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## **A Descriptive Study of Corrective Feedback and Error Categories**

Jaishree Umale  
Amity University; Gurgaon, India

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### **Abstract**

*In the past, teachers undertook the assiduous task of correcting each and every mistake of the students but the same mistakes would surface again. Students were not even aware of the type of mistakes they were making hence; in the present situation it would be beneficial if they are made aware of the error categories like errors in the use of verb form, verb tense, concord etc. Codes could be assigned to these error categories and errors made by students could be underlined and coded. Teachers could also reformulate passages or use consciousness raising to target special category of errors. Technology is also proving useful in giving feedback to students. This paper attempts to compare the direct method of error correction practiced in the past to the indirect feedback choices that are available to teachers now. In addition, it also highlights the type of errors that could be targeted by a particular type of feedback for producing optimum results.*

### **1. Introduction**

Students are always eager to have feedback on the tasks that they submit to their teachers. A positive feedback motivates and inspires them to learn but in spite of their teachers' mighty efforts, the errors still surface. A red paper with circled errors is demotivating for the students. The teachers feel frustrated as students do not take heed of their mistakes and the whole exercise of correcting each and every error is in vain. According to Truscott (1996) error correction is useless and a lot of debate has ensued thereon but there is enough evidence to support the fact that error correction does lead to grammatical accuracy (Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001, Chandler 2003; Ferris 2002; Sheen 2007). The pertinent question then is - which type of feedback should the teacher administer to the students, to help ease their anxiety and be of assistance to them? An accurate solution to this debate has not been found but researchers have come up with various corrective feedback choices which could be effectively used in the classroom context depending on the level of the students, their grammatical awareness, their exposure to the language, motivation and related factors. The teacher can set the goal in consultation with the students and then select the appropriate feedback choice.

## **2. Errors Types and Categorization**

An error is committed because of the lack of knowledge of the rules governing L2 (Ellis, 1994). Sometimes the source of the error could be the Interlanguage stage when the students are testing their hypotheses but have not fully acquired the language. This could be manifested in the form of overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules etc. Burt and Kiparsky (1972, reported in Hendrickson) classify students' errors into global and local errors. Errors that cause misunderstanding are termed as global errors e.g. the misuse of prepositions, pronouns etc. and seriously misspelled lexical items. A linguistic error that does not cause misunderstanding is called local error e.g. the misuse and omission of prepositions, the lack of subject – verb agreement, misspelled words and faulty lexical choice (Hendrickson, 1977). Errors can also be distinguished between treatable and non treatable according to Ferris and Roberts (2001).

### **2.1 Treatable errors**

Error that can be corrected by a rule stated in a grammar book is called treatable error e.g. articles, verb form, verb tense, concord, pronouns etc. Spelling mistakes come under treatable errors as a dictionary can be used to fix them.

### **2.2 Untreatable errors**

The errors that are not rule governed but need students to apply their acquired knowledge in order to correct them are termed as untreatable errors e.g. faulty word order, missing or unnecessary words, sentence structure errors and lexical errors etc. Such errors may be helped more by direct feedback.

Ferris (1995) is of the view that focusing on the patterns of errors rather than individual errors is effective for both teachers and students. Categories should be selected from the errors that are frequent, global and stigmatizing. These categories could be assigned codes for providing indirect feedback to the students (See Appendix 1).

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Theoretical Framework**

A lot of research has been undertaken to determine the possible ways of giving feedback to the as discussed below:

#### **3.1.1 Direct Corrective Feedback**

Keepner (1991) studied 60 Spanish learners but reported no gains over direct error correction. His design contained analytical flaws as there was no pre test and no control over journal entry lengths. Bitchener, Young and Cameroon (2005) investigated direct corrective feedback by implementing direct correction and metalinguistic explanation both written and orally. He found that students who received additional metalinguistic information outperformed the groups that only received direct feedback.

#### **3.1.1 Direct Corrective Feedback over limited categories of errors (Focussed feedback)**

Bitchener (2008) provided direct corrective feedback, direct corrective feedback along with written and oral metalinguistic explanation and direct corrective feedback with written meta linguistic explanation on the functional use of 'a' and 'the'. He found that the accuracy scores improved when written corrective feedback was provided and this progress could be noticed even after two months. Sheen (2007) conducted a study by focusing on two types of articles 'the' and 'a'. One group was given direct feedback while the other group was given direct feedback as well as metalinguistic information. The control group was not provided

any feedback. Both the groups outperformed the control group. Ellis et al (2008) conducted a study on definite and indefinite articles by giving focused and unfocussed corrective feedback. He found that both types of feedback were effective.

Broader ranges of grammatical structures have not been tested so far.

### **3.1.2 Direct corrective feedback focused and unfocussed**

Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa (2009) conducted a study to investigate the result of direct focused feedback on articles, direct unfocused feedback over a couple of grammatical items like (copula 'be', regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition) along with a writing practice group without any feedback. All three groups improved in accuracy but the focused group outperformed the others.

### **3.2 Indirect Corrective Feedback**

Studies carried out by Fathman and Whalley (1990), Ashwell (2000), Ferris and Roberts (2001) indicate that there were considerable gains when indirect corrective feedback was provided to the students in the form of indirect underlining, content comment, content comment and indirect underlining and coding. But the gains were not measured on new texts, only on text revision. Ferris (1995), Ferris (1997) and Chandler (2000) conducted experiments using indirect feedback but without a control group and still found that their students gained in accuracy.

### **3.3 Direct and Indirect Corrective Feedback**

Lalande (1982), Semke (1984), Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986), Ferris and Helt (2000) and Chandler (2003) performed error correction using direct and indirect type of feedback. Semke (1984), and Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) found that there was no difference between the feedback provided. On the other hand Chandler (2003) reported that direct feedback had gains over indirect feedback. Moreover, Lalande (1982) and Ferris and Helt (2000) reported that indirect feedback was more effective than direct feedback. Lalande (1982) and Ferris and Helt (2000) also carried out experiments using direct and indirect corrective feedback but without a control group and reported that their students gained in accuracy overtime.

### **3.4 Consciousness raising and reformulation**

In a study conducted by Fotos and Ellis (1991) consciousness raising tasks helped Japanese students to derive rules from the input data and form appropriate grammatical constructs. Fotos (1993) found that students who had completed consciousness raising tasks reported noticing of those grammatical structures in follow up exercises. Consciousness raising leads to noticing of those structures in subsequent writings which eventually leads to acquisition.

Reformulation promotes noticing wherein students can compare their writing with the target language and try to bridge the gap. Cohen (1989) feels that reformulation provides deeper feedback than simple correction. Sanaoui (1984) reported that all her students benefitted using reformulation for vocabulary, structures, cohesion etc than other methods of explicit feedback.

### **3.5 Computer aided feedback**

Nagata (1993) examined the effects of computer mediated feedback on complex grammatical constructions. The computer pointed out errors for one group while the other group was also provided metalinguistic feedback. The group supplied with the metalinguistic feedback outperformed the other group. Nagata (1997) also compared the computer mediated metalinguistic feedback to translation feedback and found that metalinguistic feedback was more effective in improving the performance of the students in grammatical constructions.

Dagneaux et al. (1998) developed a computerized error analysis system. It produced list of particular error

types. Wen Yeh and Jiunn Lo (2008) developed an online computer system to provide corrective feedback in the form of annotations. The control group used manual corrective method while the experimental group received feedback with the system developed on the computer. Both the groups later corrected errors on a script written by an EFL student. The results showed that the computer mediated group showed better results.

### **3.5.1 Using corpus and concordance as feedback**

Gaskell and Cobb (2004) used URL linked technology to create and embed concordances in learners texts for developing lower level learner's grammar. The learners would comprehend this information first and then apply it successfully to correct errors. Cobb and Horst (2001) found concordancing a better method for word learning than other methods. Heift and Rimrott (2008) used E Tutor successfully to give feedback on misspellings produced by English Learners of German. The error would be prompted and metalinguistic explanation would also be provided to help the students. Tuzi (2004) studied the revisions made by L2 writers using e feedback, oral feedback with friends and face to face meetings with university writing centre tutors. Students were taught to give appropriate e feedback using a template specially prepared for it. It was found that students made more revisions when they received e feedback.

## **4. Trends of giving Corrective Feedback**

In the past teachers used to correct all the errors of the students but according to new research, focusing on one or two errors is quite beneficial. The general trend of administering feedback is:

### **4.1 Unfocused Feedback**

Unfocused feedback refers to correcting all the errors that the students have committed (Sheen, Wright and Moldawa, 2009). Teachers practiced this in the past but it does not yield significant results. The same errors surface again as students are not able to focus on their errors but are frustrated on having made so many mistakes. McMartin-Miller (2014) terms it as **comprehensive feedback**.

### **4.2 Focused Feedback**

Focused feedback is directing the attention of the students to one or two errors instead of all the errors. When teachers give feedback on only one or two particular types of errors, students focus on those errors resulting in significant gains. This seems to fall within their capacity. This feedback is also termed as **selective feedback** (McMartin-Miller, 2014).

## **5. General Methods of giving Corrective Feedback**

Corrective feedback can be categorized broadly into Direct and Indirect. Both these types could be focused or unfocused.

### **5.1 Direct Feedback**

Direct feedback can be termed as correcting all the mistakes committed by the students. This method was popular in the past where teachers underlined all the errors in spelling, structure, grammar etc. and directly wrote the correct answers above the underlined words (Bitchener, Young and Cameroon, 2005). This feedback has limitations as it is perceived to be beyond students' attention capacity (Sheen, 2007). Students get exasperated at having made so many

mistakes. They feel it's beyond them and ignore the errors totally. This may be one of the reasons why the same errors surface again and again.

### Example

Salalah is a beautiful ~~pleas~~ <sup>place</sup> in Oman. In Khareef season the weather is very nice. You can do a lot of ~~ectivetes~~ <sup>activities</sup> in this weather with ~~you~~ <sup>your</sup> friends. For example, you can go outside and play football near the beach. There ~~are~~ <sup>is</sup> a lot of ~~rains~~ <sup>rain</sup> during ~~the~~ <sup>is</sup> khareef so the mountains became ~~gree~~ <sup>green</sup>.

## 5.2 Indirect Feedback

Indirect feedback is the feedback provided by the teacher without correcting the error. The students are given a cue that an error has been made and they are left to find out the errors and correct them. Students take the cue and try to concentrate on their errors in order to correct them. They can be divided into two types:

### a. Uncoded errors

Uncoded errors are errors where the teacher **underlines** the mistakes but do not provide any code to specify the type of error. The students are left to guess the type of errors they have committed and correct them. Teachers can sometimes underline the error, circle it or place some symbol/comments in the margin. Sometimes underlining and comments are also used together to direct students' attention to the error.

### Example

Salalah is a beautiful pleas in Oman. In Khareef season the weather is very nice. You can do a lot of ectivetes in this weather with you friends. For example, you can go outside and play football near the beach. There are a lot of rains during the khareef so the mountains became gree.

### b. Coded errors

Coded errors are the errors where grammatical categories are assigned codes and these are provided to the students. Students get a hint as to the type of errors they have committed and try to correct them e.g. A for errors in the use of articles, PP for Prepositions, C for Concord, VT for verb tense etc.

### Example

Dear John, How are you? Is everything nice with you? I want to invite you to visit my hometown Salalah. It is located on (PP) \_\_ (A) South of Oman. It is a very beautiful region especially during Khareef season.

## 6. Other Direct and Indirect Feedback Choices

The following choices for giving feedback could be used directly or indirectly or in combination. They could either be used in a focused or an unfocussed manner.

### 6.1 Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback

Dynamic written corrective feedback provides comprehensive feedback on relatively smaller texts. It is cyclical in nature as the process of giving feedback by the teacher and editing on the part of the student continues till all the errors are ruled out. It is based on the following four principles (Hartshorn et al., 2010; Evans, Hartshorn and Strong – Krause, 2011).

#### **a. The feedback should be meaningful**

This can be achieved when the feedback is comprehensible and hence students are given instructions related to the error categories and the codes associated with them. Students correct their own errors, listing errors on an error list. They maintain an error tally sheet to check the number of attempts needed to eliminate that error.

#### **b. The feedback should be timely**

The feedback is timely when students receive it immediately after submitting their written texts.

#### **c. The feedback should be constant**

The feedback is constant when it is administered to the students at judicious intervals over a length of time e.g. weeks, months or a semester.

#### **d. The feedback should be manageable**

According to Hartshorn et al. (2010) the feedback is manageable when students have the time to comprehend the feedback, assimilate it and apply it to their texts. Hence, students are asked to write smaller texts, and teachers do take time to provide feedback to the students

### **6.2 Reformulation**

Reformulation is a native speaker's rewriting of an L2 learner's composition maintaining the contents but straightening its awkwardness, lexical inadequacy and grammatical errors (Levenston, 1978). It provides a target language model to the students to compare their drafts with. Students gain insights into grammatical problems, vocabulary, cohesion etc. They notice the gap between their own utterances and the target language hence, they try to bridge it. Reformulation provides structures which a learner could lift according to his needs.

#### **Example**

There many interesting places near Salalah. For example, Dhulcout, Sadah and Al Muzonah. You can visit this places and meet people. They are very kinds and friendly. I think if you visit Salalah you don't forget it.

#### **Reformulated version**

There are many interesting places near Salalah e.g. Dalkhout, Sadah and Al Muzonah. You can visit these places and meet people. They are very kind and friendly. I think if you visit Salalah you will not forget it.

### **6.3 Computer/Technology mediated feedback**

Using computers to provide feedback is termed as computer mediated feedback. It can be both direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedback can be seen in spell check or grammar check software which is generally integrated within the writing software. The mistakes are highlighted and correct answers are provided instantly. Students become self independent and can also learn on their own. Some software have inbuilt error analysis section that directs students to their mistakes and offers help. The computer doesn't allow the students to proceed unless these basic errors are overcome. Nowadays, the Internet offers online corpora and students can go online and analyze their errors using a software e.g. Oxford's Micro-Concord. Concordancing can be used for vocabulary and for revealing grammar patterns. The teacher can set up concordance sequence for learners. Learners should be trained in their use and interpretation. It is focusing on forms. Students are provided a large number of examples properly organized so that they could notice the patterns and give feedback in interpreting the examples. The web address of the concordance can also be pasted in the composition of the students, providing them the mechanics to choose the best reply. The success of computer based feedback program lies in how well the learner can use the system.

## **6.4 Metalinguistic Feedback and Consciousness Raising**

Most of the errors are committed by the students as they are not aware of the grammatical forms in L2. Sometimes parallels are not found in L1 and students try to substitute them in their own way which results in errors. If students are provided metalinguistic feedback these errors could be minimized.

Example

You **can visiting** these places and meet people.

*(A base form of the verb is used after an auxiliary verb like can play, can eat, can sleep etc.)*

Students can also be made aware of the linguistic structure, this could be done explicitly by explaining the rule and giving the correction or implicitly, with the help of consciousness raising sheets. Directing learners' attention to particular features of a language can be termed as consciousness – raising (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985). Students try to understand the rule stated along with examples and try to find out the connection. They notice the gap and try to bridge it. This could be followed up with relevant exercises. This may develop cognitive insights leading to acquisition. Teachers can also ascertain the common errors of the students in the classroom and try to raise their consciousness about these errors. This technique could prove beneficial in addressing common errors committed by students in a particular class. (See Appendix for consciousness raising sheet)

## **6.5 Feedback in Combination**

Feedback used in combination produced better results than the choice of a single feedback. Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) found that direct written feedback associated with direct oral feedback improved the accuracy overtime. Other options tested so far are:

- a. Written metalinguistic feedback and oral form focused instruction
- b. Direct corrective feedback and oral as well as written metalinguistic explanation.
- c. Direct corrective feedback and written metalinguistic explanation.
- d. Focussed written corrective feedback and one to one discussion about errors.
- e. Computer mediated feedback along with metalinguistic information.

Mostly all of them helped to raise the accuracy of the students. Similar type of combinations can be devised by the teacher to get optimum results.

## **7. Procedure for giving Written Corrective Feedback**

### **1. Detecting students' common mistakes**

It is necessary to ascertain the type of mistakes students' make by making them write on the topic familiar to them. The teacher can then evaluate it and find out the common mistakes. The teacher can also ascertain whether these errors are treatable or untreatable.

### **2. Forming Error Categories**

Teachers can form error categories in the case of treatable errors and discuss it with students. These categories can be assigned codes. The number of errors to be targeted could be fixed in consultation with the students.

### **3. Raising Consciousness**

Students are not aware of the mistakes they are making so the teacher can give them consciousness raising sheets (See Appendix 2) to make them aware of the particular errors that would be targeted.

### **4. Providing Feedback**

The students can be given a writing task and teacher can give indirect feedback or as decided on the errors that are being targeted.

### **5. Self Editing and Peer Editing**

The students correct their errors and then ask their peers to review their work. This could be followed by one to one discussion.

### 6. Practice Exercise and Delayed Post Test

Teachers can give short grammar exercises in the class related to the categories of errors targeted. This will facilitate uptake after noticing leading to long term gains. In the end teacher can ascertain the progress with the help of delayed post test.

### 8. Feedback Choices and Error Categories

Not all types of feedback help in eliciting errors and improving accuracy of the students. It depends on the types of errors made and the amount of exposure to grammar in the past. Sometimes one particular type of feedback is effective for one type of error while sometimes two methods used in combination produce optimum results. The following table depicts the type of feedback that is beneficial for the particular type of error. It also highlights the drawbacks of that feedback.

SN	Feedback Choice	Targeted Errors
1	Direct focussed	Example  write She can <del>wrote</del> an essay.
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To treat treatable errors that are rule governed</li> <li>Good for elementary and intermediate levels</li> </ul>	
2	Indirect	Example  article missing e.g. There is $\Lambda$ book on the table  A (Error code) e.g. There is <u><math>\Lambda</math></u> book on the table
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maybe suitable for advanced levels as they have more linguistic knowledge</li> <li>Suitable if grammar categories are pretaught in the class.</li> <li>Also suitable if students have metalinguistic knowledge and their level is fairly ok</li> </ul>	
3	Dynamic Corrective Feedback	Repeated revisions and corrections targets nearly all types of errors
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rules out all errors</li> <li>Time consuming</li> </ul>	
4	Reformulation	<b>Good for spelling or word errors</b> Example



	Direct	It is a beautiful <u>pleas</u> in Oman.
	Indirect	It is a beautiful place in Oman  <b>Grammatical structure errors</b> Example *I think if you visit Salalah you don't forget it.  I think if you visit Salalah you will not forget it.
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes a long time and is taxing for the teacher</li> <li>• Benefits students more if their level of L2 proficiency is high.</li> <li>• Confusing for elementary level students.</li> </ul>	
<b>5</b>	Consciousness raising	Good for treatable errors that are rule governed.  Should develop grammar categories with the help of students.
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consciousness raising associated with repeated exercises targeting the same errors shows significant gains which can even be seen over time.</li> </ul>	
<b>6</b>	Computer/Technology	.
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good for treatable errors that are rule governed.</li> <li>• Makes students independent</li> </ul>	
<b>7</b>	In combination	
<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More effective than single feedback choice</li> </ul>	

Recasts are not noticed by low proficiency learners. (Ahangari and Amirzadeh , 2011)

## 9. Conclusion

Looking at the current situation it is concluded that students should be given feedback. Havranek (2002) feels that corrective feedback is successful if the learner is a part of the correction process and contributes to it. If the students are developmentally ready, corrective feedback could result in learning. First they should be made aware of the errors and error categories discussed with them. Secondly, you could raise their awareness as to the type of errors they could make while targeting a particular type of composition. Secondly, students should be given focused directed feedback on one or two errors which should be followed by one two one discussion with the student. Direct corrective feedback failed as it was too bigger a canvas for the students to concentrate on all the errors at the same time. Indirect feedback could help if students' errors are underlined and the error categories specified. Let

the error categories be limited. Students can also benefit if their consciousness is raised regarding the errors before they undertake writing task. Then they should be given ample opportunities to notice that and regular practice so that it becomes an uptake and is acquired. Giving opportunities for error correction by using software is also beneficial. It's good that students take charge of their own mistakes.

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S.N.	Errors	Description	Type
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**Appendix 1 Description of Error Categories**

1	Noun ending errors <b>(NE)</b>	All errors in plural or possessive ending, incorrect missing or unnecessary e.g. *This is <u>Muna</u> purse.	treatable
2	Pronoun errors <b>(PN)</b>	Errors in missing, unnecessary or incorrectly used pronouns e.g. *The tourists are very happy <u>her</u> going to Dhofar.	treatable
3	Article errors <b>(A)</b>	Errors in articles or other determiner- missing, unnecessary or incorrectly used e.g. *It is <u>a</u> beautiful new roads.	treatable
4	Preposition errors <b>(PP)</b>	Missing, unnecessary or incorrectly used prepositions e.g. *Alawi watches cinema <u>in</u> night.	untreatable
5	Verb form errors <b>(VF)</b>	Errors where verb tense is wrongly used or is unnecessary e.g. * They <u>are visited</u> good places..	treatable
6	Verb tense errors <b>(VT)</b>	Errors where verb form is wrongly used or is unnecessary e.g.The tourists <u>came</u> in “Khareef’.	treatable
7	Missing verb errors <b>(MV)</b>	All instances of omitted verbs e.g. * Dhofar ... .. very wonderful.	treatable
8	Concord errors <b>(C)</b>	All instances of disagreement of the verb with the subject e.g. *The boys <u>is</u> writing the exam.	treatable
9	Wrong word errors <b>(WW)</b>	All lexical errors in word choice or word form. Spelling error included if misspelling resulted in an actual English word e.g. * It has a <u>tall</u> and beautiful coast.	untreatable
10	Sentence structure errors <b>(SS)</b>	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, comma splices), missing or unnecessary words or phrases, unidiomatic sentence construction, wrong word order e.g. * There are several places in ‘Dhofar’ are very good	untreatable

		place.	
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