wastepaper basket because a lot of the things you write are what I know but do not take serious [sic] when I am writing. (L. 10)

I hate everything even remotely related to writing. My guess is feedback is so [sic] connected [sic]. Give me something to talk about but don't ask me to write. (L. 18)

Indirect feedback. The rest of the feedback strategies did not seem to be attractive to a lot of the learners. Indirect feedback was appealing to only 36.4% of the participants:

Positive. A little over one third (36.4%) of the students felt positive about indirect feedback. Strangely enough, those who liked the feedback strategy said they liked it for its novelty, or because it was somehow different from the other kinds of feedback strategies and not because they thought it was more useful or conducive to better writing performance. The time to process the feedback provided by the teacher was also thought to be a contribution to its efficacy. It is worth mentioning that L. 13's response also suggests that novelty plays a role in the attitude of the learners.

I think to write an appropriate essay I should be more considerate to refrain from simple mistakes. The way my writing was corrected was most amazing. I had to spend a lot of time trying to understand the problem [sic] though. (L. 13)

It was good. It was a new experience. (L. 19)

Negative. Overall, all those who wrote unfavor-

ably of this method of feedback wrote a variation of I wished you had written the correct form to give feedback. This could be partly because they were not used to this kind of CF strategy, unlike what occurs in their classes.

Error coding. The least attractive form of correction was error coding. The participants mostly thought it was time-consuming to figure out what the symbols represented and to memorize them. They complained that they had to refer to the list and go through a host of unintelligible signs to find out what a symbol signified, and that by the time they did so, they would be too tired to find out what the correct form would be. One thing should be borne in mind, though. If they had more time, this method might have been more appealing to them, but because in most cases, the IELTS candidates look for quick tips, they do not find this way of getting feedback quite attractive. The positive affective aspect for this CF strategy stood at 9% against almost the rest of the class:

Positive. A salient fact about the positive side of the affective continuum is that what makes error coding interesting for some makes it unappealing to the rest, that is, novelty. However, as they get used to it, some learners find it interesting:

At first it was confusing to me. I did not have the symbols and when I got them, you had already corrected two of my writings, so I had to rush thorough [sic] them. (L. 8)

I felt frustrated at the beginning but as it went on, I felt fine with it. (L. 14)

Negative. This could be partly because of the time frame and the density and intensity of the materials covered in the class and the fact that the learners were pressed for time.

I think it is meaningless. (L. 2)

At first it was fine because I thought this is [sic] a new model and this will work but later I thought to myself why I should spend time memorizing some symbols which I will not see them [sic] in my life anymore. (L. 20)

Metalinguistic feedback. Metalinguistic feedback was moderately more attractive (18%) to the learners than error coding because they thought a brief description could help them think about the errors, and it was like asking them to choose the

correct form, and that they thought they were interacting with the text. However, most of the learners again thought, and implicitly or explicitly mentioned, that direct type of feedback would be a better choice:

Positive. Although 18% of the participants said they liked it, they also relayed their dismay at not knowing what the correct form was.

....because your correction was approximately detailed and your explanations about my mistakes were beside them. I think it is better to mention the correct form of and [sic] each wrong word or sentence also if you think a sentence can be written better, please recommend that better form. (L. 1)

I think it is impressive, but I'll appreciate it if the examiner [sic] write [sic] the correct terms, vocabularies [sic] and grammar that are wrong. If I am aware [sic] of the average score that I probably [sic] get in the exam, it'll be more helpful. (L. 24)

Another participant mentioned the conative aspect of her attitude, suggesting that she did not spend enough time trying to figure out what the problem was:

If I'd had more time to analyze my essays more and applied all of the things that had been mentioned in my following essays, I think I would have improved more. (L. 11)

Peer feedback. Peer feedback is also one of the least popular error correction feedback types, fishing compliments. 13.63% had a positive view towards peer feedback. One of the positive comments on that was not directed at the cognitive part of feedback but rather at the affective side of it:

Positive. One point about this kind of feedback is the kind of rapport the learners make with their classmates:

I have a positive view toward that because I think peer correction gives you a situation for [sic] introduce yourself to friends. The best way for you and your friends for cooperating [sic] more and more without any stress, anxiety, evaluation of your knowledge and increase [sic] your self-confident [sic]. (L. 11)

Negative. Equally unattractive as metalinguistic feedback, peer feedback attracted even more ve-

hement brickbats because 86.4 percent of those in the peer feedback category disapproved of this CF strategy:

It is not [sic] the matter that I like it or not, I think peer feedback

do [sic] not help me at all because my classmates might be right on their ideas on my writing but I am not sure of their correctness [sic] and I still do not know what are my weaknesses[sic]. (L. 3)

Revision was good. But my classmates corrected my grammatical mistakes more [sic]. They did not pay attention to other points such as my style, reasons and conclusion. I have searched some of my mistakes in dictionaries and other references. I found [sic] what I wrote was correct. But they said it was wrong. Now I do not know who is right. I myself did not do more than that in correcting the essays but I checked their mistakes in some references to correct them. (L. 6)

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Six different groups received six different feedback strategies, and their responses were compared to find out how their attitude changed over the course of correction. The participants were asked how they felt towards the error correction model before they started and after the project was over. Although the results suggest otherwise, different kinds of feedback strategies have their own proponents. They even voiced their views for those strategies. McConnell (2002) believed that peer feedback was beneficial for both feedback-giver and feedback-receiver. The findings for this research question did not intend to answer the effectiveness of peer feedback but rather significant attitudinal change was to be detected in the peer feedback group.

The best attitude changer seemed to be reformulation. This kind of feedback could be the winner of the participants' favor for two major reasons: novelty and native-speaker correction. All the participants in the project claimed that they never had a professional native speaker comment on their writing. Also, they were never exposed to a reformulation as a feedback strategy. These two major players in the game of correction greatly affected their attitude, and thus none of the participants showed a negative attitude towards reformulation. It could be claimed that although the learners liked this type of CF,

there is no proof that their performance has significantly changed compared to that of participants in the other groups. As opposed the finding of Sachs and Polio (2007), the findings in this research suggests a significant change in the participants' performance. Of course, it is out of the scope of this research to cite that fact. However, it was worth mentioning, for as Nieto (2002) mentioned getting to know about the students' attitude could help a teacher get familiar with his/her students' needs especially when they are from different sociocultural backgrounds. The students' better performance and attitude towards reformulation is also proof enough that attitude could in turn affect learners' performance.

The second most favorite feedback strategy was direct feedback and there was a 52-percent change of attitude. This kind of feedback enjoyed a large reversal of attitude from negative to positive partly not because the students did not like it but because, as they suggested, they did not like writing itself. The other kinds of feedback did not seem to be appealing to the students at the beginning and there was not a significant attitudinal change once they were employed by the researchers. Although statistical analyses suggested that there was no significant change in the attitude of the participants, it should be stated that the least amount of change was observed in the peer-feedback group. Apparently, teachers should not rely much on peer-feedback for a change of attitude. A very significant factor to mention here is that although novelty played a part in the error-coding feedback as well, it did not help change the learners' attitude for the better.

A dearth of research in attitude in our major suggests that maybe it is high time that we experienced a change of attitude towards attitudinal studies in applied linguistics, for just as different factors such as behavioral, cognitive and affective ones influence our attitude (Maio & Haddock, 2007), many a thing could be a function of our attitude not the least, our achievement.

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