Feedback to Grammar Mistakes in EFL Classes: A Case Study

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Este artigo reporta a análise da correção de erros gramaticais de duas turmas de inglês como língua estrangeira (LE) e como os alunos avaliam esse tipo de correção. Os dados são provenientes de transcrições de dez aulas de dois grupos de alunos de nível pré-intermediário, totalizando 7,5 horas de observação em cada grupo. A mesma professora lecionava para os dois grupos analisados e através de um questionário respondido pelos alunos foi possível observar as suas crenças com relação aos procedimentos de correção. A análise foi feita sob uma perspectiva sócio-cultural e revela que (1) correção explícita de erros é o tipo de estratégia de correção mais freqüentemente utilizada, e (2) os alunos gostam de ser corrigidos e consideram a correção importantíssima para o desenvolvimento de suas habilidades lingüísticas.

This article presents the analysis of feedback to grammatical mistakes in two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and how learners view this kind of correction. The data are drawn from transcripts of audio-recordings of ten classes of two pre-intermediate groups, totaling 7.5 hours of observation in each group. The two groups were taught by the same teacher, and a questionnaire was given to the learners in order to investigate their feelings about the teacher's feedback procedure. The analysis was carried out through a sociocultural perspective and reveals that (1) explicit correction is the most frequent type of feedback to grammar mistakes, and (2) learners appreciate and consider the teacher's correction highly important for the development of their language skills.

Introduction

As stated by Swain (1995) and Lyster (1993), a communicative-oriented environment is not the only necessary condition for Second Language (SL) acquisition. According to them, a way to significantly improve learners' performance is to focus on form in communicative settings, referring to formal instruction while communicative activities are performed, i.e., teachers drawing learners' attention to specific

linguistic forms when a task-based syllabus is followed. For Ellis (1994), there are two ways to focus on form. The first is through the activities that require both communication and attention to form, and the second through corrective feedback during performance in communication activities. The latter will be the focus of this article.

If the role of grammar is seen as relevant in order to enhance communication, some importance needs to be given to learners' output. In this sense, feedback is believed to be a useful strategy for teachers to help learners to reprocess their output, thus helping them develop their interlanguage (SWAIN, 1995).[1]

In order to investigate how Brazilian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' grammatical mistakes are corrected, two classrooms of pre-intermediate EFL learners were observed. The teacher was the same in both groups, an aspect that was helpful to verify whether she was consistent in using the same error correction categories in the two settings.

Thus, this study was carried out with three main purposes: (1) to list the corrective feedback categories the teacher used, (2) to examine whether she used the same categories in both groups, and (3) to investigate the learners' response and beliefs about error correction. These findings can highly contribute to the research on feedback from the learners' perspective, since most of the studies focus on the teachers' techniques and the learners' response to feedback, giving little emphasis to the learners' beliefs about error correction.

This article is divided into five sections. The second section reviews the literature that gives support to this study: negotiation of form (LYSTER, 1998; ROBERTS, 1995), collective scaffolding in second language learning and the sociocultural perspectives of teacher-learner interaction (ADAIR-HAUK & DONATO, 1994; ANTÓN, 1999; DONATO & ADAIR-HAUCK, 1992; DONATO, 1994). The third section describes the procedures used to collect and analyze the data as well as some details about the participants and the teacher. The fourth section presents and discusses the results concerning the interrelation between the data collected and the theories. The fifth section presents the conclusions of the study together with its limitations and suggestions for further research.

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[1] Learner's transitory competence or intermediary system between the native language and the target language.

Review of Literature

As Hammond (1995) has pointed out, with the decline of the audiolingual method in the 1960s and 1970s and the popularity of communicative language teaching since then, less attention has been given to the production of accurate output by EFL learners. The focus in EFL classes shifted, in the 1970s, to the ability to communicate, and form was believed to be acquired through learners' constant exposure to comprehensible input (KRASHEN, 1983). However, the attitude of encouraging learners' communication and ignoring their local mistakes (grammatical or phonological errors that do not cause communication problems) in order not to inhibit fluency has generated some reflection regarding learners' intelligibility.

According to Lyster (1998), young second language (L2) learners may not easily notice target-nontarget mismatches in the interactional input. In order to call the learners' attention to these mismatches, teachers should provide some signals (metalinguistic clues or elicitation) to facilitate peer- and self-correction, which results in more attention to the analysis of target-nontarget mismatches than does the repetition of a teacher's recast or explicit correction. Lyster claims that different feedback types have differential effects on learning and result in different degrees of attention. As a result of his study on the various kinds of recasts used by teachers in content-based classrooms, he concluded that learners were not able to notice the majority of recasts as negative evidence, since teachers used recasts following either ill-formed or well-formed learner responses. Lyster highlights that several other studies have revealed that, for corrective feedback to be effective, explicit signals were employed.

Roberts (1995) and Lyster (1998) analyzed teacher correction types into the following categories: (1) explicit correction, when teachers supply the correct form, indicating that the learner's utterance is incorrect; (2) recasts, when teachers reformulate all or part of the student's utterance; (3) elicitation, when teachers elicit a reformulation; (4) metalinguistic clues, when teachers provide comments or any information related to the accuracy of the learner's sentence; (5) clarification requests, when teachers ask learners to repeat their utterance; (6) repetition, when teachers repeat the learners' ill-formed utterance, using intonation to highlight the error; and (7) cue, when teachers cue learners to repeat their utterances.

Roberts' (1995) findings corroborate those of Lyster (1998), since the former also concluded that learners are only aware of corrective activity in the classroom in limited instances and even when they are, they may not understand the nature of the error in many occasions. Lyster also found that the teachers he investigated tended to select feedback types according to error types. He noticed that recasts were preferred after grammatical and phonological errors, while negotiation of form was the usual strategy for correcting lexical errors. Another relevant finding was that teachers were less tolerant with lexical errors, whereas grammatical errors were repaired at a lower rate.

Antón (1999) and Adair-Hauck and Donato (1994), who follow the sociocultural approach, suggest that teachers explain grammatical structures by scaffolding learners in the foreign language classroom. According to Donato (1994), the metaphor of "scaffolding" derives from cognitive psychology and L1 research. He claims that in social interaction a more proficient learner can create supportive conditions to help a less proficient learner, by means of speech, to participate in and extend his current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence (p. 40). Donato (1994) and Antón (1999) suggest (based on WOOD, BRUNER & ROSS, 1976) six features used by teachers when they scaffold learners: 1) recruiting interest in the task; 2) simplifying the task; 3) maintaining pursuit of the goal; 4) marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal of the solution; 5) controlling frustration during problem solving, and 6) demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed. Points 4, 5 and 6 are completely related to feedback, since the correction of mistakes can create a collaborative effort involving not only the teacher and the learner, but the whole class. Through dialog the teacher can shift the authority and control of the activity of providing feedback to the class, which is likely to result in a challenging, but supportive environment for learning.

This dialogic relationship is defined by Donato and Adair-Hauck (1992) as "proleptic instruction", a powerful kind of formal instruction in collaboration and negotiation with students. Along with proleptic activities, learners are challenged to re-create each other's perspective on the issue to be studied and on the tasks demanded. Thus, if proleptic instruction suggests that explanation is embodied in a discursive negotiation between teacher and learners, the term can also be used to understand how the teacher provides feedback in a dialogic way,

since proleptic instruction can lead learners to develop their individual linguistic awareness, which facilitate their conscious reflection about the errors they make.

In the following section, both the method adopted to observe how feedback was given in EFL classes, as well as how the students view correction are presented.

Procedure

The following data come from observation of two groups of pre-intermediate Brazilian EFL learners, enrolled in levels 2 and 3 of the Extracurricular course at the *Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina* (UFSC). In level 2, there were 13 participants, 4 women and 9 men, ages 16-31, and in level 3, there were 18 participants, 8 women and 10 men, ages 18-24. The material adopted by the Extracurricular course is the New Interchange series, by Jack Richards. In level 2, three lessons of Book 1 were covered (14-16) during the data collection, and in level 3, only two lessons from Book 2 (7 and 8) were covered at the same period. The teacher analyzed was an M.A. student at the *Pós-Graduação em Inglês-UFSC* at the time of the study. The teacher was familiar with the theories on which this study was based.

Besides note-taking, five ninety-minute classes of each level were recorded, totaling 15 hours. Only the eighty-three instances containing error correction of grammatical mistakes were transcribed. At the end of the observation period, students were asked to answer a brief questionnaire related to their beliefs about error correction and their assessment of the teachers' performance when providing feedback.

In order not to influence the findings, only the teacher was aware of this researcher's identity, but she did not know the real focus of the investigation. The learners believed that the researcher was only one more student in their environment, a strategy chosen not to inhibit their production.

The following section shows the results of the analysis, describing the strategies used to correct the learners' grammar mistakes, and also the students' beliefs about error correction.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of transcriptions

The results of this section are based on Lyster's (1998) and Roberts' (1995) categories of corrective feedback types in response to learner errors. These categories were analyzed from a sociocultural perspective in order to understand the importance of scaffolding (DONATO, 1994) as a way to make the learners interact and provide them with conditions to develop their skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence. The categories are reported in the following sub-sections.

Explicit correction

As already defined, explicit correction is a way through which the teacher can supply the correct form of an item, indicating the inaccuracy of a learner's utterance. This was the most frequently used strategy in the two groups.

Example:

S7: May I ask you a question? Correct me if I make a mistake.
T: Uh-hu.
S7: You, you can, uh, go in shopping center, uh, at, in, Saturday night to + drink beer, teacher?
T: Oh, yes, I can. OK. You asked me to correct you, OK? So, you, you said, "You can", OK? It's better if you say, "Would you like?" for invitation, OK? Right?

As can be observed, the teacher is worried about the learners' comprehension of what has been explicitly corrected. She gives an immediate correction followed by an explanation about the reason why the learner's utterance was considered a mistake. This example also portrays the learner's willingness to be corrected (*Correct me if I make a mistake.*) and the teacher is able to explicitly correct the problem by suggesting a better way to reformulate his utterance, besides asking for his confirmation to check whether the correction has really been understood.

Recast

This feedback category was frequently used by the teacher and, as stated by Lyster (1998), it is the least effective one. Since recasts are

mere reformulations of the learners' utterances, they might not be noticed in the majority of times. The following example illustrates the learners' reaction to recasts.

T: What's a computer for? + What's a computer used for?
S5: Play games.
T: Play games? OK. It's used for *playing* games, OK.
S2: To type the texts.

As can be observed, when recasting grammatical features, the teacher tends not to encourage the learners to reprocess their output. She simply reformulates the sentence in order not to break the flow of the conversation, controlling frustration when solving a problem.

Elicitation

The teacher analyzed adopts a proleptic kind of instruction, encouraging collaboration and negotiation in the classroom. Elicitation was the second most frequently used strategy, which shows she is likely to facilitate the learners' conscious reflection about the errors they make. In the following example, it is possible to visualize her concern with offering students different ways to interact in order for them to develop their linguistic awareness.

S3: I went to the beach, I stayed in my house, I played games and I sleeped.
T: I…
S3: I sleeped.
T: Remember …?
S2: Slept.
S3: I slept.
T: Good. Very good. OK.

When the teacher uses elicitation to help her learners to notice their mistakes, she tends to give them some time to reflect on where the error might be, encouraging them for self-repairing their utterances. In most instances, she gives them encouraging feedback, defined by Tsui (1995, p. 43) as a way to value every contribution in order to motivate learners to learn and participate in class. When the learner is not able to self-repair his sentence, the teacher adopts three procedures: she encourages the group to solve the mismatch, she naturally allows

enough time for the other learners to reflect on the error resulting in spontaneous peer-correction, and when elicitation does not help the learner to notice how the sentence can be repaired, she explicitly corrects the mistake. The last procedure, however, is adopted only in the level 2 group, probably because at this level learners are still beginning to develop their grammatical competence.

Metalinguistic clues

Since the classes observed are based on the communicative approach, metalinguistic clues were rarely used. The teacher does explain grammar when difficulties or questions arise, however she tends not to use metalanguage.

S12: Tell him to bring the tickets to the hockey game tonight.
T: OK. It is a request. You have to see if it is a statement or a request. Do you understand statement and request?
S9: Yes.
T: Can you explain, Luis?
S9: In English or in Portuguese?
T: You decide it.
S9: Statement é uma frase e request é um pedido.

This example clearly shows how collective scaffolding is usually present during the explanation of new items or during the correction of exercises. In this instance, one student is asked to explain the difference between statements and requests. Again, the teacher gives the learner the responsibility to help his peers to understand a confusing item. This attitude of allowing the learners' participation in the explanation of difficult items is a notorious example of how interaction can be effective to negotiate form and motivate learners to reflect on the target-nontarget linguistic mismatches.

Clarification request

The use of this strategy was very infrequent, but by asking the learners to repeat their utterances the teacher is contributing to the learners' noticing that something is inaccurate in their speech. What could be observed is that clarification requests are generally accompanied by facial expressions or body gestures and, in most cases, the teacher

approaches the learner who made the mistake in order to be closer to him and scaffold him more naturally and efficiently.

S7: He invites she.
T: What's the sentence? (Facial expression showing it is incorrect.)
S7: He invites…
T: ++ He invites + her. OK, uh, in this case, "her" is at the end of the sentence, but…
S8: After the verb?
T: Yes. Exactly. Because + it is after a verb. Right. Only for you to remember that, right? OK. So let's continue. What else did they talk about Halloween?

Clarification requests result in self-repair as well as in peer-correction, as can be seen in this example. In all the instances of clarification requests the teacher asks the learners to repeat their utterance twice or three times. This asking for several repetitions might be explained as the strategy selected to help the learners notice more complex kinds of errors. In this example, however, besides correcting, she gives them some explanation about how to properly use the object pronoun "her", a grammatical point which generally confuses beginners.

Repetition

The teacher observed rarely used repetition as a strategy to make the learners notice their mistakes. The only example found in the data collected was when the teacher repeats the learner's mistake, using intonation to highlight the error. As a result, the learner is able to self-repair his utterance and the teacher repeats the correct sentence, providing him with encouraging feedback.

Cue

In order to cue the learners to repeat their ill-formed utterances, the teacher always made use of gestures. In all the instances when cueing was used, the teacher was correcting the conjugation of a verb that should be in the past tense. The explicit signals helped the learners to notice that the cues were negative evidence, which resulted in their reprocessing of output.

Analysis of the questionnaire

With the aim of investigating the learners' beliefs about error correction and their satisfaction regarding the way the teacher corrects them, a brief questionnaire containing seven questions with three possible answers (totally agree, partially agree, disagree) was given to the learners.

The first question was: (1) "When there is a significant number of new information (vocabulary, grammar), I prefer to learn things little by little instead of dealing with much information at once." The great majority of the learners (69% in level 2 and 72% in level 3) totally agree with learning lexical-grammatical items gradually, which shows their interest in form, since they are willing to understand specific aspects of the language and not only the context as a whole. The second question, (2) "I like to try to use new words and structures, even though I am not completely sure whether they are accurate or not" portrays more balanced results. However, most of the learners (46% in level 2 and 76% in level 3) partially agree with the idea of using new information without completely mastering the accurate use of words or structures. These results confirm the learners' interest in the accurate use of the language.

The next question shows the learners' partial interest in speaking fluently, without any correction. Most of the answers to question (3) "I like those exercises that must be done in pairs, because the teacher does not correct me all the time and I feel free to speak" were "I partially agree" (46% in level 2 and 50% in level 3), which indicates that there are some instances when the learners prefer to receive some kind of feedback, whereas in others they just intend to communicate without paying much attention to form. The next question (4) "I constantly monitor myself when I speak in order not to make mistakes" is strongly related to question number (3), and the answers differed a little in the two groups. Most of the learners in level 2 (46%) partially monitor themselves when speaking, while 50% of the learners in level 3 prefer to monitor their utterances in order to speak accurately. In the present study, the results show that the more advanced the learners, the more worried about accuracy they become. In order to confirm the previous result, question (5) "I feel terrible when I make a mistake, because this shows how much my performance still needs to be improved" shows that, although the learners try to be accurate, the great majority of them (76% in level 2 and 94% in level 3) prefer to use their mistakes to

improve their linguistic skills, which means that they do want to focus on form when speaking.

Question number (6) "I appreciate when the teacher immediately corrects me, because then I am sure I'm not learning anything incorrectly" portrays the learners' belief about corrective feedback in communicative settings: although communication is the main goal, the absolute majority of the learners (92% in level 2 and 94% in level 3) worries about accuracy, approving the teacher's correction. This can be further observed in the results of the last question (7) "I am pleased with the way grammatical correction is done, since I feel to be learning from it." Again, the majority of the learners (61% in level 2 and 72% in level 3) appreciate the interactive environment the teacher provides.

Conclusion

Although this study was limited to the observation of the performance of only one EFL teacher, results allowed the analysis of the different feedback category types used by the teacher in a communicative setting.

As stated by Chaudron (1988, in LYSTER 1998), there is a diversity of responses given by the teacher that can serve several functions of either positive or negative nature (correcting, agreeing, appreciating, etc.), thus "leading to a problem for L2 learners for whom the modification may be imperceptible, or perceived as merely an alternative" (p. 188). In most instances of this study, the teacher tried to be sure her students noticed her correction, a valuable skill that needs to be highlighted.

Concerning the first objective of this study, to list the corrective feedback categories used, it was possible to observe that the teacher used the seven category types listed in the Review of Literature section. Her ability to use them spontaneously resulted in the learners' great interaction and motivation in the classroom. In relation to the second objective, to examine whether the teacher used the same categories in both groups, the findings showed that she was consistent and used the same feedback types to give negative evidence to both levels. The findings concerning the third objective, to investigate the learners' response and beliefs about error correction, give more evidence to the good teacher-learner relationship, and, as a consequence, the profitable interaction between them. Most of the learners reacted to correction consciously,

appreciated correction and considered it important for the development of their linguistic competence. Their answers also revealed that they approved the way their teacher corrected their grammar mistakes.

This study was limited to the analysis of feedback to grammatical items. Further research should investigate the feedback category types and learners' beliefs about phonological and lexical mistakes. Moreover, several teachers who work within the communicative approach should be analyzed, in order to find out whether or how they focus on form in their classes. As already stated, the teacher observed in this study is aware of the sociocultural theories presented in this article. A different investigation could analyze whether a teacher who has not studied these theories would intuitively behave the same way.

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