IELTS Speaking Teachers' Attitudes towards Oral Corrective Feedback: A Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract: Corrective feedback (CF) refers to a pedagogical technique that provides learners with information about their errors or mistakes and helps correct them. It can take the form of both oral and written feedback. In this study, the main focus is on oral corrective feedback (OCF). Oral corrective feedback (OCF) can enhance the accuracy of oral expression, which is crucial for the IELTS exam. However, incorrect usage might have a negative impact on students. This study investigated the attitudes of IELTS teachers towards the use of OCF from a pedagogical perspective by adopting a qualitative method. Six teachers with varying years of experience in teaching IELTS speaking were interviewed. The findings indicate that OCF is guided by consideration for students' feelings. Teachers generally exhibit positive attitudes towards OCF, although there is a suggestion that they lack systematic training and knowledge on the topic. Therefore, it is important for teacher training programs to incorporate relevant content on OCF.

Keywords: IELTS speaking, Oral corrective feedback, Attitudes

1. Introduction

Based on the 2022 IELTS test statistics, the Chinese test takers who took the academic exam scored the lowest in the speaking section compared to the other assessed English language skills (reading, listening, and writing), with an average of just 5.6 points [1]. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to assist learners in improving their speaking skills and provide IELTS teachers with more practical guidance. Corrective feedback (CF) is a pedagogical technique used in educational and language learning contexts to provide learners with information about their errors or mistakes and help correct them [2]. On the other hand, oral corrective feedback (OCF) specifically refers to the use of corrective feedback in oral or spoken language contexts.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of OCF in improving language accuracy, but some researchers believe that OCF can have a negative impact on learners, such as discouraging their enthusiasm for learning [3]. In the criteria of IELTS speaking test, accuracy is particularly crucial. Therefore, the teacher's attitude towards this technique plays an indispensable role in this controversy. The effectiveness of OCF depends on the teachers' attitude and the balance between improving accuracy and preserving learners' confidence. Research on IELTS teacher perceptions of OCF is limited, as these teachers are typically not part of the formal Chinese education system and government-funded institutions, such as colleges and public schools. This study adopted a qualitative approach to analyze attitudes of the IELTS teachers towards OCF, with the aim of addressing these questions:

What is the attitude of IELTS-speaking teachers regarding:

(a) Should OCF be given? (b) How to give OCF? (c) When to give OCF? (d) Who to give OCF? (e) What types of OCF?

2. Literature review

2.1 IELTS test in China

According to the IELTS Academic Mean Performance by Nationality 2022 report published by the British Council, China ranked 29th on the list with an overall average score of 6.1, which fell short of the global average of 6.3. Furthermore, Chinese IELTS applicants had an unfavorable average speaking score of 5.6 in 2022, which was below the overall average of 6.3. The IELTS exam is considered a critical

indicator of English language proficiency in teaching, and Chinese teachers perceive it as highly practical. Test-takers are often students who have studied English for an extended period or individuals aspiring to study or live abroad, receiving extensive English instruction. However, their IELTS speaking scores remain below the average [4].

2.2 Oral corrective feedback (OCF)

Corrective feedback (CF) refers to a pedagogical technique that provides learners with information about their errors or mistakes and helps correct them. It can take the form of both oral and written feedback. In this study, the main focus is on oral corrective feedback (OCF). The most commonly discussed topics regarding CF are whether to provide correction, when to provide correction, how to provide correction, who should provide correction, and which types of correction to use.

2.2.1 Is OCF necessary?

Communicative Language Teaching Approach considers that communication should be unrestricted, and error correction should be avoided. Krashen[5] had an unfavorable opinion of OCF and suggested that, even under ideal conditions, it was likely to have a negative impact on the students' willingness to speak up freely. However, in subsequent iterations of Communicative Language Teaching Approach, OCF was reinstated as crucial for assisting learners in achieving accuracy. Moreover, accuracy is a requirement for achieving high scores according to the IELTS speaking exam's scoring standards. Therefore, OCF appears to be inevitable in IELTS speaking instruction.

2.2.2 When to give OCF?

Verbal mistakes can be fixed immediately after they occur, or a delayed correction can be given after all speech activities are completed. The controversy over whether immediate or delayed feedback is more advantageous remains unresolved. Generally, teachers tend to make immediate corrections in accuracy-focused activities, while it is recommended to delay corrections in fluency-focused activities.

The Transfer Appropriate Processing Hypothesis asserts that the acquisition of language rules and forms relies on context and communicative situations, and the provision of immediate feedback can facilitate learners' better recall of the rules in a communicative setting. On the other hand, some researchers suggest providing delayed feedback after the completion of oral activities to avoid interruptions in attention [6].

2.2.3 How to give OCF?

Lyster and Ranta[7] have classified six major types of OCF strategies, which are widely used in the literature. They identified six types of feedback: recast, clarification request, repetition, explicit correction, elicitation, and metalinguistic. In this study, these feedback types are categorized into two main classifications: implicit and explicit feedback, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A classification of OCF strategies

Classification	CF types	Explanation
Implicit	Recast	Correcting students naturally in the correct form in the dialogue
Implicit	Clarification request	Asking students to explain and guiding themselves to be aware of the mistakes
Implicit	Repetition	Repeating students' words in the correct form
Explicit	Explicit correction	Pointing out errors and providing correct answers
Explicit	Elicitation	Emphasizing errors and prompting students for correct forms
Explicit	Metalinguistic	Pointing out the errors and explaining

2.2.4 Who to give OCF?

OCF may involve teacher correction, peer correction, and self-correction. The issue of whom to provide feedback to is still controversial, as each approach has its respective strengths and weaknesses. Gómez Argüelles et al.[8] claimed that teacher correction is the most commonly used in the classroom since teachers are regarded as authorities and can provide valuable feedback. In contrast, some researchers advocate giving students the opportunity for peer correction or self-correction, as these approaches involve students actively participating in the learning process.

2.2.5 What errors to be corrected?

Regarding the issue of which oral errors should be corrected, there are grammar errors, vocabulary errors, and pronunciation errors. According previous research, teachers indicated that they prioritize correcting grammatical mistakes in grammar courses and pronunciation mistakes in speaking sessions[9]. This suggests that teachers have varied error correction priorities depending on the specific lesson scenarios.

3. Method

This study used a qualitative method by interviewing six teachers who have different years of experience teaching IELTS speaking. The participants were recruited through random sampling method. Prior to data collection, the study obtained informed consent from the participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Pseudonyms (Stella, Vicky, Sally, Linda, Wendy, and Amber) were used to ensure confidentiality. The participants' demographic information includes age and gender: Stella (33 years, female), Vicky (29 years, female), Sally (31 years, female), Linda (30 years, female), Wendy (28 years, female), and Amber (34 years, female). Each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, and the entire process was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. NVivo software (version 12) was employed for conducting a thematic analysis on the interview data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Oral corrective feedback is necessary in IELTS teaching

When asked about whether it was necessary to correct learners' oral mistakes, four out of the six teachers firmly believe in correcting students' mistakes. Amber mentioned that there are more advantages than disadvantages in terms of students' further development. Appropriate OCF can aid acquisition when a student is having trouble communicating. She added that only by providing corrective feedback can students know how they can improve to develop accuracy and achieve high scores in the IELTS exam. In addition, the four teachers also confirmed that all corrective activities should be conducted while protecting students' self-esteem and confidence.

On the contrary, two teachers believed that correction is not necessary in oral activities due to consideration for students' feelings and the flow of the lesson. Wendy commented that correcting could impede the class's flow and distract learners' attention. Although Stella holds a dispensable view towards OCF, she believes that every teacher should have a thorough understanding of the content and knowledge related to OCF. Based on their use of words such as "important", "necessary", and "there is a need to master OCF", their attitude can be concluded as "positive".

4.2 Immediate and delayed feedback are both used

Regarding the issue of when to give feedback, all six teachers expressed that they would give both immediate and delayed feedbacks, depending on the teaching context and students' personalities. Ölmezer-Öztürk's research also suggests some congruence, stating that the timing of feedback varied depending on the error and situation. Linda mentioned that the IELTS speaking test needs to be completed within the specified time[10]. In timed training, she values students' fluency, so she provides delayed feedback after all oral activities are completed. In casual training, however she opts for immediate feedback as it tends to make a strong impression on students. This aligns with Ellis's view that teachers recommend delayed corrections for fluency work but prefer immediate correction for accuracy work. Two teachers, Sally and Stella, indicated that they take learners' personality into consideration. If a learner is timid and shy, they will give delayed feedback regardless of the circumstances. All six teachers demonstrate thoughtfulness in ensuring that students do not feel hurt during the correction process.

4.3 Recasts are the most preferred

When it comes to error correction, recasts are the most commonly chosen method by teachers, with five out of the six teachers preferring them. According to Table 1, recasts are considered one of the implicit types of feedback, and implicit feedback may not cause learners to feel embarrassed or anxious. The second most selected method by the teachers is repetitions, which are also considered implicit

feedback. Linda mentioned that she would not directly point out the faults but rather address them in a more tactful manner to avoid dampening their enthusiasm.

Sally and Vicky share similar views regarding error correction, where they prefer to correct oral errors in a more natural manner without emphasizing the mistakes. Stella, on the other hand, has a specific approach to error correction. She writes down the errors made by students during speaking activities, and during the summary session, she displays these errors on the blackboard and asks students to correct them on their own. This method serves as an implicit way of correction, as it encourages students to pay more attention to the errors themselves rather than focusing on the students who made them, thus avoiding undermining their confidence. This aligns with Rolin-Ianziti's recommendation in the research, which suggests that teachers should make note of errors during students' oral communication and review them after the completion of the task. [11].

4.4 Teacher correction and peer correction are preferred

When asked about their preference for who provides the correction, three teachers stated a preference for teacher correction, while two teachers reported a preference for peer correction. Wendy explained her reasons for choosing teacher correction, emphasizing that teachers possess overall abilities beyond the students' scope, allowing them to provide better guidance and advice. Vicky also favors teacher correction due to its efficiency and convenience in the classroom, enabling students to quickly address their problems and obtain desired answers.

In contrast to their views, Linda expressed her thoughts on the advantages of peer correction, saying that it can promote interaction between them and help build a friendly and positive learning environment in the class. There is no risk of damaging their feelings since students are familiar with each other. When further asked if they would doubt peer advice, Linda explained that although there is a possibility of peer distrust, students can always seek help from the teacher, which is also a process of self-learning and exploration.

Stella prefers self-correction as it cultivates students' awareness of self-directed correction and independent learning, even in the absence of teachers. However, there is one distinct problem with self-correction, which is that it places great demands on students' self-discipline and abilities. The researcher expressed doubts about these challenges, and she continued to explain that she believed that self-correction was indeed not suitable for beginners. For beginners, they may not be able to identify their mistakes, let alone correct them.

4.5 Pronunciation errors are the most concerning

The mistakes were all coded into three categories: vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. While three teachers stated that pronunciation errors should take precedence, two teachers felt that addressing grammar errors was the most crucial. Only one teacher gave the most attention to vocabulary errors. Vicky explained in the interview that grammatical or syntactic usage is not the focal point of oral speaking sessions since it is not a grammar or writing class. This finding is consistent with Ha's[12] research, which revealed that teachers showed a preference for addressing pronunciation errors in speaking activities. Accurate and clear pronunciation enhances understanding, which is why pronunciation is valued in OCF.

5. Conclusions

This study has revealed that teachers generally hold a positive attitude towards OCF, considering it "necessary" in the classroom, and prioritize their students' feelings when implementing OCF. Even when teachers acknowledge the potential harm of OCF on students' confidence, they make every effort to minimize the risk.

Furthermore, teachers take into account the context and learners' characteristics when deciding whether to provide immediate or delayed feedback. They tend to prefer implicit feedback, such as recasts and repetitions, as it can be argued that implicit feedback has a lesser negative impact on students' self-esteem. The majority of teachers favor both peer and teacher correction, as these methods can help students find solutions more efficiently. Pronunciation errors are the most commonly corrected mistakes in class.

Based on the data, it is evident that teachers lack knowledge of OCF, despite their overall enthusiasm for its usage, which indicates their intention to incorporate it into their daily teaching. However, incorrect

implementation of OCF could potentially have a negative impact on students. Therefore, it is crucial to include relevant content on OCF in teacher training programs.

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