EFL students' attitudes toward corrective feedback: a study conducted at undergraduate level

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is mainly to find out the EFL learners' attitude towards corrective feedback. This paper also investigates types of learners who prefer the online or offline corrective feedback, and how feedback should be tailored to the needs of the learners.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was conducted on sixty female participants who were students of levels 7 and 8 of the B. A. program (English) at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. They were administered a questionnaire comprising eight questions about corrective feedback from teachers individually and independently so that they could identify their own choices without any influence from other participants. The items in the questionnaire were closed items.

Findings – It was found that both types of feedbacks are essential to enhance learners' linguistic accuracy. Learners have shown their positive attitude towards teachers' corrective feedback because they consider it a motivating learning tool. Not only that the learners have expressed the view that corrective feedback is very useful in enhancing the learning process for EFL learners. On the other hand, some of the learners are not serious about going through corrective feedback given by teachers because sometimes they are unable to differentiate between what helps or hampers progress towards language learning. However, they preferred both online (immediate/automated) feedback and offline (delayed) feedback. In general, the results state that the learners have expressed the view that corrective feedback is very useful in enhancing the learning process for EFL learners.

Research limitations/implications – This study has some limitations. The first one is the sample size. Only students from levels 7 and 8 (undergraduates) were taken into consideration. The second limitation is that the researchers focused on only one university in Saudi Arabia. The third limitation is that no male students participated in this study. The results might be different if the male students participated as well.

Originality/value – One vital point in employing CF in the language classrooms is timing. Considering the timing of corrective feedback, teachers face the problem of whether CF should be immediate (online) or delayed (offline).

Keywords Attitude, Corrective feedback, Delayed feedback, EFL learners, Error correction, Immediate feedback, Learners' needs, Learning tool, Motivation, Offline feedback, Online feedback, The role of language teachers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The notion of corrective feedback is not a new phenomenon. For decades, it has been an essential means adopted by teachers to treat learners' errors in a second language classroom. In simple words, corrective feedback refers to teacher and peer responses to learners' erroneous second language (L2) production. According to Ellis (2009) and Li (2010), corrective feedback (CF) refers to the responses from teachers to a learner's non-target like the second language (L2) output. For decades, there have been controversies about the potential of CF in

language acquisition and learning. As a result, practitioners are in a dilemma whether, when, and how they can include CF in classroom instruction. Further, Ellis (2010) focused on self-correction, adding simple language can be a solution to avoid erroneous output. Feedback can be positive or negative. Positive feedback means that a learner's response to activity is correct, and it is essential because it gives affective support to the learner and motivates the learner to continue learning. On the other hand, negative feedback means that the learner's response to an activity is not correct. Some SLA theorists believe that CF is harmful to L2 acquisition and should be completely ruled out, while others think of CF as essential for L2 development. Both SLA researchers and language teachers have often disagreed about whether to correct errors, what errors to correct, how to correct them, and when to correct them. Lantolf (2000) and Lantolf and Thorne (2007) believe that CF should be provided only when it is necessary and tailored to the needs of individual learners. Vann *et al.* (1984) found that some teachers viewed all errors as equally serious – "an error is an error." Furthermore, there are different strategies to correct errors. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis (2009), they can be divided into two types: implicit and explicit CF strategies. The former refers to recast (incorporating correct linguistic content), repetition (repeating the wrong expression with stress), clarification request (asking to clarify if something is not clear or understood), whereas, the latter refers to explicit correction (correcting the errors directly), metalinguistic explanation (making a metalinguistic comment), elicitation (repeating the correct part with rising intonation with an indication to complete the incorrect one) and paralinguistic signal (indicating an error through a gesture or facial expression). The corrector/teacher applies them according to the context and needs of learners.

Another vital point in employing CF in the language classrooms is timing. Considering the timing of corrective feedback, teachers face the problem of whether CF should be immediate (online) or delayed (offline). That is, when errors are responded to during a task, it is known as online CF. Offline CF refers to feedback after a task has been completed. SLA researchers-especially those working within an interactionist framework, argue that CF works best when it occurs in context at the time the learner makes an error (Long, 2007). Hedge (2000) noted that teacher guides accompanying course books frequently ask teachers to leave correction, until the end of fluency activities. There is general agreement that in accuracy-oriented activities correction should be provided immediately. Some SLA researchers present theoretical arguments for immediate correction, even in fluency activities. Doughty (2001) and Willis and Willis (2007) claimed that "delayed CF leads to focal attention on form resulting in explicit rather than implicit L2 knowledge." The needs of the students, the experience of the teacher, and the learning context are the only factors that can help determine which CF needs to be used. The attention of the researchers about online and offline corrective feedback to students was triggered by the fact that in most of their classes, the majority of the learners were not serious about receiving CF. Either they did not try to understand the feedback or they just simply ignored the feedback that they got. However, there were only a few learners who were eager to know about both the online and offline feedback from teachers. As a result, the researchers reflected whether learners had the same kind of attitude towards CF in other teachers' classes or not.

Literature review
There are abundant studies on corrective feedback: direct and indirect, online and offline, but no research talks about the female Saudi EFL learners' attitudes towards corrective feedback. Though SLA (Second language acquisition) theorists and researchers do not agree about the role that corrective feedback plays in L2 acquisition. Burt (1975) recommended that teachers should focus on "global" rather than "local errors." By global errors, it is meant that errors

that affect overall sentence generalization. Whereas, local errors mean the errors that affect single elements in a sentence. There are some debates about the number of total corrections that teachers should make on students' work. Teachers who make many corrections give a "true" sense of the extent to which students need correction, but such feedback can be overwhelming because excessive feedback can affect learner autonomy. Students may also see their performance as a failure, thus shattering their confidence. They might think that the teachers are very critical or biased against them. On the other hand, teachers who make sparse corrections help their students to focus on improving in one or a few major areas, but the exclusion of other helpful corrections may be harmful to the students' progress in the long run.

Krashen (1982) calls error correction "a serious mistake" (p. 74). He points out two main reasons for this view. First, "error correction has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive" (p. 75) with the result that the learner eliminates mistakes by avoiding the use of complex constructions. Second, error correction only helps the development of "learned knowledge" and does not play a role in "acquired knowledge." Krashen pointed out that CF may hinder L2 development because it is believed to strike at learners' confidence and stir up the affective filter. VanPatten (1992) expresses a similar view to Krashen's, arguing that "correcting errors in learner output has a negligible effect on the developing system of most language learners" (p. 24). Truscott (1996) claims that CF is of no effect and should be wholly abandoned concerning its problems of pseudo-learning, learnability and harmful side-effects. It is recommended by methodologists that teachers need to focus attention on a few error types rather than try to show almost all the errors learners make (Harmer, 1983 and Ur, 1996). Ellis (1993) and Ferris (1999) suggests that corrective feedback needs to be directed at marked grammatical patterns that learners have shown they have problems with because they believe that CF directs learners' attention to linguistic forms and fosters L2 "intake." Considering the overall effect of feedback, Schmidt (1990 and 1994) thinks learners notice that there is a mismatch between their current state of knowledge and the target language while they receive corrective feedback. Further, some researchers view that the learners' attitude towards CF can get affected because of their cultures and beliefs. Al-wossabi (2019) states in his research on Saudi students that Saudi learners do not have a good perception of corrective feedback because of cultural factors, but this view is not shared by Hamouda. Hamouda's (2011) large scale survey conducted in Saudi Arabia on 200 EFL students and 20 teachers found that students valued written feedback, and they preferred to receive comprehensive direct feedback from their teachers. He also mentions that Saudi students favor the overall correction by their teachers to peer and self-correction. In another study by Alshahrani and Storch (2014), it is found that there were some mismatches between Saudi students' preference for CF and teachers' feedback practices because the university administrators who determine the feedback policy are not always aware of what may be appropriate feedback for different types of errors. In the study of Alkhatib (2015), she concluded that Saudi students were in favor of teachers' written corrective feedback, but they faced difficulties understanding some of their teachers' comments. On the other hand, the students who did not take their teachers' written feedback fully into account had low motivation levels, and they were low-achievers.

While mentioning about EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding written corrective feedback in the Saudi context, Rajab *et al.* (2016) say that time constraint is one of the major challenges faced by EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Hence, teachers are unable to provide sound corrective feedback to their students because of the shortage of time.

Although there are lots of controversies about the role of CF in the learning process, many approaches influenced either by cognitive or socio-cultural perspectives believe that CF facilitates L2 learning. Some linguists above have argued CF as a disturbing element in the

classroom. At the same time, others have believed it to be a powerful strategy for both the teachers and students.

Objectives of the study

This research paper aims mainly to find out the EFL learners' attitudes towards corrective feedback. The following questions were framed to seek the answer about teachers' correction, whether in language classrooms or online/Blackboard.

(1) How do learners view online (immediate) and offline (immediate/delayed) feedback from teachers?

(2) Do learners have a positive or negative attitude towards corrective feedback?

(3) Is feedback useful for life-long learning?

(4) Which types of learners prefer online or offline corrective feedback?

Methods

Participants

In administering the questionnaires, sixty female research participants were chosen from King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. They were Arabic L1 speakers, and they ranged between 20–22 years of age. All the participants were level seven and eight students of the B.A. (English) program. They had already enough exposure of English language. Therefore, they were aware of the feedback very well.

Instruments

As the questionnaire is a relatively popular means of collecting data, a questionnaire comprising eight close-ended questions related to EFL learners' perception, understanding and attitude towards teachers' corrective feedback in the classroom and online (automated) was distributed among these sixty students to get the idea of what outlook they have on corrective feedback. Do they find it motivating or demotivating? Does it boost their confidence or help in avoiding the same errors after getting corrected?

Procedure

The researchers, being teachers at the tertiary level, personally distributed the questionnaires to level seven and eight students during their lectures. The students were asked to opt "Yes," or "No," according to their perception and attitude towards teachers' feedback either online or offline. They were asked to answer the questionnaire individually and independently so that they could identify their own choices without any influence from other participants. All these sixty participants were from different classrooms.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. The first one is the sample size. Only students from levels 7 and 8 (undergraduates) were taken into consideration. The second limitation is that the researchers focused on only one university in Saudi Arabia. The third limitation is that no male students participated in this study. The results might be different if the male students participated as well.

Results and discussion

After collecting the questionnaires, the data was analyzed by only counting students' responses, then calculating the percentage. Table 1 demonstrates the number and percentage of students' responses towards teachers' corrective feedback (see Figure 1).

No	Questions	Yes		No	
1	Do you wait for the teachers' feedback after you complete a task?	54	90%	6	10%
2	Do you take feedback as something positive?	58	97%	2	3%
3	Does it motivate you?	50	83%	10	17%
4	Do you find it easy to understand what errors to correct when you get feedback?	44	73%	16	27%
5	Does feedback help you to improve your performance?	56	93%	4	7%
6	Is written feedback more helpful than oral feedback?	34	57%	26	43%
7	Do you overcome repeating the same errors after getting corrected?	50	83%	10	17%
8	Do you prefer online feedback (immediate/automated) over offline (immediate/delayed) classroom feedback?	36	60%	24	40%

Table 1.
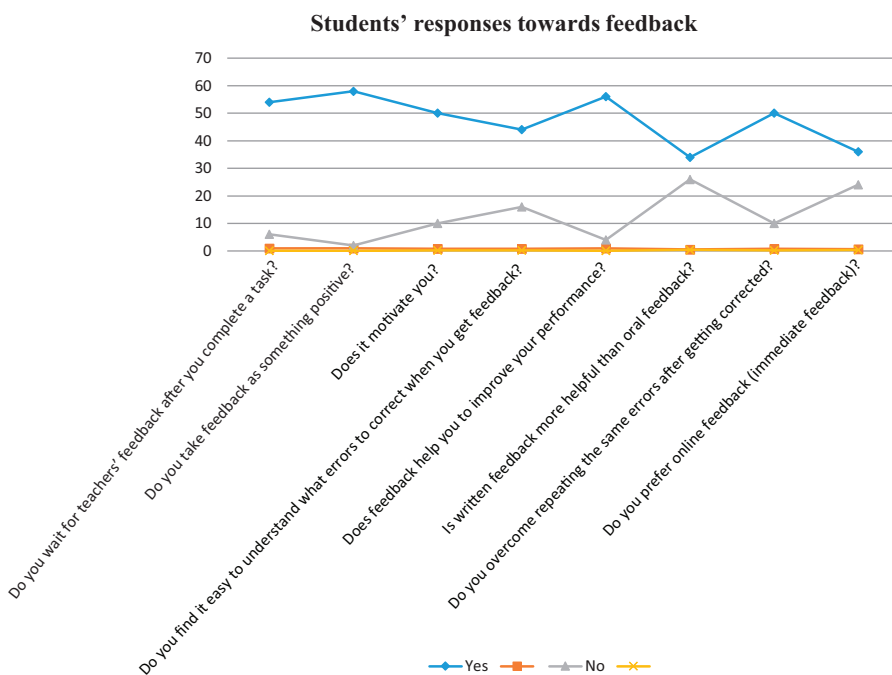Students' responses
towards feedback

Figure 1.
Students' responses
towards feedback

The figure above shows the difference in "Yes" or "No" responses of students towards teachers' feedback

Table and figure above illustrated that 54 out of 60 (90%) students considered the teachers' direct corrective feedback necessary. They wait for teachers' corrective feedback after completing a task. Additionally 58 (97%) students found feedback positive for learning outcomes. These two responses go with the work of Ellis *et al.* (2005), and Bitchener *et al.* (2005). In their view, CF is an assisting strategy for learners. On the other hand, the claim made by the present study contradicts with Krashen (1982) and Van Patten and Cadierno (1993). As Krashen called error correction a serious mistake, he pointed out two main reasons for this view. First, "error correction has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive" (p. 75) with the result that the learner seeks to eliminate mistakes by avoiding the

use of complex constructions. Second, error correction only helps the development of "learned knowledge" and does not play a role in "acquired knowledge." Krashen pointed out that CF may hinder L2 development because it is believed to strike at learners' confidence and stir up the affective filter. Van Patten and Cadierno (1993) also had a similar argument viewing it as "correcting errors in learner output has a negligible effect on the developing system of most language learners" (p. 24). Further, in the same way, Truscott (1996) claimed that CF is of no effect and should be wholly abandoned concerning its problems of pseudo-learning, learnability and harmful side-effects. The students' responses proved that corrective feedback is a beneficial teaching approach to practice in classrooms with a positive outcome.

Even the majority of the population 50 out of 60 (83%) participants were of the view that feedback motivates them for something positive. Again the response of students is opposite to Krashen (1982) and Van Patten and Cadierno (1993). The findings of this study are in favor of feedback on their error correction as a positive alarm to arouse their sensitivity to improve their mistakes. Hamouda's (2011) study also confirms the students' preferences of comprehensive feedback as a positive thing. When the learners were asked whether they find it easy to understand what errors to correct when they get feedback, 44 (73%) learners' response was "Yes." Only 27% of the participants said "No." This response is also very different from the previous well-known studies like Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996). Furthermore, 56 (93%) subjects admitted feedback help improve their overall performance. Again this result goes in opposition with Schmidt (1990, 1994), who thinks that there is a mismatch between learners' current state of knowledge and the target language while they receive corrective feedback.

When the participants were asked whether written feedback or oral feedback was helpful, this time, their answer did not show a big difference. They find both the written feedback, and oral feedback equally helpful. 34 (57%) students perceived written feedback more helpful while 26 (43%) of them did not have the same opinion. It can be said that a bit more than half the population agreed that written feedback works better and almost half of them thought oral feedback to be useful. 50 (83%) of students were of the view they do not repeat the same errors after getting their work corrected. The researchers, here, agree with Ellis (1993 and 2009) that written feedback can work only in pattern regulated framework. The last question was about their preference for online and offline feedback. In the response, it was found online, and offline feedback works almost equally for them as 36 out of 60 (60%) were in favor of online feedback while 24 (40%) preferred offline/classroom feedback. Although there is no huge gap in the responses of online (immediate) and offline (delayed) preferences, the 10% variation might be because they find it safe or help them improve their errors immediately without any delay. It can be said based on this variation that the finding is weak in contraction with Willis and Willis' (2007) view when the learners get offline/delayed CF, they get more knowledge about the form and they can easily incorporate the forms those learned in post-task CF whereas the finding might go in favor with Long (2007), who claimed that online/immediate feedback develops among the students the understanding of immediate correct and incorrect forms.

Although Al-wossabi (2019) found that Saudi learners do not have a good perception of corrective feedback based on cultural factors, it is undoubtedly apparent from the results of this study that EFL learners at advanced levels have a positive attitude towards teachers' CF whether implicitly or explicitly. The students do not feel scared or go into defensive mode when they get the correction. They see it as something quite positive and motivating. A study by Alkhatib (2015) also emphasized the practice of corrective feedback because the students wait for teachers' feedback to improve, but sometimes they find teachers' comments difficult to understand. For this, teachers must comment according to the levels of students and they must motivate the students also to ask the difficult parts. This research, overall, explicitly claims that corrective feedback is an effective tool to boost the learners' performance.

It assists language learning as a useful teaching and learning strategy. Regarding the timings of CF, it can be stated based on the research that both the immediate or delayed CF is useful. Teachers can switch them according to the needs, level, and context of the classroom. In delayed CF, teachers can focus on the grammatical features of the target language. Learners do not mind to have online or offline feedback. Now, the full responsibility comes over the shoulders of teachers that they must choose online or offline task-based feedback. The same results have come for immediate or delayed feedback; hence again, teachers must be fully aware of which corrective feedback strategy they should apply in which context, task and timing. Blackboard can also be a useful tool for teachers for automated and immediate feedback in grammar, reading and listening skills, but offline feedback must be opted for writing, literature and linguistics classes to frame out the focal focus on structure and patterns of these particular subjects. At the same time, learners should know about self-correction strategies to develop their learning process. Further, the researchers can draw their opinion from the findings of this study that advanced level learners, who are interested in learning, are enthusiastic to CF because they want to achieve their goals of learning a foreign language.

Recommendations
As learners and language teachers view corrective feedback differently, and some controversies are there, some recommendations are given below.

Teachers need to train their learners in correcting their own mistakes.

Learners need to be motivated to accept corrective feedback from teachers.

Teachers need to raise the awareness of learners in perceiving corrective feedback as something positive in language learning.

Ample time and sufficient explanations need to be provided to learners if corrective feedback is to be productive and successful.

Language teachers should have different strategies for correcting errors concerning the preferences of the learners.

Although correcting errors selectively may not appeal to all EFL teachers, sometimes teachers can correct errors in a selective way rather than expansively.

While providing CF, teachers need to avoid writing harsh comments to their learners.

Learners' progress has to be appreciated by teachers, and positive comments on the performance of the learners need to be made.

Teachers need to be trained to give corrective feedback appropriately.

The feedback that teachers provide to their learners should be structure-based, explaining the patterns and features of the foreign language. In other words, it can be said that it should be more than just marks on their tasks.

It is suggested that instructors must tailor the corrective feedback according to the needs and attitudes of learners.

As CF is central to the second and foreign language pedagogy, learners need to be aware of the necessity and the facilitative role of corrective feedback.

Conclusion
For many teachers, correcting errors is globally accepted and unquestionable because it provides long-term linguistic accuracy in the learners. Teachers or students cannot deny the importance of feedback, whether immediate, for example, in online activities/objective exercises, or delayed such as in exams/written assignments. It helps progressive learners as they can improve their ability to monitor their progress. Some L2 learners are very keen on using the target language correctly, so they expect their teachers to respond automatically to

their errors. On the other hand, some learners do not take CF seriously and repeat the same mistakes in the further classroom or online activities/exams. The low achievers generally do not believe that CF is suitable for all students because of their varying levels. Although the advantages of CF cannot be rejected, it can be said that instructors must tailor the corrective feedback according to the needs and attitudes of learners. It is suggested that feedback that teachers provide to their learners should be in a continuous process to get the optimum benefit of it. Learners should make sure that feedback does not only remain as red marks or comments on their work. They should go through them, make sense of them, get back to teachers and get clarification from them if anything is not understood. Then all types of feedback can be useful for both teachers and students.

Implications

This research has both the pedagogical and research implications that giving feedback must be an integrated pedagogical practice with teaching materials because in all stages of learning, errors are an inevitable part of the learning process. What needs to be observed by teachers is the appropriate time when corrective feedback should be given. Sometimes it has been found out that students are eager to get immediate feedback from their teachers. On the other hand, some students prefer to get delayed feedback. All EFL teachers and institutions need to delve deep into the matter whether corrective feedback should be provided to the students immediately, or at a later stage, or both immediate and delayed feedback should be given to students. This study implies that the further studies may compare the attitudes of male and female EFL learners towards corrective feedback. Research may be sought to investigate the differences among the beginner, intermediate and advanced learners' attitudes and perception towards feedback.

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