

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract: Corrective Feedback (CF) is a cornerstone of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA), serving as a primary mechanism for bridging the gap between a learner's interlanguage and the target language. This article examines the efficacy of various CF strategies—specifically distinguishing between implicit and explicit interventions and their timing. By synthesizing findings from decades of empirical research, this study argues that while CF is universally beneficial compared to its absence, its effectiveness is highly contingent upon the learner's cognitive readiness, the linguistic complexity of the target structure, and the instructional context. The paper concludes with a framework for "optimal feedback," advocating for a balanced, learner-centric approach.

Keywords: Corrective Feedback (CF), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Recasts, Metalinguistic Awareness, Interaction Hypothesis, Form-Focused Instruction (FFI).

Аннотация: Корректирующая обратная связь (КОС) является краеугольным камнем целенаправленного усвоения второго языка (ISLA), выступая в качестве основного механизма преодоления разрыва между «интеръязыком» учащегося и целевым языком. В данной статье рассматривается эффективность различных стратегий КОС, в частности, проводится различие между скрытым (имплицитным) и явным (эксплицитным) вмешательством, а также анализируется выбор времени для их применения.

Синтезируя результаты эмпирических исследований за последние десятилетия, данная работа доказывает, что, хотя наличие обратной связи всегда более благотворно, чем её отсутствие, её эффективность во многом зависит от когнитивной готовности учащегося, лингвистической сложности целевой

структуры и контекста обучения. Статья завершается представлением модели «оптимальной обратной связи», которая предполагает сбалансированный, ориентированный на учащегося подход.

Ключевые слова: Корректирующая обратная связь (КОС), усвоение второго языка (SLA), рекасты (перефразирование), металингвистическая осведомленность, гипотеза взаимодействия, обучение с фокусом на форму (FFI).

1. Introduction

In the mid-20th century, behaviorist models viewed errors as "sins" to be avoided through rote habit formation. However, modern SLA theory, pioneered by researchers like Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972), views errors as essential evidence of a learner's "interlanguage"—a transitional linguistic system. Corrective Feedback (CF) is the pedagogical response to these errors, aimed at stimulating cognitive "noticing" (Schmidt, 1990).

The theoretical underpinning of this study rests on Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, which posits that negotiation for meaning during interaction facilitates acquisition, and Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, which suggests that feedback forces learners to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing. Despite general agreement on the necessity of feedback, a debate persists: Should feedback be implicit (preserving communication flow) or explicit (providing direct rules)? This article investigates which methods provide the most significant long-term gains in linguistic accuracy and communicative competence.

2. Methods

This study utilizes a systematic review and meta-analytical approach to evaluate the efficacy of CF. The methodology followed these rigorous parameters:

Data Sources: A comprehensive search was conducted via JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the ERIC database for peer-reviewed studies published between 1997 (foundational Lyster & Ranta study) and 2024.

Inclusion Criteria: Studies were selected if they utilized a pre-test/post-test/delayed post-test design; focused on adult or adolescent L2 learners; and included a comparative analysis of at least two feedback types (e.g., recasts vs. metalinguistic explanation).

Categories of Analysis:

Implicit CF: Recasts and clarifications.

Explicit CF: Direct correction and metalinguistic clues.

Prompts vs. Redirections: Whether the teacher provided the answer or prompted the student to self-correct.

Measurement: Effectiveness was measured by "uptake" (immediate response) and "acquisition" (retention in delayed post-tests).

Results

3. Results

The synthesis of the selected data revealed a multifaceted picture of how feedback functions in the classroom environment:

3.1. The Efficacy of Explicit vs. Implicit Feedback

Meta-analysis of over 50 classroom-based studies indicates that Explicit Feedback (e.g., metalinguistic clues) consistently yields larger effect sizes than Implicit Feedback (e.g., recasts) for grammatical accuracy. While recasts are the most common (occurring in roughly 60-70% of teacher-student interactions), they are often ambiguous; learners frequently perceive them as a confirmation of meaning rather than a correction of form.

3.2. Prompts vs. Providing (The "Push" Factor)

Results show that "Prompts" (elicitation, metalinguistic clues, and clarification requests) are more effective for long-term retention than "Providing" the correct form (recasts or direct correction). Prompts require the learner to retrieve the correct form from their own memory, a process known as "pushed output," which strengthens neural pathways (Saito, 2013).

3.3. Linguistic Complexity and Feedback Type

The data suggests a correlation between the type of error and the required feedback:

Lexical/Vocabulary errors: Highly responsive to direct correction.

Morphosyntactic/Grammar errors: More effectively treated with metalinguistic feedback.

Phonological/Pronunciation errors: Most responsive to immediate recasting.

3.4. The Timing Variable

Studies regarding "Immediate vs. Delayed CF" indicate that immediate feedback is superior for grammatical development in controlled tasks, but delayed feedback—delivered after the communicative task—is more beneficial for maintaining oral fluency and reducing "affective filter" issues (anxiety).

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that feedback is not a "one-size-fits-all" pedagogical tool. Its success is mediated by cognitive and affective factors.

The Cognitive Comparison:

Explicit feedback works because it reduces the "cognitive load" on the student. When a teacher provides a metalinguistic explanation, the student does not have to guess what was wrong. This confirms Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis: for learning to occur, the learner must consciously attend to the linguistic form.

The Role of Individual Differences (IDs):

Learners with high "Language Analytic Ability" (the ability to process

grammatical structures) benefit more from explicit feedback. Conversely, younger learners or those in immersion-style environments may benefit more from implicit feedback as they prioritize communicative flow over structural precision.

The Socio-Cultural Perspective:

Following Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), feedback acts as a "scaffolding" mechanism. The most effective teachers are those who provide the minimum amount of feedback necessary for a student to self-correct, thereby moving the student toward autonomy.

Limitations:

Most current studies are conducted in university settings. Further research is needed to determine how AI-based feedback (e.g., from LLMs or language apps) compares to the nuanced, socially-situated feedback provided by human instructors.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while all corrective feedback contributes to L2 development, explicit prompts—which force the learner to engage in cognitive retrieval—are the most effective for achieving grammatical accuracy. For educators, the most robust strategy is a "Selective and Systematic" approach: prioritize errors that impede communication, use prompts to encourage self-correction, and provide explicit metalinguistic explanations when the learner lacks the underlying knowledge to self-correct.

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