An Investigation of Corrective Feedback and the Treatment of Spoken Errors in Communicative English Language Classes: A Case Study of Iran

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The present study endeavors to investigate teachers' and students' expectations toward corrective feedback, focusing on delivering agent, timing, types and techniques of error treatment in communicative-oriented English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in the context of Iran. It also reveals how teachers provide corrective feedback to EFL learners and the frequency of corrective feedback techniques they use in the classroom. To fulfill the purpose of this study a total number of five class observations were carried out and followed by five interviews with the teachers of the same classes. Based on qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures the results show that both students and teachers prefer to receive or give corrective feedback to infrequent errors more than to frequent ones which is completely against what part of the literature suggests. It also shows that the preferences of both groups of participants do not greatly differ from each other except in few ways such as timing. Also, the findings show that recast is the most frequently-used technique employed by Iranian teachers in their classes.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, corrective feedback (hereafter, CF) has been a controversial topic. With the emergence of communicative approaches, changes in the perception of error correction began, its usefulness was reassessed and also its popularity amongst scholars and teachers rose. A large number of researchers have examined the nature and role of CF in L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Chenoweth, 1993; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ohta, 2000; Chaudron, 1988). Nevertheless, after many years of researching and exploring error treatment and communicative language teaching, there is still considerable debate and researchers are still asking the same five basic questions posed by Hendrickson:

1. Should learners' errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learners' errors should be corrected?
3. Which errors should be corrected?
4. How should errors be corrected?
   5. Who should do the correcting?

The expansion and development of English language have increased dramatically throughout the world, and Iran has been no exception. At present, English language plays an important role in Iranian educational environments and students need to possess a good command of English to be successful in their higher education.

Schools in Iran are divided into three levels: Primary schools, Middle schools and Secondary schools. Primary school includes five years of studying and is followed by middle school which involves three years. English is a compulsory subject in Iran's education system and students start learning it at this level. After middle school students enter secondary school which involves four years of studying. Having finished secondary school, students will be entitled to attend the national university entrance exam in order to go to university. With respect to English Language Teaching (ELT), the English language is considered a foreign language in Iran (Dabaghi, 2008).

As usual, different scholars are of divergent ideas on the effectiveness of implementing the corrective feedback on the improvement of the students' knowledge.

For instance, Morgan and Travis (1995, cited in Birjandi and Nasrolahi, 2012) argue that the occurrence of CF is not frequent enough to be regarded as something essential for learning; most of the time correction may not help at all. Other researchers believe that the existence of CF does not have effect on language development and makes no difference. For example Schmidt and Frota (1986) state evidence on error treatment in first language acquisition which shows that "negative information is not systematically provided by the caretaker, and when it is provided it does not seem to have much effect on the learner" (p.21).

However, unlike the studies above that refute or partly refute the facilitative role of feedback in the formation of a child's language system, in other studies (e.g., Chouinrad & Clark, 2003; Bohannon & Bonvillian, 2009) it is revealed that caretaker-child conversations and CF that caretakers provide has a significant role in developing the language system of children. Bohannon & Bonvillian (2009) maintain that children are "able to discern that a particular adult utterance is CF when the apparent intended meaning of the adult's utterance is the same as that of the child's utterance, but the grammatical form is different" (p.245). In addition, according to Saxton (1997, p.147) "naturalistic data reveal that children sometimes shift from erroneous to correct versions of particular structures following the intervention of negative evidence ".

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Discover Iranian teachers' and learners' preferences with respect to CF
2. Compare teachers' and learners' preferences with respect to CF

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3. Describe different approaches used by Iranian teachers of English with respect to CF, in other words describe what they actually do in the classroom and compare it to what they say they do.

4. Examine the frequencies of error treatment techniques in speaking activities to find out what is the most frequently used CF technique by Iranian teachers, in pre-intermediate (PI), intermediate (I), upper-intermediate (UI) and advanced (Adv) level classes.

Research questions

The aims of this study will be elucidated by the following questions:

1. Research questions about students' preferences:

a. By whom do Iranian language learners like their errors to be corrected?

b. How often do they like to be corrected?

c. What types of their errors do they like to be corrected?

d. Which error treatment amongst eight different ways do they prefer?

2. Research questions regarding teachers' preferences:

a. Who do Iranian teachers think should correct students' errors?

b. How often do they think they need to correct students' errors?

c. What types of errors do they think should be corrected?

d. Which error treatment amongst eight different ways do they prefer to use?

3. What are the different approaches used by teachers regarding treatment of spoken errors?

4. What are the frequencies of error treatment techniques in the classrooms?

Setting and Participants

This research was carried out in an English language institute in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Participants were teachers and students who were working and studying in the language institute. Forty eight male and female students in five classes were chosen from intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced level to be observed. Also, 5 teachers in the above mentioned 5 classes were observed and interviewed; they were between 26 to 35 years old and they had 2 to 10 years of teaching English experience. Also 48 female and 22 male students from PI to advanced level participated in this survey along with twenty four female and 12 male teachers who were between 21 to 40 years old with average 5 years of experience.

Instruments

The present study aims to answer the questions posed in Chapter one, Section four, through qualitative and quantitative research instruments:

Questionnaire

For this study, the researcher used Park's (2010) teachers' and students' questionnaires (see Appendix 1) to develop the questionnaires used to collect data in the study. The modified teachers'/students' questionnaires used in the current study are included in Appendix 2.

The teachers' questionnaires (consisting of 11 items) and the students' questionnaires (consisting of 8 items), was carried out among four different levels of proficiency. The questionnaires included 2 sections. The first section involved students` demographic information. The second part contained items exploring issues about delivering agent, timing, types and methods of providing CF.

Classroom observation

Data concerning approaches employed by Iranian teachers of English with respect to CF and frequency of CF techniques in classrooms were collected by means of class observation which involves audio-recording and grid. The grid was used in order to record students' errors and each CF technique used by teachers in response to students. Five class observations of five classes were conducted in the same learning context, i.e. a language institute in Iran. The teachers were informed about the purpose of the research beforehand. During the observation, the recorder was on and the errors made by students and the CF techniques employed by the teachers were noted by means of a grid.

Interview

The observations were followed by the interviews with the 5 teachers of five observed classes from the language institute. A semi-structured interview was used to allow the researcher to ask for further clarification about certain answers or about the answers which may have appeared ambiguous. The purpose of the interviews was to attain the stances of the teachers on different aspects of CF.

Procedures

The teachers' questionnaire was distributed among teachers by the researcher and also through www.surveymonkey.com , so the teachers could decide in which form they preferred answering it. An information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 3) was attached to the printed questionnaires to inform the teacher participants about the topic and also that their participation was voluntary. Also, the students' questionnaire was administered by the researcher amongst them. Before filling in the questionnaire, the consent was obtained from the students and they were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. The students were asked to read the general instructions for the survey and were informed that they could skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering.

Data Analysis

Seven hours and 30 minutes of tape-recorded data and also 5 interviews have been partially transcribed by the researcher. For the purpose of the present study, the transcribed material was examined to find the different CF types and the frequency of each one of them. Furthermore, the recognized types were then categorized under the terms explained in Chapter two, Section three, Sub section one. Additionally, some parts of the dialogues between teachers and students, while teachers were providing CF, were transcribed to depict the process of providing error treatment in the classroom.

Detailed Findings
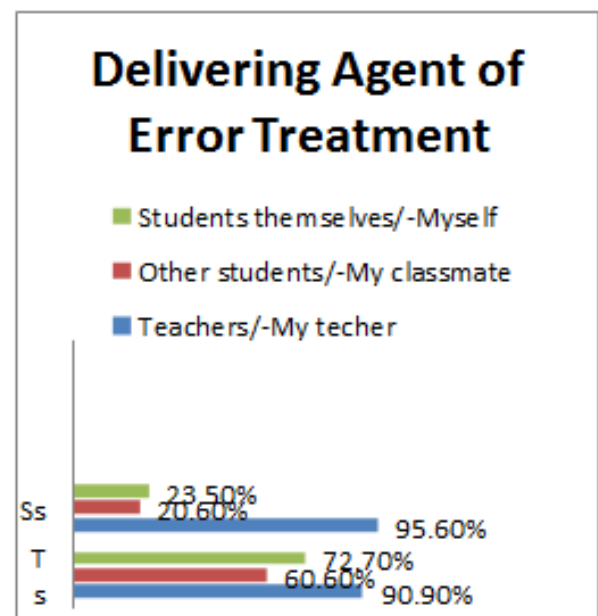
Who should correct students' errors?

Figure 1. Delivering Agent of Error Treatment

Table 1. As soon as Errors are Made Even If It Interrupts the Conversation

Students			Teachers		
As soon as errors are made even if it interrupts my conversation.			**As soon as errors are made even if it interrupts students' conversation.**		
Disagree/Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly agree
32.90 % (23)	20.00% (14)	47.10% (33)	75.00% (24)	18.8% (6)	6.30% (2)

Table 2. As Soon as the Speaking Activity Finishes

Students			Teachers		
As soon as I finished speaking.			**As soon as the student has finished speaking.**		
Disagree/ Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly agree
8.70% (6)	15.90% (11)	75.30% (52)	12.10% (4)	36.40%(12)	51.50% (17)

Table 3. It Depends Very Much on the Type of Speaking Activity

Students			Teachers		
It depends very much on the type of speaking activity.			**It depends very much on the type of speaking activity.**		
Disagree/ Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly agree	Disagree/ Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree/ Strongly agree
13.00% (9)	20.30%(14)	66.60% (46)	0.00%	11.40% (4)	88.50% (31)

Table 4. Student and Teacher Responses on the Timing of Error Correction

Students			Teachers		
At the end of an activity.			**At the end of an activity**		
Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree/ Agree	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree/ Agree
38.6% (27)	11.4% (8)	50.0% (35)	9.3%(3)	22.6% (7)	67.7% (21)

Table 5. At the End of Class

Students			Teachers		
At the end of class.			**At the end of class.**		
Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree/Agree	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree/ Agree
73% (49)	13%(9)	15.9% (13)	62.0% (18)	24.1% (7)	13.8% (4)

Table 6. Ts' Responses to Serious and Less Serious Spoken Errors

Types of errors	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	Always
Serious spoken errors	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.30% (12)	66.70% (24)
Less serious spoken errors	8.80% (3)	26.50% (9)	41.20% (41)	17.60% (6)	5.90% 92)

Table 7. Ss' Responses to Serious and Less Serious Spoken Errors

Types of errors	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree/ Strongly agree
Serious spoken errors	4.3%(3)	7.1% (5)	88.60% (64)
Less serious spoken errors	2.90% (2)	13.0% (9)	57.90% (40)

Table 8. Ts' Responses Regarding Frequent and Infrequent Errors

Types of errors	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	Always
Frequent spoken errors (for example always using 'he' instead of 'she'.	2.8% (1)	22.2% (8)	30.6%(11)	25.0% (9)	19.4% (7)
Infrequent spoken errors (for example getting one verb tense wrong)	11.4%(4)	17.1%(1)	22.9%(16)	45.7%(16)	2.9% (1)

Table 9. Ss' Responses Regarding Frequent and Infrequent Errors

Types of errors	Strongly disagree/Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree/ Agree
Frequent spoken errors (for example always using 'he' instead of 'she'.	24.3% (17)	17.1% (12)	58.6% (41)
Infrequent spoken errors (for example getting one verb tense wrong)	7.2% (5)	12.9% (9)	80.0% (56)

Table 10. Types and Frequency of CF in 'UI' level, T1

CF Types	Recast	Metalinguistic feedback
Frequencies	14	1

Table 11. Types and Frequency of CF in 'I' level, T2

CF Types	Elicitation	Recast	Explicit feedback	Repetition	Metalinguistic feedback
Frequencies	8	6	4	3	2

Table 12. Types and Frequency of CF in 'I' level,T3

CF Types	Recast	Elicitation	Repetition	Metalinguistic feedback
Frequencies	17	1	1	1

Table 13. Types and Frequency of CF in 'UI' level,T4

CF Types	Recast	Clarification
Frequencies	9	1

Table 14. Types and Frequency of CF in 'Adv.' Level,T5

CF Types	Recast	Explicit	Clarification	Metalinguistic feedback
Frequencies	11	1	1	1

As is shown in the above figure, peer-correction received the lowest attention among Ss (20.60%), while a remarkable percentage of teachers (60.60%) chose it. The figure also demonstrates that only 23.50% of Ss looked favorably at "self-correction", while 72.70% of Ts chose it.

When should spoken errors be corrected?

A. As soon as errors are made even if it interrupts my/ the Ss' conversation. It is shown in the following table.

There is a contradiction in opinion amongst students. A noticeable number of students (47.10%) agreed/ strongly agreed and had positive views toward their errors being treated immediately, whereas 32.9% and 20.00% disagreed/strongly disagreed and were neutral respectively. In contrast, most of the Ts' responses showed that they were harmonious in their preference. Three quarters of the Ts (75.00%) were against treating errors right after they were made, while only 6.30% of them considered correcting their Ss' error right after they made them an appropriate time to do so.

B. As soon as I/the Ss finished speaking.

According to Table 2, two thirds (75.30%) and 8.70% of the students agreed/strongly agreed and disagreed/strongly disagreed respectively with receiving CF after they finished speaking. The Ts' results reveal that 51.50% of teachers are also for treating errors at the end of students' conversation, and a small percentage of (12.10%) disagreed/strongly disagreed. There are also 36.40% of teachers who are neutral about treating errors when they finished speaking.

C. It depends very much on the type of speaking activity

Results imply that although there is an evident similarity in the Ts' and learners' expectation, teachers decisively rejected disagreement on this sub-question and strongly believe, that treating errors very much depends on the nature of the activities being drilled in the class.

D. At the end of an activity

Students' responses show discrepancies with respect to receiving CF at the end of an activity, with 38.6% of students disagreeing/strongly disagreeing, while 50.0% agreed/strongly agreed. The rest (11.4%) were neutral. In contrast, a large percentage of teachers (67.7%) agreed/strongly agreed and minor percentages (9.3%) and (22.6%), of teachers disagreed/strongly disagreed and were neutral respectively. All in all it conveys that there is not statistically a big dissimilarity between both groups of participants and that they found it as appropriate time to give/receive CF.

E. At the end of class

As to treating errors at the end of the class, Table 5 demonstrates that this timing of error treatment is the least favorite among both groups of participants.

The results showed that 73% of students and 62.0% of teachers preferred not to receive and give CF at the end of the class. Another teacher believed that this is a good method since we should not show publicly to other Ss how their classmates make an error.

Which errors should be corrected?

With reference to the answers to the Which-question, the data analysis in this part looked only at those strongest preferences and comparison of those which revealed odd and surprising results. The answer options to the question "What types of spoken errors should be corrected?" were four: serious spoken errors, less serious spoken errors, frequent spoken errors and finally, infrequent spoken errors. Teachers were asked to rate each type of error with "Never", "Rarely", "Occasionally", "Often", "Always". Students were asked the same question: "Which of the following errors would you like your teacher to

correct?" and they were asked to mark the aforementioned types of error with "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Neither agree nor disagree", "Agree", "Strongly agree".
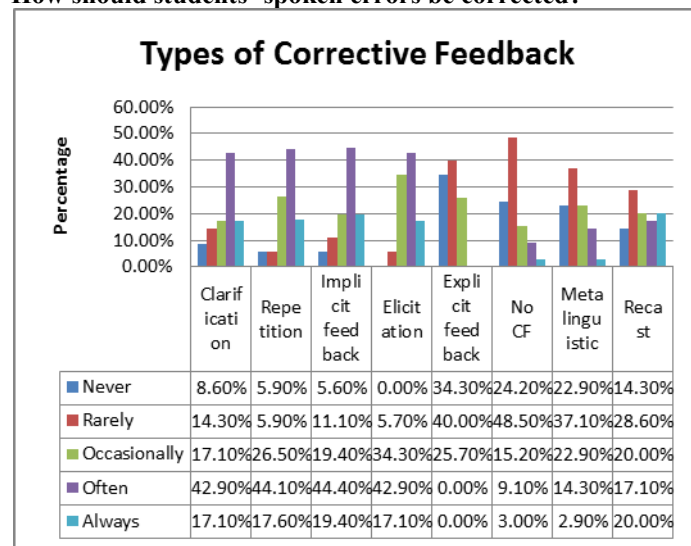
The results revealed that 66.7% and 33.3% of teachers rated "Always" and "Often" serious spoken errors should receive treatment. Whereas in response to less serious spoken errors they mostly rated "Occasionally" 41.2% and "Rarely" 26.5%. These results indicate that for teachers, serious spoken errors receive top priority over less serious spoken errors.

All teachers also expressed the same idea that "Serious ones obviously always should be corrected". Students also showed that they would like their serious spoken errors to receive more treatment than less serious errors.

Findings as to treating frequent and infrequent errors revealed that 30.6% of teachers believed frequent spoken errors should be treated "Occasionally" and 45.7% stated that infrequent spoken errors need to be treated "often". This outcome shows that for teachers, infrequent errors have priority over frequent ones which seems to be odd. In addition to this, analyzing the students' responses shows that the students' preference is in line with that of teachers, since for the former group, receiving treatment of infrequent errors is far more important than receiving treatment for frequent errors.

Statistical data shows that 58.6% of students displayed positive responses toward treating of frequent errors. A wider percentage of them (80.0%), however, showed more interest in receiving treatment for their infrequent errors which, as in the case of the Ts' answers, is odd and unexpected. To clarify, Tables number 13 and 14 are provided to illustrate the paradox in a more detailed way:

How should students' spoken errors be corrected?

Types of Corrective Feedback

|	Clarification	Repetition	Implicit feedback	Elicitation	Explicit feedback	No CF	Meta linguistic	Recast
Never	8.60%	5.90%	5.60%	0.00%	34.30%	24.20%	22.90%	14.30%
Rarely	14.30%	5.90%	11.10%	5.70%	40.00%	48.50%	37.10%	28.60%
Occasionally	17.10%	26.50%	19.40%	34.30%	25.70%	15.20%	22.90%	20.00%
Often	42.90%	44.10%	44.40%	42.90%	0.00%	9.10%	14.30%	17.10%
Always	17.10%	17.60%	19.40%	17.10%	0.00%	3.00%	2.90%	20.00%

Graph 2. Types of Corrective Feedback Uses by Iranian Teachers in Classroom

Looking at Graph 2, what initially draws one's attention is that four types of corrective moves are quite popular among Iranian teachers. These, in order of percentage, are: 'elicitation', 'clarification request', 'repetition' and 'implicit feedback'. On the other hand, the least favorite CF moves among teachers are: 'no CF', 'explicit feedback' and 'metalinguistic feedback'.

What seems interesting is that, regarding 'EF' none of the teachers (0.00%) have chosen "always" and "often". Instead, the majority of them have chosen "never" and "rarely". And only 15.20% have said they do it "occasionally" in their classes.

The result show that teachers' and student' expectation regarding the way of treating errors are very much the same. It seems that students expect their teachers to implicitly notify

them about their faulty output or give them time to reconsider their own error. Similarly, it appears that teachers most favored techniques are "implicit feedback", "elicitation", "clarification" and "repetition". Graph 3 illustrates students responses as to how they would like to receive error treatment:
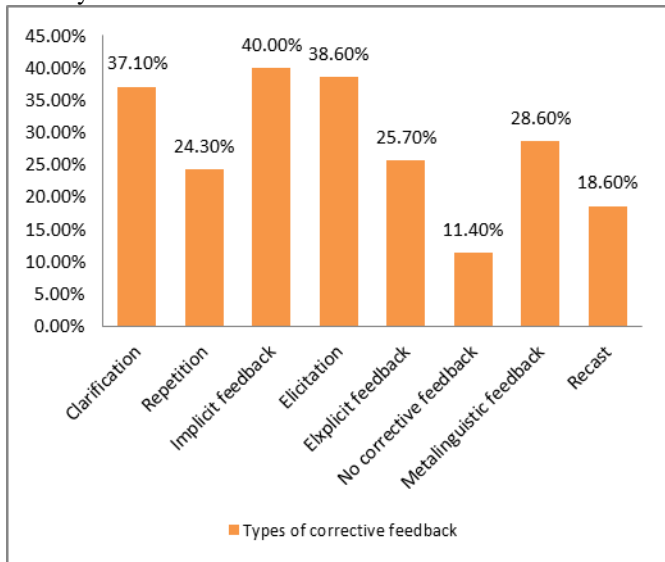
Graph 3. Types of Corrective Feedback that the Students Prefer

Different approaches used by Iranian teachers

Pre-Intermediate: T1 had a friendly relationship with the students and both students and teachers were relaxed. He rarely interrupted the students' speaking and did not give much corrective feedback during oral production nor at the end of an activity and at the end of the class. He waited till they finished their sentences and of course sometimes for the sake of treating their errors he cut them short. The table below shows the frequency of techniques used in speaking activities:

Although the teacher addressed learners' errors it was less than what had been expected in this level of proficiency classroom. At this level of proficiency and also lower levels, teachers need to be more attentive and not only 'recast'. As is stated by researchers (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) 'recast' is the least effective form of oral CF.

Intermediate: At this level of proficiency two classes were observed. T2 and T3 both taught intermediate level but they had completely different ideas and approaches toward treating students' errors. T2 used various types of corrective techniques such as "elicitation", "recast", "explicit CF" and "metalinguistic CF". Basically, he used "elicitation" and "recast" more often than the other techniques. He often gave the students time by pausing for some seconds and waiting for the answer from them to get them to think and generate the right answer, and if a given student could not produce the right answer he asked others (peer-correction). Furthermore, he quite often interrupted students' production to point out their errors, especially when it was related to grammar practice, but he had a friendly relationship with students and did it in a way that students did not appear to be uncomfortable.

T4 in his interview expressed that employ almost all of the techniques apart from "No CF", "explicit feedback". The data shows that he act according to what he says he does in the class. T3's relationship with Ss was not as friendly as other teachers. And the students seemed less relaxed than in other classes. He employed various CF moves but used "recast" far more than other methods. He also avoided treating some errors while they were speaking and often interrupted students' speech. The type and frequency of CF techniques he used are:

Upper-Intermediate:T4 had a friendly relationship with students and a cheerful atmosphere was dominant in her class, which felt like a group of friends talking to each other. She used a small number of CF techniques (as can be seen in Table13). While two of the Ss were giving lectures, she corrected them at the end of the activity and basically she noted the errors on a piece of paper and at the end she gave it to them and asked them to bring it to the next session with the correct version of their errors. Also, when two students had a conversation she joined their conversation, reformulated some sentences, and overlooked minor errors, letting the conversation flow. In some cases she waited until the Ss had finished their sentence and then she talked.

The frequencies of the errors in this class are:

Advanced: T5 also had a friendly relationship with the Ss in his class. He, as in the case of other teachers, used 'recast' far more than the other techniques which supports what he expressed in his interview.

He also used other techniques as can be seen table below:

T5 mostly interrupted the students right away after they made an error, but mildly, or when the students were struggling generating a sentence he intervened and formulated the sentence more correctly.

Key Findings and Conclusion

The purposes of this study were to: 1) investigate the learners' and teachers' preferences; 2) describe the different approaches used by Iranian teachers regarding the CF and also 3) examine the frequencies of error-treatment techniques used by teachers in different levels of proficiency classes. The first finding of this study with respect to the timing of error treatment is that the teachers' and students' expectations were almost in accord with each other except on one point. The teachers did not consider providing students with CF immediately after they make an error as an appropriate time to do so, whereas the majority of students where not against this timing in CF. In other cases (i.e., when the students finished speaking, at the end of an activity and at the end of class) they were in agreement about whether or not to provide CF.

Secondly, both groups of participants gave priority to infrequent spoken errors. The students showed that they liked to receive treatment on frequent errors as well, but not as much as on the infrequent ones. This seems highly dubious since researchers suggest that high-frequency errors should be among the first errors that teachers treat in students' oral communication. Given the fact that the question 'Which spoken errors should be corrected?' provided examples and elicited unexpected answers, one possible explanation for such a finding could be that participants had a different conception of 'frequent' vs. 'infrequent' from that provided in the examples. This may imply that the question might only be meaningful if everybody has the same understanding of these errors.

Thirdly, regarding the corrective feedback types, both groups of participants showed similar preferences. The teachers' most used CF types were implicit feedback, repetition, elicitation and clarification. The last two types were equally favoured in terms of their percentages. Similarly, implicit feedback, elicitation and clarification were the most favoured ones among Ss.

Fourthly, what the teachers stated in the interview was to some extent according to what they actually did in their classes except T4. Moreover, regarding the approaches used by Iranian teachers only one out of five teachers did provide different

varieties of CF in the classroom and the rest of them mostly used 'recast' to treat students errors which does not seem very promising. Given the fact that in Iran language school classes are usually small and the number of students does not exceed 15-20, one would expect teachers to be more attentive, deal with a larger number of students' errors and to use a wider range of CF types.

Overall, the findings suggest that no significant differences exists in the general attitudes to error correction among students and teachers in this specific context, and that the numbers of teachers who benefit from various types of CF in their classes are very limited.

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