

# A brief overview of the effectiveness of implicit and explicit feedback in Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** This academic essay is an assessed coursework in Second Language Acquisition (2018) for taught postgraduate in School of Languages, Linguistics, and Queen Mary University of London. This essay firstly provides detailed definitions and research examples of different CF categories in order to distinguish and further exemplify the features. Then, the essay confirms the general effectiveness of explicit and implicit CF and points out the overlap between teacher's intentions and learner's perceptions might differ due to a few variables, which is necessary to pay attention to in SLA classroom. The rest of the essay analyzes three dominant variables that may influence expected language teaching results, which is, linguistic targets, learner's language proficiency, and learner's ages. Since the three influential factors interact to impact CF effectiveness, it is necessary for teachers to consider them when deciding the type and form of provided feedback in different situations.

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition, teacher's feedback, explicit feedback, implicit feedback

## 1. Introduction

It is regarded as the teacher's eligibility to provide to committed error corrections from learner's problematic utterances in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) classroom. In order to highlight the grammatical errors and to state the existence and necessity of corrections, language teachers can use either explicit and implicit feedback to correct learner's non-target like forms.

Many previous pieces of research have identified the corrective feedback (CF) effectiveness and found that both explicit and implicit CF is helpful to students to recognize and modify their error or mistakes in the non-target like utterances. However, the degree of effectiveness can differ due to the difference existed in teaching contexts and situations. Therefore, teachers need to take a few variables into their considerations to increase the level of corrective feedback effectiveness.

This essay firstly provides detailed definitions and research examples of different CF categories in order to distinguish and further exemplify the features. Then, the essay confirms the general effectiveness of explicit and implicit CF and points out the overlap between teacher's intentions and learner's perceptions might differ due to a few variables, which is necessary to pay attention to in SLA classroom. The rest of the essay analyzes three dominant variables that may influence expected language teaching results, which is, linguistic targets, learner's language proficiency, and learner's ages. Since the three influential factors interact to impact CF effectiveness, it is necessary for teachers to consider them when deciding the type and form of provided feedback in different situations.

## 2. Literature review

Feedback, according to Ellis, Loewen & Erlam (2006), is generally seen as a powerful supporter in language teaching process, as it provides with additional information and opportunities, which consequentially poses positive impact on learners' perception, production, and the overall performances.

Feedback can be both positive or negative (Ayhan, Arikian & Akbarov. 2011.). The CF form is partially based on the correctness of learner's utterance. Positive feedback is thought for learners who contain the language abilities to produce correct utterance, while negative feedback is adopted to correct current linguistic errors in learners' utterance in a more direct and instant way.

In SLA literature, Corrective feedback is regarded as a common approach of negative feedback (Ellis, 2009b). According to Ellis (2006), CF refers to 'responses to learner utterances containing an

error.’(pp.18-41). It has been categorized into different types according to response approaches of grammatical errors. Lyster & Ranta (1997) classified CF into two broad categories, that is, reformulations and prompts. The former reformulates learners’ non-target like utterances, and the latter provides learners with opportunities to self-repair. Lightbown & Spada (1999) defined the CF and suggested that the given CF can be either explicit or implicit. It based on the evidence that both types of the CF have a similar function in indicating the incorrectness and reformulating the non- target utterance of learners, but they are different in the way to correct learners’ use of the target language. Ellis (2009a) further pointed that teachers can give CF mainly by indicating the incorrectness in learners’ use of the target language, providing the correct form in the targetlanguage, or import learners of the metalinguistic information.

Another widely accepted approach of categorizing CF is the explicit and implicit CF in the field of SLA. Ellis, Loewen. & Erlam (2006) defined the term ‘explicit feedback’ as ‘overt indicator that an error has been committed.’ (pp. 540-541). In the case of explicit CF, teachers tend to state the existence of the problem directly and provide the correct forms at the same time. Generally, explicit feedback can take three forms: (a) metalinguistic feedback; (b) explicit correction and (c) metalinguistic feedback and explicit correction. In metalinguistic feedback, teacher’s commentconcerns the well-formedness of the learner’s utterance. (Lyster & Randa, 1997). Grammatical metalanguage such as word definition is provided for learner’s produced lexical error, explanations for grammar or key vocabularies is adopted to make learners aware of their problematic utterance forms. Below are two examples of explicit CF:

**Example 1. Metalinguistic feedback**

L: — I go to the movies yesterday.

T: — Past tense.

In this case, the teacher used the grammar point ‘past tense’ to encourage learner to rethink and to derive the correct form, but did not say the correct form. This CF type is called the Modified Output.

**Example 2. Explicit feedback**

L: —He go to school everyday.

T: —No, you should say ‘he goes’, not ‘go’.

In the conversation, the learner misused the third person singular in English. The teacher provided the correct form of target language ‘he goes’ followed by order language ‘You should.’

**Example 3. Metalinguistic feedback and explicit correction**

L: — I go to the movies yesterday.

T: — No, you need the past tense. You should say; I went to the movies yesterday.’

In this example, it is noticeable that the teacher’s feedback contains two components: (1) the grammar point ‘past tense’; (2) the correct form of target language. As this CF type focuses on linguistics forms and patterns, it is also known as Form-focused Instruction,

Unlike explicit feedback, there is ‘no overt indicator that an error has been committed’ in implicit feedback (Ellis, Loewen. & Erlam, 2006, pp.540-541.). To better differentiate between the twotypes of CF, Lightbown & Spada (1999) took the teaching conversation in their research as an example.

**Example 4. Implicit feedback**

L: —He go to school every day.

T: —Yes, he goes to school every day.

This case can be seen as an implicit correction. Instead of directly provide the answer, the teacher repeated learners’ problematic answer, but modified the sentence. To be more precise, Mackey *et al.* (2007) give two forms of recasts: (a) declarative recast, in which the teacher provides the target-like form with declarative intonation; (b) interrogative recast.

**Example 5. Declarative recast**

L: — Because he found a stable [incorrect] job.

T: — Suitable. [correct]

**Example 6. Interrogative recast**

L: — Because he found a suitable [incorrect] job.

T: — Suitable? [correct]

In the above examples, different intonations between two recasts are noticeable. In Example 3, the learner mispronounced the word ‘suitable.’ The teacher repeated the word in the correct form with declarative intonation. However, the teacher in Example 4 uses the interrogative intonation when providing the target-like version, in order to indicate that an error has been committed in the utterance.

However, intonation is not the only way to define and distinguish recasts. Sheen & Ellis (2011) argued that implicit CF might also be provided in the form of conversational recast as well as a didactic recast. When the communication breakdown occurs, the teacher uses a reformulation of the student’s utterance in an attempt to resolve the problem. According to Sheen & Ellis (2011), a didactic recast is another form of recasts. Unlike conventional recast, it is used in the absence of a communicative problem to provide a partial or whole reformulation and highlight the error in the learner’s utterance more explicitly. Below are two examples in real teaching situation:

**Example 7. Conversational recasts**

L: — Boy are playing.

T: — Wow, the boy is playing ball.

**Example 8. Partial didactic recast**

L: — I have 20 years old.

T: — I am.

Apart from recasts, negotiation is another common form of implicit feedback. It can also be seen as ‘prompts’, as it aims to provoke learner’s output. Negotiation includes the repetition, the clarification request, and the confirmation check. To negotiate with the learner for meaning and to understand the learner’s problematic utterance in communicative breakdowns, the teacher either repeat the incorrect part of the utterance or merely ask clarification questions. In confirmation check, teachers would repeat the utterance partially or pause the conversation to wait for utterances completion. Ellis (2009a) defined it as output-provoking feedback, as it focuses more on the elicitation of correct forms from learners. However, it can also be provided in an explicitly by merely asking questions.

**Example 9. Repetition**

L: — I go to the movies yesterday.

T: — You go [stressed] to the movies yesterday?

**Example 10. Clarification questions**

L: — I go to the movies yesterday.

T: — Sorry? / What do you mean? / what did you say?

**Example 11. Confirmation check**

L: — I go to the movies yesterday.

T: — Yesterday?

It is worth mentioning that in example 9, the teacher use repetition to draw learner’s attention to the produced language error. The changed intonation and the stressed word ‘go’ both indicate that the learner should use the simple past tense because it happened yesterday.

Many researchers have commonly recognized the theoretical value of CF in SLA. In Connectionist theory, CF has been seen as an influential part in the aspect of developmental sequences. As Cook (2008) defined, learners are exposed to massive language input in the learning process. However, the truth is that they cannot internalize everything as their intakes. If the expected input does not integrated into current learner-language systems, it would not be used in the output production as well. In this way, teacher’s correction can be seen as additional information input to learners. When learners try to modify problematic utterances and reproduce in a correct version, the output can be triggered, which Izumi & Bigelow (2000) defined as Modified Output (MO). Ellis (2009b) also suggested that CF can be both input-providing or output-provoking. Therefore, CF is seen as a powerful approach of checking the learner’s intake and output for language teachers. Providing necessary CF can help to facilitate the

conversion of explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge to aid learner's performances.

*Table 1. Types of Corrective Feedback*

(Adapted from Lyster & Ranta 1997; Sheen & Ellis 2011; Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013)

Corrective Feedback	Categories	Explicit or Implicit	Function
<b>Recast</b>	declarative recast	Explicit	Input-providing feedback
	Interrogative recast	Implicit	Output-provoking feedback
	Conventional recast	Implicit	Input-providing feedback
	Didactic recast	Explicit	Input-providing feedback
<b>Prompts / Negotiations</b>	Repetition	Implicit	Output-provoking feedback
	Clarification request	Implicit	Output-provoking feedback
	Elicitation	Explicit	Output-provoking feedback
<b>Prompts / Negotiations</b>	Metalinguistic clue/comment	Explicit	Output-provoking feedback
<b>Explicit correction</b>	metalinguistic feedback	Explicit	Input-providing feedback
	Explicit correction with metalinguistic explanation	Explicit	Input-providing feedback

In addition, in Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1992), CF is considered to be facilitative because of its form-focused instruction. In this theory, noticing is the indispensable starting point in language acquisition. (Ammar & Spada, 2006). Based on the hypothesis, CF helps learners to notice the elicited linguistic features, draws their attention to the language ability gap between interlanguage forms and target forms, and aids language learners to make improvements to narrow the gap. This can reasonably explain why CF can be viewed as a typical type of input enhancement.

Also, the positive impacts of both implicit and explicit CF in SLA has been widely admitted in educational researches. Many studies have conducted many researches to investigate the effects of different corrective feedback, and the results remain the same. In Sanz's (2003) research, the student's groups who received feedback from the teacher, either implicit or explicit, outperformed the control group who did not receive any feedback. Similarly, Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) verified this in the research and found that learner's overall accuracy in the regular past tense has been mainly increased, which proves the effectiveness of both the metalinguistic explanation and the recast. The researches provide evidence for the facilitative role of CF in SLA. As Lyster, Saito & Sato (2013) suggested, CF provides scaffolding for teachers to help their learners promoting language competence. Although the types of provided feedback might be different, students benefited from error correction in general, and the performance does not differ dramatically.

However, CF may also have negative impacts on language learning process, especially on the communication effectiveness and learner's motivation. Lasagabaster & Sierra (2005) argued that frequently corrective feedback might inhibit communication. The language learning process might be interrupted if learner's errors are corrected by the teacher constantly. Besides, providing CF appears to increase the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1994). Affective filter and learning opportunity is thought to be diametrically opposite. When the affective filter goes high, learning opportunities would accordingly decrease. That's to say, when learners produce wrong language forms and get CF from the teacher in public, they may feel ashamed or embarrassed. Those negative feelings may make those learners feel anxious and not willing to provide new language production, this would decrease learning opportunities accordingly. Therefore, teacher's CF may demotivate learners in real language learning situations.

It is also worth noticing the mismatch between teacher's intention and learner's interpretation in aspects of amount, form and degree of CF. In previous researches, the disagreement in the amount of CF that teachers should provide has been identified (Lyster, Saito and Sato, 2013), as learners prefer to receive more CF than teacher's expectation. Also, though implicit feedback could attribute to language acquisition (Doughty & Varela, 1998.), most learners tend to express their particular preference for explicit feedback. (Kim & Mathes, 2001) More specifically, explicit corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic information tends to be more effective than implicit feedback.

According to Schmidt (1992), this type of feedback is believed to foster acquisition and is more welcomed by most learners. One possibility for this phenomenon might be that the corrective force is clearer in explicit feedback; another reason for the phenomenon is that learners tend to be more confident of producing MO when the teacher provides explicit feedback and give hints to the exact location of the error to learners. The overlap between the teacher's intentions and learner's perceptions can have a direct impact on the effectiveness of CF. According to Sheen & Ellis (2011), learner's misunderstanding about teacher's feedback might impede the learning outcomes. In contrast, when the degree of overlap increases,

CF would be regarded as more effective.

Overall, although CF facilitates L2 learning in general, the degree of effectiveness can differ. The truth is that the effectiveness of CF might be affected by many different variables in the SLA classroom. Since the contexts and situations, the ages and language proficiency of students groups, and the linguistic targets are different, the effectiveness of different types of CF would be varied as well. To ensure the function of CF, it is necessary for teachers to provide different correction strategies according to different contexts. However, the previous studies have paid too much attention to the overall effectiveness of CF and the performances in different CF types, and fail to consider these variables. The questions of whether to correct an error or not, what errors to correct, how to correct and when to correct remains controversial. Also, the impact of different variables have on the implicit and the explicit feedback still remains further investigations.

### 3. Variables that influence the effectiveness of feedback

As the previous identified, both implicit and explicit feedback is useful, but the effectiveness can be affected by various factors, such as linguistic target, language proficiency and learner's age. In order to make the most effective CF, it is suggested that teachers need to make choices between these variables.

#### 3.1. Linguistic target

One crucial variable considered to mediate CF effectiveness is the linguistic target difference. In authentic language classrooms, various exercises are provided to practice learner's language skills in different linguistic domains. When teachers intend to correct errors, the linguistic target might differ as well. According to Mackey *et al.* (2007), the overlap between the teacher's intention and learner's perception can be impacted by different linguistic focuses. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to identify which language focus it is in the classroom before correcting work.

When the linguistic focus is on a specific aspect of grammar points, such as passive voice or past tense, explicit feedback can provide more benefits for learners, as teachers not only correct specific grammar errors but the explanation of grammar terminologies. These would help learners to generate an accurate interpretation of the teacher's instruction. Therefore, the error correction efficacy has been recognized the most by learners. (Schulz, 2001.)

What is more, explicit CF in the form of metalinguistic explanation is confirmed to be more suitable in grammar instruction. (Ellis, 2007) In this type of feedback, the correct form has been provided by the teacher as well, which made it less likely for a student to misinterpret the teacher's intention. In Example 12, the teacher uses grammatical terminology to explain the necessity of using the past tense in the sentence. Thus, this type of CF enables learners to fully understand teacher's correction, which means the perception percentage between teacher's intention and learner's perception would increase.

#### Example 12. Morphological/ Lexical target

L: — The university for his reasons...

T: — Ok, past tense verbs. Fired him from work?

L: — From work.

To summary, the focus of the language class may not always be the same. Therefore, in order to make correction effectively and avoid learner's misinterpretations, teachers need to make choices in accordance with different linguistic targets. To tackle with grammar errors committed in learner's problematic utterance, teachers can select metalinguistic feedback to provide grammar-focused correction explicitly. It is considered to be easier for learners to interpret teacher's intention accurately and produce MO successfully after receiving the explicit feedback, and therefore the perceptions of teachers and learners overlapped the most.

#### 3.2. Language proficiency

Apart from the feedback, language levels can be another determining factor of CF effectiveness. It is investigated that learner's responses to CF (Dekeyser, 1998) can be affected by individual differences, such as their proficiency. Lyster, Sato & Saito (2007) also pointed out that learner's proficiency plays a substantial role in the measurements of CF effectiveness, and found that learners with developing

knowledge of target forms appear to gain more benefits.

Considering learner's cognition accuracy and interpretation ability, implicit feedback is more suitable for learners at higher stages of language development than to learners at lower stage (Mackey & Philp, 1998.). Learners who have attained high previous achievements and language aptitudes are seen as being more able in language classrooms. In implicit CF, teachers repeat the incorrect part or indirectly point out the committed error in the utterance, in order to highlight the linguistic errors and make learners aware of that, expect students to repair errors by themselves without teacher's explicit instruction. In this way, proficient learners are more likely to recognize the corrective intentions of the feedback, (Sheen & Ellis, 2011.) and repair the errors by themselves (Lyster, Sato & Saito, 2007). When communication breakdown occurs, teachers request clarification and try to understand the meaning of learner's utterance. This can also trigger learner's modified output.

However, implicit feedback would be not useful for learners who are less advanced in the language level. When the implicit CF is provided to them, they may not be able to recognize the teacher's corrective intention or recognize it inaccurately. What is even worse, in implicit CF, teachers tend to frequently ask questions in order to provoke learner's modified output. However, the affective filter would notably increase when less advanced learners are asked or feel the need to produce MO by themselves. They may not be able to produce utterance in a target-like form without teacher's explicit feedback. Thus, implicit feedback can be considered as effective when it is given to proficient learners, while learners at lower stages of development tend to benefit more from explicit feedback. Below are two examples to further distinguish CF effects for learners at different levels:

**Example 13. Implicit feedback to proficient learners (Lyster, Saito & Sato. 2013.)**

L: — But, actually, he won in World Cup. So, he can have confidence. He must have confidence. If he have confidence.

T: — If he have? He have?

L: — Oh! If he had confidence, we can believe him.

T: — Your opinion is good.

**Example 14. Implicit feedback to proficient learners (Lyster, Saito & Sato. 2013.)**

L: — But, his team enter the final league.

T: — Pardon me?

L: — Oh, entered. Thank you. And he is very great. I want to give him trophy.

T: — OK. My present is Messi.

Example 13 & 14 both exemplified learner's self-correction abilities when teacher provided implicit feedback. In Example 13, the grammatical error from produced conditional sentence has been detected by the teacher. When the proficient learner recognized it, the detected error was corrected by learner immediately. While in Example 14, the teacher did not provide clues to the nature of the error, and the learner was left to infer possible type of the committed error. To summarize, learners who are less advanced in language levels are considered less able to find out the error let alone provide the target like form in MO. However, it would be easier for them to produce required target form in explicit feedback, as the metalinguistic clue makes the location and the nature of error much clear for them to spot.

### 3.3. Learner's age

The age of learners can be the third contributing factor of CF effectiveness. Previous studies have shown that the function of CF might be different in different age groups, as older learners tend to benefit more from implicit CF, while younger learners benefited more from explicit correction. Panove & Lyster (2002) has investigated adult ESL learners aged from 17-55 in the descriptivestudy in Quebec and found that recasts played a dominant role in language classroom CF, as most CF were given in this form (77%), while teachers provided only little explicit correction. Similarly, in Sheen's research (2004) of adult English as Foreign Language (EFL) in Korea, older learner aged between 29-36 showed their preference to CF in the type of recasts. However, other studies held in high schools have shown different results. In mainland China, teachers are likely to use more prompts when correcting high school EFL learners, which is considered more beneficial to young students.

According to Panove & Lyster (2002), it is reasonable that older learners tend to be more acceptable to teacher's implicit instruction, as they have developed mature cognition to notice linguistic information in an autonomous manner. In addition, older learners are more likely to have more advanced language competence because of their prior learning experiences. The previously obtained knowledge would help learners interpret the teacher's intention accurately and provide MO successfully. Compared with adolescent and adult learners, young people tend to demonstrate lower and fewer gains from implicit correction.

In conclusion, to ensure the effectiveness of CF, the age factor needs to be taken into consideration when teachers correct learners with different age groups. Since older learners benefited to a more considerable extent from recasts, while younger learners benefited more from prompts, it is necessary to provide them with different types and forms of feedback.

#### 4. Conclusion

To ensure the effectiveness of CF, language teachers need to make choices in the use of explicit or implicit feedback in accordance with different situations. The essay suggested three variables that teachers need to take into consideration in giving useful feedback. Linguistic target in the class is of great importance in relation to the effectiveness of CF, and teachers are required to identify language focus before deciding provided CF forms. This essay suggested that explicit CF tend to be more effective when the linguistic focus in the class is on grammar. Particularly, explicit CF in the form of metalinguistic explanation is argued to be more effective in grammar instruction, and the perceptions of teachers and learners overlapped the most.

Learner's language proficiency is another variable. This essay suggested that providing implicit feedback to learners at higher stages of language development and providing explicit feedback to less advantaged learners would be more effective, and the efficacy of error correction would be recognized the most by learners.

The third variable that teachers need to pay attention to is the learner's age. Implicit feedback is regarded as more effective when it is given to adolescent and adult learners, while younger learners at lower stages of development tend to benefit more from explicit feedback. It would help learners to interpret teacher's instruction accurately, and to produce the required target form in explicit feedback.

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