

FACTORS THAT GUIDE EFL TEACHERS' CHOICE FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to discuss the factors that guide EFL teachers' choice for different types of corrective feedback while carrying out focus on form activities with their students. This paper is based on a research carried out in 2005 by the author as one of the requisites to obtain a doctorate degree in Applied Linguistics from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The findings show that the five teachers studied - although they have different experiences, length of teaching practice and educational background - consider mainly the following factors when they decide to opt for types of *feedback*: how they think the student is feeling at the moment, how they consider the personality of the student, and how they judge the linguistic knowledge and emotional capacity of the student.

Key words: corrective feedback; EFL teachers; choices; beliefs; sociocultural perspective.

Introduction

This paper aims at presenting a summary of a study developed with the objective of investigating the factors that guide the choice for different types of corrective *feedback* by teachers of foreign languages when correcting their students' oral errors. The research, my doctorate dissertation, followed a sociocultural perspective and was carried out with 5 teachers of a private language institute in the south of Brazil that follows the principles of the communicative approach. The investigation was done through the observation of the corrective behavior of these teachers during focus on form activities with their own students. These activities were video taped and, immediately after, commented on by the teachers during interviews with the researcher. These interviews were also video taped. There was a third video recording of an interview between the researcher and each teacher to discuss the teacher's perceptions about error treatment and the different types of corrective *feedback*. The analysis of the recording transcripts resulted in a description of the corrective choices of each individual teacher and a description of the pattern of behavior in regards to the option for reformulative, teacher reformulates student's erroneous utterance, or elicitive, teacher elicits correction from student, feedback.

The investigation was motivated by my Master's thesis (Menti, 2003). That study, as this one, is based on the belief that focus on form instruction is beneficial to the learning process, and aimed at verifying the effect of two kinds of corrective feedback, recast and elicitation, on the performance of EFL students. It was carried out with two intermediate level groups in a private language course and consisted of an experimental investigation in which the performance of the subjects was tested before and after

receiving feedback. One group of subjects received recast (corrective feedback that does not require the learner to produce the correct form, the teacher reformulates student's utterance correctly), and the other received elicitation (student is requested to reformulate utterance that contains error) while participating in tasks managed by their own teachers during their English classes. The study's steering hypothesis was that corrective feedback given to students through elicitation generates better performance than recast due to the demand that the student reformulate his/her own utterances using his/her own linguistic resources. The results of the research indicated that students who received feedback through elicitation produced more error-free utterances when tested immediately after the investigation. Despite reaching significant findings in favor of the use of elicitation, elicitative type of feedback, I stress in my conclusion that more studies have to be done in this area, especially studies that consider the teachers' reasons for opting for different types of feedback before advocating for the use of any type of feedback in detriment of others.

1. Theoretical Background

This study follows a sociocultural perspective of learning (Vygotski, 1972) which understands that learning occurs through interaction with others, through scaffolding within the learner's zone of proximal development, ZPD. Scaffolding is understood as the assistance the teacher, or other learner, provides the learner while they are engaged in performing a communicative task that would not be able to be carried out without the teacher's, or other learner's, assistance. This research studies corrective feedback while it is being given during interaction between teachers and their students and discussed between teachers and the researcher, it was carried out in a school whose practice reflects the sociocultural ideas and whose teachers prioritize authentic and communicative interaction in their classrooms.

A major study that has contributed significantly to the study of corrective feedback in second language learning is that of Lyster & Ranta (1997) which studied types of corrective feedback provided by teachers to their learners while engaged in speaking activities. The authors found that teachers mainly employ recasts, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, corrective repetition, and explicit correction. This study also claims that the most used type of corrective feedback is recast, when teachers immediately give the student the correct form of the erroneous utterance, and that this type of feedback is the most inefficient because it does not generate much uptake, recognition that a mistake has been made and that a correction has been given, on the part of the learner. Using uptake as a measure of efficiency of corrective feedback has been questioned by Lima (2002), Menti (2003) and Lima and Menti (2004) based on the argument that recognition of an error on the part of the learner does not guarantee that he/she has understood what the error was and that he/she has benefited from this intervention.

The underlining idea of this study is that focus on form teaching, teaching that stresses authentic interaction between teacher and learners and among learners themselves while engaged in communicative tasks in which instruction (explicit and/or implicit) on structures is provided to the learner and during which corrective feedback

may be provided, is beneficial to the learning process. Many studies have been carried out to investigate the benefits and drawbacks of different types of teaching. Among those that conclude that focus on form teaching is beneficial to learning are: Spada, (1997); Russel and Spada, (2004); Lyster and Ranta (1997); and Panova and Lyster (2002). One of the most significant papers in this area was that of Russel and Spada (2004) which reviewed 56 studies on focus on form instruction and corrective feedback. The authors concluded that there is great support in the vast majority of these studies that corrective feedback is beneficial to learning a second language. They conclude that corrective feedback within focus on form instruction has a positive effect on learners' performance and that there is evidence that feedback types that promote student correction are more effective than feedback in which the teacher reformulates students' utterances.

This study is based on the understanding that research about teaching must be centered on teachers' thoughts, experience and practice, in other words, must consider the teachers' perspective on teaching and learning. Crandall (2000) claims that the teacher should be the main resource and source when investigating learning, this reflects a growing focus on knowledge about and of the teacher. Freeman (2002), stresses the need to study the "mental life" of teachers, how they see and understand their teaching practice in research about L2 learning and teaching, proposing an emic perspective to explain how learning and teaching occur.

As this study centers on teachers' voices, their thoughts, how they perceive and justify their own corrective feedback, it ultimately deals with teachers' beliefs. The reasons teachers present for their behavior, be it corrective or any other, spring from their beliefs about teaching and learning. Barcelos (2004) states that teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching come from how they define language and how they think languages are learned. She understands, as I do, that these beliefs guide teachers' practice. It is important to mention that the present study did not aim at making any kind of judgment of teachers' beliefs and their practice, but it aimed at hearing teachers describing their corrective behavior based on their own perspective.

During the interviews with teachers and during the viewing sessions it became clear that the teachers that participated in this study have a great concern about their students' well-being, mainly their emotional well-being, when opting for different types of corrective feedback. These teachers avoid any kind of behavior that they think will inhibit the student, will embarrass the student or make him/her think less of him/herself. These teachers also worry about being liked by their students, about being accepted and well-seen by their students. This concern for the other's image and their own image is directly related to the Politeness Theory. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) the Politeness Theory is about keeping one's own face and respecting the face of others. They understand that members of conversations respect each other's face – they avoid saying anything that will threaten each other's face. The face is exactly the image that we show to the outside world. Teachers in this study show that they respect the politeness theory, in other words, they consider the students self-image and their own and try to protect this image when making decisions about corrective treatment.

The points above constitute the theoretical background for the study and will be brought up later when I discuss the findings.

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in 6 stages. In the first stage, teachers filled out a questionnaire about their professional and educational background, and about their concepts regarding learning/teaching. The second stage aimed at gathering data on teachers' corrective behavior in class while working with their own students. To that end, two focus on form activities were video recorded of each teacher. Teachers did not know the aim of the investigation in these two stages. The third and fourth stages gathered teachers' insights on their own corrective behavior through two more video recordings. The third stage was a second recording with each teacher individually talking with the researcher about their corrective behavior while watching the video recording of their classes. This recording was made immediately after the recording of the focus on form activity. The researcher stopped the video recording whenever there was a correction and asked the teacher to talk about the correction through semi-open questions such as: "Why did you correct this student?"; "Why did you correct him/her that way?"; "What was happening at this point?"; "Why did you correct this student differently from that other student". On the whole, the questions had the intention to elicit from the teacher the reasons that led him/her to correct the way he/she did looking for the factors that influence this teacher's corrective behavior.

The fourth stage consisted in a third video recording, this time of an interview with each teacher to discuss in more details the teacher's views about how a second language is learned and should be taught, and how errors are/should be treated. The fifth stage dealt with transcribing and analyzing the data in all three video recordings: the focus-on-form class, the teacher-researcher viewing of the class and the interview with the researcher. After all the transcripts were made and answers to the questionnaires were collected and organized, a thorough analysis was carried out of all the transcripts searching for teachers' reasons for correcting the way they do and the underlying beliefs that led them to act that way. The objective of this analysis was to verify the influence of each individual teacher's educational and professional background on their choices for different types of corrective feedback.

In the sixth stage, another analysis of the transcripts was made in order to group the factors presented by the all 5 teachers into reasons for using reformulative or elicitive feedback. In other words, the aim of this stage was to group the reasons presented by the teachers for eliciting the correct form from their students when they produce an erroneous utterance, this way providing elicitive feedback, or deciding to provide the correction to their students right away, thus providing reformulative feedback.

3. The findings

Due to space restrictions, I will concentrate on the findings reached in the second analysis whose purpose was to verify the reasons the whole group of participants gave for justifying their choice of corrective feedback, specifically choices for elicitive or reformulative feedback. I will begin with the reasons presented for the use of recasts.

Teachers stated that they opt for recasts (reformulative feedback), they decide to provide students with the correction and not to elicit the correction from the student, when they want to avoid embarrassing their students or making them feel demanded upon, to help those students who are not able to produce the correction without the help of the teacher, to show that the teacher is participating in the conversation and when the teacher feels that the student is nervous or apprehensive. The reasons put forward for the use of recasts are related to how much and what kind of assistance the teacher feels that the student needs at the moment of the corrective intervention. Recasts are many times used as an instrument that promotes scaffolding, or linguistic support given to students according to their linguistic and emotional state and level. Feedback given as scaffolding provides students with information and instruction according to the students' ZPD, Zone of Proximal Development, which is, as stated above, what the students can produce with the aid of the teacher or another learner. Teachers show a great concern for keeping the interaction they have established with their students. Teachers state they decide on the kind of feedback to employ according to how they perceive their students' emotional and linguistic state and conditionals so as not to jeopardize the interaction between the student and teacher and between students themselves. These teachers believe that learning occurs in and because of this interaction, hence their priority is to ensure the continuity and well-being of this interaction. If a corrective feedback type can harm interaction, they will not employ it. This may be one reason why recasts are used so often, so as not to harm interaction since it is the feedback type that least risks interaction because it does not ask anything of the student, but rather, it provides students with more input.

The reasons put forward for the use of elicitive feedback are almost all related to teachers' certainty that the student being corrected has the linguistic and emotional conditions to reformulate his/her utterance. In other words, teachers will only ask a student to correct him/herself or draw his/her attention to the mistake when they are sure that the student is capable of doing that, when they are certain the student knows how to correct him/herself and will not feel embarrassed or intimidated by the intervention. The reasons for the use of elicitation are also coherent with the notion of assistance in the sociocultural perspective of learning. As with the choice for recasts, when teachers choose to employ elicitation they act respecting their students' reach, knowledge, personality and emotional state having as priority the interaction with their students and the understanding that interaction is essential for learning to occur.

Teachers stated that they employ feedback through metalinguistic feedback, elicitive feedback type that gives students linguistic clues in order to help students correct themselves, when they feel that their students need more input about the structure being used or when they understand that the structure needs to be made clearer to the student. They choose to use this kind of feedback when the structure in question was recently worked with, when the error is recurring, to help the student remember and understand the structure, when the student is emotionally and linguistically ready to be more demanded upon, and when the teacher wants the student to think and reflect about the error and the language being used. Once again, these reasons pertain to how much and what kind of assistance the teacher feels the student needs, and to the appropriate time to help the learner. When choosing this kind of feedback, as when choosing recasts

and elicitation, teachers act according to the sociocultural concepts of assistance as scaffolding, ZPD and, above all, act prioritizing interaction.

Final remarks

On the whole, the findings show that the five teachers studied - although they have different experiences, length of teaching practice and educational background – consider mainly the following factors when they decide to opt for types of *feedback*: how they think the student is feeling at the moment, how they consider the personality of the student, and how they judge the linguistic knowledge and emotional capacity of the student.

Teachers who have interaction among their students as a priority in class, who believe that it is through interaction that learning takes place, direct their corrective behavior toward providing episodes of scaffolding and toward assisting their students to produce within their ZPD.

These teachers respect the Politeness Theory considering their own and their students' face. The factors teachers present for the use of reformulative and elicitive feedback are based on how well they know their students and how they perceive their students' linguistic capacities and emotional conditions avoiding any kind of episode that would potentially harm interaction with the student or diminish the student's sense of self-worth and importance.

I suggest that more studies dealing with the Politeness Theory and teachers' actions be made in order to deepen what is known about the issue, especially studies related to teachers' corrective behavior. I also believe that more research has to be carried out to better our understanding of the role of corrective treatment on learning.

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