HANDLING ORAL ERROR FEEDBACK IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Good oral error feedback strategies can boost student motivation, advance language learning, and increase student perception of instructional effectiveness, but the oral error feedback literature offers a confusing picture of what is appropriate feedback. Many teachers have heard that recasts, a type of feedback that involves reformulating the student's error into the correct form, is an appropriate approach, especially because it may avoid increasing student anxiety. Other teachers have probably heard that recasts are not effective and that pushing students to self-correct is a more appropriate technique. In fact, the research literature on oral error feedback has advocated both perspectives, and some writers have even advocated against providing error feedback altogether. This paper looks at four error feedback interactions from class observations in an EFL context to highlight issues that may help teachers make appropriate decisions for handling errors in their classrooms. These feedback interactions come from the author's doctoral research (Margolis, 2007). The paper first examines the nature of errors and feedback in the classroom, then identifies key decision points in error feedback interactions, and finally suggests a framework for evaluating oral error feedback effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

A good strategy for handling oral error feedback can boost student motivation, build confidence, and create a satisfying learning experience. The nature of such an oral error feedback strategy, however, remains unclear and even controversial. Some researchers suggest that teachers should not correct student errors. Truscott (1999), for example, has presented a detailed case against giving oral error feedback on grammar, suggesting that the risks are not worth the potential rewards. He cites several teacher and student obstacles to effective oral error feedback, including ability to unambiguously identify the error, correctly assess the intended meaning, and appropriately address the error within the context of other pressing lesson concerns, to name a few. Studies offering data to support these contentions include Allwright (1975), Fanselow (1977), and Hendrickson (1978), among others. Moreover, DeKeyser (1993) found no main effects in a year long comparison study between a class receiving regular error feedback with one not receiving it. Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada (1999), however, reject Truscott's reasoning, and passionately present a case supporting the provision of error feedback, believing that students do benefit from it. In fact, surveys seeking student preferences about error feedback, consistently report a desire for it--not unanimous, but high majorities. Table 1, below, from Margolis (2007), summarizes nine such studies that taken together surveyed over 3000 students in six different countries studying English and other foreign languages. Of all the findings in the oral error feedback literature, the fact that large majorities of students express a desire for receiving feedback is arguably the most stable and trustworthy.

Expressing a preference for error feedback on a survey, however, is not the same as receiving or acting upon feedback provided for errors. When researchers put students to this test, giving them oral feedback, their desire for it somewhat dissipates. Yao (2000), for example, found that students did not always like the feedback they received. Cathcart and Olsen (1976) found students becoming so overwhelmed by the feedback that they changed their original

Table 1. Error Feedback Preference Studies, from Margolis (2007, p. 29)

Investigators	Focus	Subjects	Approach	Findings
Cathcart & Olsen (1976)	Learner EF preferences for the classroom	149 adult ESL students	Survey about classroom EF preferences	Learners strongly desire EF
Chenoweth, Day, Chun, & Luppescu (1983)	Preferences for EF in NS-NNS conversations	400 adult ESL students	Survey EF preferences for interactions with NS friends	Strong preference for more EF in social encounters
Oladejo (1993)	Alignment of learner preferences with teacher practices	500 EFL Ss at the National University of Singapore	Survey based on Hendrickson's (1978) 5 questions	Consistent with prior research, strong preference for EF
Schulze (1996)	Differences between T & Ss beliefs across different L2s	824 Ss + 92 T Of multiple FL courses at U of Arizona	Study included observation and a survey of Ss preferences	Ss: favored FonF regardless of TL but T beliefs were not aligned
Musayeva (1998)	Create a "corrective profile" of Ts to compare against Ss preferences	2 Teachers with 2 EFL classes each, 74 Ss in university prep class in Turkey	Observed classes per Chaudron's (1977) model; interviewed Ts; surveyed Ss	Found small amount of parity between EF practices and EF preferences
Yao (2000)	Learner view of EF, preferences, & alignment w/ Teacher practices	18 1st & 2nd year undergraduates (3 per class—6 diff. classes) ESL	Observed 24 hours of classes (4hrs per T); interviewed Ss for preferences	Learners regarded EF as necessary, but did not always like it
Schulze (2001)	Compare Colombian students & teachers with the 1996 study's data	607 Ss + 122 Ts from language classes at univ. in Colombia, plus 824 Ss & 92 Ts from 1996	Survey	Ss & Ts from both cultures, all L1s/L2s, had similar attitudes as Schulze (1996), above
H.J. Lee, (2004)	Proficiency level effects on learner preferences and teacher practices	280 EFL university students in Korea & 31 English NS Teachers	2 studies, 1 survey of EF preferences; the 2nd journal & interview data on 2 teachers	Ss wanted more EF; Ts feared providing too much. High & low proficiency Ss answered similarly

EF=Error Feedback, NS=native speakers, Ss=students, Ts=Teachers

favorable attitudes. Finally, for the error preference studies that included teacher opinions (see for example, H.J. Lee, 2004; Musayeva, 1998; Schulze, 1996, 2001) a predilection to avoid giving oral error feedback was found. Teachers worried about silencing students and creating too much anxiety. The findings regarding teachers are almost as consistent as those regarding student preferences, suggesting that teachers have legitimate concerns, from experience, that justify caution when deciding whether or not to give feedback. In fact, for many teachers, perhaps

all, the decision to give feedback is far from simple. It greatly depends on the error, context, student, available class time, lesson plan factors, and other considerations.

In light of the various issues that teachers must consider when contemplating oral error feedback, suggestions in the literature advocating for a particular feedback type over another (for example, Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), seem frustratingly unhelpful. These studies put forth an argument for error correction, of a particular type, without consideration of the errors, student, lesson plan, or other factors. One might argue that basic research needs to first establish a causal relationship before these other factors can be considered; but if the real classroom variables that teachers must cope with are not factored into these studies, how can we ever be confident that their findings generalize back to classroom pedagogy? This paper suggests we cannot. Through analyzing specific error feedback interactions in actual classroom contexts, this paper raises questions about oral error feedback research methodology and endeavors to help teachers better recognize options available for maximizing the effectiveness of their feedback. After first examining four error feedback interactions from Margolis' (2007) doctoral research[1], we then consider specific attributes of oral error feedback interactions that offer teachers choices for calibrating feedback to the unique context. Finally, the paper suggests how teachers might evaluate the effectiveness of their feedback strategies.

ORAL ERROR FEEDBACK INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Oral error feedback interactions have been investigated in many studies (see for example, Chaudron, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Sheen, 2004). A common research design in these investigations follows the corrective discourse model developed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). Their study considers error feedback to be a speech act entailing three moves: (a) the error, (b) feedback, and (c) optional uptake. The error is an "ill-formed utterance" (p. 45). Feedback is classified into one of six different types--(a) explicit correction, (b) recast, (c) clarification requests, (d) metalinguistic feedback, (e) elicitation, and (f) repetition. Uptake in their model "refers to a student's utterance that *immediately follows* the teacher's feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance" (emphasis added, p. 49). This approach is then largely employed to investigate whether particular feedback types are better than others (i.e., Lee, 2006; Mori, 2002; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2004; Suzuki, 2004; and Tsang, 2004). Two consistent findings from these studies, for example, are that (a) recast feedback is generally the most frequently deployed type, and (b) elicitation feedback is generally more effective at producing uptake.

These studies, however, are not without their critics. Long (2006), for instance, has taken to task the concept of "uptake," arguing that the Lyster and Ranta (1997) approach includes almost anything as uptake, even wrong responses to the feedback. Ohta (2000), moreover, complains that the Lyster and Ranta (1997) model does not take into account the positive effects of feedback on peer auditors. Hauser (2005) challenges the definition of recasts, suggesting that rather than reformulating the student's intended message, teachers might in fact be co-constructing the message with the learner. This paper also challenges the Lyster and Ranta (1997) approach on two new levels: (a) first, their definition and handling of errors; (b) second, their characterization of the whole error treatment sequence in terms of the feedback type. Regarding the first issue, even Lyster and Ranta (1997: p. 51) acknowledge that "the effect of error type on feedback type is an important variable," but put off this analysis to a

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1 These error feedback episodes come from a total database of 203 episodes obtained from observations of 12 class sessions of three courses taught by three different instructors. The context was EFL with Korean L1 learners. See Margolis (2007) for more details.

future study. As for characterizing the error feedback interactions by feedback types, they are suggesting that all recasts, elicitations, repetitions, and etc. represent the same general features from one error treatment sequence to the next. Put another way, the context, the participants, and prior attention to the error issue have no relevance to the nature of the feedback. Perhaps so, but if this view is wrong, then researchers may be clumping together groups of error feedback interactions that are no more similar to each other than a dog to a zebra or a fish. Let us first look at the error issue and return to this zebra one below.

Researchers have classified errors in many ways. Margolis (2007) found fourteen systems for classifying errors in the literature and grouped them into three categories. One group categorizes errors in terms of the error source, which may include developmental factors, L1 interference, grammatical or phonological language features, processing limitations, and the like. Labeling errors as "interlingual" and "intralingual" (Tomasello & Herron, 1989), or "phonological," "syntactical," and "pragmatic" (Chaudron, 1988), are examples of these taxonomies. A second group categorizes based on the effect of the error, such as whether the listener comprehends the message, the error causes the learner to be stigmatized, or if the error is even noticed. Examples include Corder's (1967) "covert" and "overt" distinction and Burt and Kiparsky's (1974) "global" and "local." A third category of classification includes errors based on pedagogical concerns: "high frequency" versus "low frequency" (Hendrickson, 1978), "treatable" versus "fossilized" (Cowan, Choi, & Kim, 2003), or even, "on-topic" versus "off-topic."

This complexification of errors in the language classroom is necessary for understanding the amazingly diverse universe of error possibilities in any given language context. In other words, to compare error feedback types without consideration of error feature differences may completely distort the reality of how feedback functions in classroom contexts. In fact, Coggins (2008) investigated teacher attitudes toward different types of errors and found that decisions to correct errors and ratings regarding the urgency of error correction greatly depended on error type and context. Moreover, many of his teachers suggested that the history between a student and teacher in regards to an error is an important factor when considering provision of feedback. Recognizing then that not all errors are equal, the problem of determining which distinctions are important in error feedback research remains, not to mention the concomitant issue of coding errors reliably.

If researchers are ever to be able to understand oral error feedback in language learning classrooms, they must account for the potential effects caused by different error types. To illustrate this point and raise additional issues regarding oral error feedback interaction, consider the following transcript from an EFL classes observed by Margolis (2007).

Extract 1. Recast – Next-Turn Feedback (Margolis, 2007, p. 112)
1. Byunggu[2]: I want to say I like *that* blue jeans and--
2. Teacher: Those.
3. Byunggu: So I should say, 'I like those…'
4. Teacher: Yeah.
   [Four turns, 6 seconds]

Extract 1 resembles the typical error feedback interaction depicted in many research articles. Turn 1 contains an error, a singular demonstrative where the plural is required. Turn 2 is the teacher's feedback. In this case, the teacher has provided a recast of the erroneous part, clearly isolating the problem and briefly drawing the student's attention to form (cf., Long & Robinson, 1998). In Turn 3, the student provides clear uptake, demonstrating understanding that (a) an error

2 All names are pseudonyms.

was made, (b) the precise nature of the error, that is, the demonstrative form, and (c) recognition of the gap between his interlanguage and the correct form. Then the teacher reinforces the feedback and ends the episode. This interaction perfectly fits the "error treatment sequence" model envisioned by Lyster and Ranta (1997: p. 44). The teacher appears to have successfully addressed this student's grammatical error in only six seconds--a very efficient use of class time. In this interaction, the particular error hardly seems to matter at all. Margolis (2007), however, found that this type of error feedback interaction might only account for half of the error feedback interactions in language learning classrooms. Consider for example, Extract 2.

Extract 2. Explicit: Non-Adjacent-Turn Error Feedback (Margolis 2007: p. 42)
  1.   Hwajin: *And I don't like skinny jeans.*
  2.   Ss: Hmmm, yeah.
  3.   Hwajin: I really want to try that on but I can't because of my
                    thick thighs and—
                    <laughter>
  4.   Minji: I agree.
                    <laughter>
  5.   Minji: I like it but I cannot wear
  6.   Hwajin: Yeah
  7.   Minji: It looks great, but
  8.   S?:   It looks—
                    <long pause>
  9.   Teacher: So really tight jeans; is that what skinny jeans means?
  10. Hwajin: Yes, yeah.
  [Ten turns, 26 seconds]

In Extract 2, the teacher is clearly giving feedback to the learner's utterance in Turn 1, but has the student made an error? If she meant to say "tight jeans," then the use of "skinny" was wrong. However, if she meant the fashion style, called "skinny jeans," she did not make an error at all. So how do error feedback researchers handle this kind of issue? The problem is that researchers could code it differently, leading to findings that vary depending on the researcher, not the data. Another issue about this feedback interaction is the number of turns between the "error" utterance and the feedback. Seven turns separate the two utterances. Feedback, of course, does not always occur in the turn immediately adjacent to an error. Classroom-situated oral error feedback researchers following the Lyster and Ranta (1997) model, however, only include feedback that immediately follows the error. Consider, for example, Lyster and Ranta's (1997) approach (also used by, J. Lee, 2006; Lochtman, 2002; Mori, 2002; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Suzuki, 2004; and Tsang, 2004):

> The sequence begins with a learner's utterance containing at least one error. The erroneous utterance is *followed either by the teacher's corrective feedback or not*; if not, then there is topic continuation. If corrective feedback is provided by the teacher, *then it is either followed by uptake on the part of the student or not*....
> (emphasis added, Lyster & Ranta, 1997: p. 45).

This perspective of error interactions, while avoiding the dilemma about skinny jeans, would completely miss the feedback provided in Turn 9. Teachers who frequently provide feedback in nonadjacent turns might even be described as giving no feedback at all, which would seriously undermine the validity of such studies and offer only confusion to second language acquisition theory and language pedagogy. Moreover, exactly what type of error feedback occurs in Turn

9? The first clause seems like a recast, but the second is prompting for a student metalinguistic response. If we call it a recast, we are equating this ten turn episode of 26 seconds duration to the four turn episode that lasted six seconds cited above. Are they the same? Do we have two zebras? Or, would it be more realistic to code one as a dog and the other a zebra? Extract 3 raises even another coding issue.

Extract 3. Long Error Feedback Interaction (Margolis, 2007: p. 98)

    (Talking about anti-social behavior in Korea)

1.	Youngsoo:	Speeding.
2.	T:	Speeding?
3.	Youngsoo:	Yes
4.	T:	That's your problem too?
5.	Youngsoo:	I think speeding makes the Seongsu Bridge, Bridges, the speeding in Korean people makes so many problems, Which is uhm Breakdown Seongsu Bridge -
6.	T:	Speeding caused the bridge to fall down? Fall down--breakdown
7.	Youngsoo:	Yes, (*Bballi Bballi*) culture.
8.	T	I don't think so, I think that was, I think that was poor construction; but maybe speeding, maybe speeding hurt it worse. How could speeding –Go fast? Its like, its better for the bridge. Its Less weight.
9.	Moonsuk:	Ahh, poor bridge.
10.	T:	Right?
11.	Minji:	Here speeding means ah go beyond the speed limit when you drive her
12.	T:	Yeah, but speeding. Your less time on the bridge.
13.	Jin:	I mean speeding, what she meant by speeding, that means doing something quickly.
14.	Minji:	Quickly. Quickly, quickly. Not speeding.
15.	Byunggu:	Ahh, not like not driving--
16.	T:	Ahhh No speeding means driving fast. Only.
17.	Youngsoo:	Only?
	<laughter>	
18.	T:	Yeah. Ahha. I see what you mean, the poor construction because they did it quickly?
19.	Youngsoo:	How can we express the 'quickly culture' in English?
20.	T:	Poor workmanship.
	<laughter>	
21.	T:	Not caring.
22.	S? & Yoonhee:	Poor workmanship.
23.	T:	Yeah, We wouldn't call it speeding. When you worry more about deadline than actual quality, so we would say Poor workmanship, or shoddy workmanship or something like that. Ahh I understand now. I thought speeding, why would that be cause for the bridge to fall down. Fast? Speeding is only vehicles.
24.	Youngsoo:	Yes
25.	T:	Sorry I misunderstood. Anything else?

    [Twenty-five turns, 67.5 seconds]

Extract 3 offers an example of a "covert error" (Corder, 1967), a learner's utterance that is not obviously incorrect. In Turn 1, for example, Youngsoo offers "speeding" as an example of a social problem in Korea. At that point, the teacher might question her opinion, as he appears to do in Turn 2, but it would be wrong to code Turn 2 as feedback to the form of what she has said. In fact, the first obvious feedback occurs in Turn 6 where the teacher has recasted the student's previous turn. The teacher's attention, however, seems to be directed at what he apparently considers a ridiculous notion--that speeding can cause a bridge to collapse. Youngsoo, in Turn 7, may have realized a problem occurred. She gives the Korean expression for what she intended to say (*Bballi Bballi*), which helps Minji and Jin in turns 11 and 13, respectively, to recognize the error and begin correcting it. The teacher then adds explicit or metalinguistic feedback in Turn 16, followed by Youngsoo's response, "Only?" Her response suggests that she now realizes that she had made an error and that her understanding of the usage of "speeding" requires narrowing its scope in her lexicon. The rest of the episode she attempts to learn how to say what she had originally intended.

Clearly Extract 3 presents problems for the coding scheme put forth by Lyster and Ranta (1997) cited above. This approach would not begin to see an error feedback sequence until Turn 5 at the earliest, and it would be over at Turn 7. They would then need to code a second, unrelated error sequence around Turns 14-17. The problem, however, is that both error sequences are related and part of this twenty-five turn exchange. To pull these internal interactions out of the whole distorts the feedback reality. Moreover, this sequence demonstrates how several people can be involved in providing the feedback, not just a teacher. Plus, the recast within this episode could hardly be equated with the recast of Extract 1. In this case, the error is connected to a whole fabric of meaning the student is attempting to articulate; the student responds to the feedback, but her response is a fundamental re-evaluation of her original, covert error, not the error in the preceding turn of the feedback. Calling the two interactions, "recasts," gives about as much helpful information as calling a kangaroo and a zebra animals. Too much information is lost. Labeling both "recasts" distorts the nature of the error feedback interactions and undermines the analysis. In other words, labeling the interaction by a feedback type fails to project the essential elements that allow for valid comparison of different error feedback interactions.

Even when the error feedback interaction is between the teacher and one student, the nature of the dialogue may differ dramatically from the picture painted by the research literature. For example, in Extract 4, the student appears to reject the teacher's feedback and challenge the teacher's credibility.

Extract 4[3]. Legitimacy Challenge (Margolis, 2007: p. 140)

1. Eunjin: It's a round shape and there is a back, there are two
                long r- r- Long what? Long ru--
2. Teacher: Ribbons? Ribbon?
3. Eunjin & S?: Not ribbons, just the stripe, it's cloth.
4. Teacher: Ribbon is cloth.
5. Eunjin: Yeah, but ribbon make shape
6. Teacher: No.
7. Eunjin: but there's no shape.
8. Teacher: No. Ribbons doesn't make shape, ribbon
9. Eunjin: Ok, ok. That's long ribbon. And (cxxxd) goes to the
                left and my daughter doesn't have hair a lot

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3 Describing a Korean *Ion*, during an impromptu speech.

10. Teacher: Uhh.
11. Eunjin: So she must wear that one. If I put, take off, that *Ion*
                 and everyone will say why didn't you put (xxxxx) if
                 she wears *Ion* then she looks like woman.
        [Ten turns, 49 seconds]

Eunjin is attempting to describe a Korean type of hat, but she is stuck on the word "ribbon," which in Korean codified English (cf., Shim, 1999) usually refers to a bow. In Turn 3, she rejects the teacher's assistance and makes the covert error visible. Turn 4 is teacher provided error feedback and Turn 6 is the teacher's rejection of the student's misunderstanding. Turn 5 and 7, however, expresses the student's challenge to the teacher's credibility. She refuses to believe that the teacher understands what she intends. At Turn 9, she becomes impatient with the teacher and partially accepts the error feedback, but still marginalizes or discredits it. A student challenging the teacher's credibility probably does not surprise many instructors, but error feedback researchers have not addressed the issue and its implications for feedback. Should the student's rejection of the feedback be called "uptake"? Certainly, the student has noticed the feedback. The error feedback challenged her inner criterion of correctness and, perhaps, made an impact on her interlanguage system. She just as likely diminished her respect for the teacher and refused to accept his correction.

In sum, these four oral error feedback episodes demonstrate (a) that errors are not all equal in terms of their visibility, (b) that labeling an utterance an error itself could be controversial, (c) that error feedback sometimes may be inextricable from larger contexts, and (d) that the impact, or efficacy, of feedback may depend on characteristics of the error, such as whether students have previously received reinforcement for an erroneous form, as much as, or more so, than the category of feedback type. Thus, it is important to recognize that different error types may demand different degrees of attention and require a different combination of feedback attributes. For example, if a teacher meets resistance to feedback, it may require gathering additional evidentiary support to convince the learner about the correct form. This support could come from the internet, peers, or a fellow teacher. These oral error feedback episodes also suggest that error feedback can be more than an interaction between a teacher and one student. In short, classroom-situated oral error feedback can be a lot messier than the recent research literature suggests. If so, then teachers need guidance from other quarters about how to address learner errors.

FEEDBACK DECISIONS

Reading the error feedback research literature, the decisions that teachers must make regarding provision of oral feedback appear quite simple: (a) do it or not, and (b) choose a type of feedback: recast, prompt, meta-linguistic, or the like. Unfortunately, as most teachers realize, the process is much more complicated. The interaction transcripts above demonstrate that teachers need to consider a number of factors, including the nature of the error, the student, and the potential objectives for providing feedback. Timing of feedback is another critical consideration. Should teachers interrupt the student to correct the error in the most immediately adjacent turn possible, even if this makes the feedback obtrusive and possibly annoying? Or should teachers withhold feedback until the student has finished the utterance, risking the student forgetting factors contributing to the error? The answers to these questions remain for future researchers to determine. However, the answers will depend upon the objectives the teacher holds when deciding to give feedback. For example, within a behaviorist framework, errors must be avoided or else students might develop

bad habits that could be fossilized. This perspective motivated teachers of the Audiolingual Method to limit student talk and strive to correct every error. Teachers influenced by a Communicative Approach, however, in order to promote student talk and reduce anxiety, emphasize that mistakes are OK and limit error correction. Still, there are many possible objectives one might have when providing feedback. Some teachers aim for the student to master the correct form, and may repeatedly require a student to produce the form until perfect, or the teacher wearies from the effort. Alternatively, teachers may set a more modest objective, such as noticing the correct form, or noticing the gap between the correct form and the student's interlanguage (Schmidt, 1986). Other teachers might aim to provide scaffolding or develop the learner's internal criterion of correctness. To each of these potential objectives a different set of feedback behaviors might be appropriate. Moreover, each objective requires its own unique ways for evaluating the effectiveness of the feedback. One size does not fit all.

Admitting that feedback efficacy is dependent on the nature of the error and instructor objectives, means that researchers and teachers need to think about and analyze oral error feedback, not as one-move feedback types, such as recasts and prompts. Rather, a more sophisticated approach is needed that considers the various attributes that the feedback should possess to achieve one's objectives (cf., Allwright, 1975; Chaudron, 1988). Figure 1, below, attempts to move beyond the feedback type discourse and imagines the feedback interaction as a series of decisions that taken together infuse feedback with a variety of attributes. These decisions occur on a time continuum, allowing feedback to occur immediately in the turn following the error or at some delayed time period. There is also an attribute continuum regarding the implicit versus explicitness of the feedback: the more teachers choose to include in the feedback interaction, the more explicit the feedback. Once the decision to provide feedback is made, the remaining decisions are not dependent on one another. That is, if teachers choose not to identify the error, or the fact that an error has been made, a repair is still possible, but it would be implicit, such as a recast, or a comprehension check. It is even conceivable that a teacher forgo identifying and repairing the error, and yet in a later class follows-up with discussion of the form, or gives an assignment that requires students to use the form. Thus, a recast could be more or less explicit depending on whether: (a) the error is identified, (b) the repair process is noticed as such, and (c) the feedback interaction is supported with a follow-up activity. Depending on a teacher's decision at each of these points, oral error feedback interactions could vary in at least six attributes or more.

The decision to identify the error, for example, yields at least two important attributes to an error feedback interaction. One is the identity of the error, which may be specifically pinpointed or left for the students to determine on their own. A second attribute is whether or not the feedback interaction explicitly identifies the fact that an error was made. Recasts, for instance, typically provide students a model of the correct form in a turn adjacent to their ill-formed utterance, and yet may offer no evidence that an error was committed. In fact, the usual complaints about recasts, that they are ambiguous or difficult for learners to recognize as feedback (i.e., Lyster, 1998; Lyster and Ranta, 1997) arise because the identification of the error may not be an attribute of the interaction. Doughty and Varela (1998), considering this attribute important, designed recasts in their study that clearly identified the errors. There are two factors to consider regarding error identity: (a) alerting students that an error was made, and (b) drawing their attention to the exact nature of the error. The more that teachers focus on doing this identification, the more students will notice the error feedback, and the more explicit the feedback becomes. Explicit versus implicit feedback is an area that has attracted much research interest (for an overview, see Ellis, et al, 2006). The

typical feedback type approach, however, has unfortunately obscured inquiry in this area. For example, researchers tend to interpret recasts as implicit feedback and take prompts or elicitations for explicit, regardless of how teachers handle the error identification attribute, not to mention the support issues. Consequently, the recasts of Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study and those of Doughty and Varela's (1998) research are not the same thing at all. As a result, one must be very careful when reading the error feedback literature because it is difficult to know the true characteristics of error feedback categorized into convenient, but untrustworthy, types. Regardless of the research issue, the important takeaway is that teachers can increase and decrease explicitness via the identification attribute in feedback interactions, and by the other choices they make.
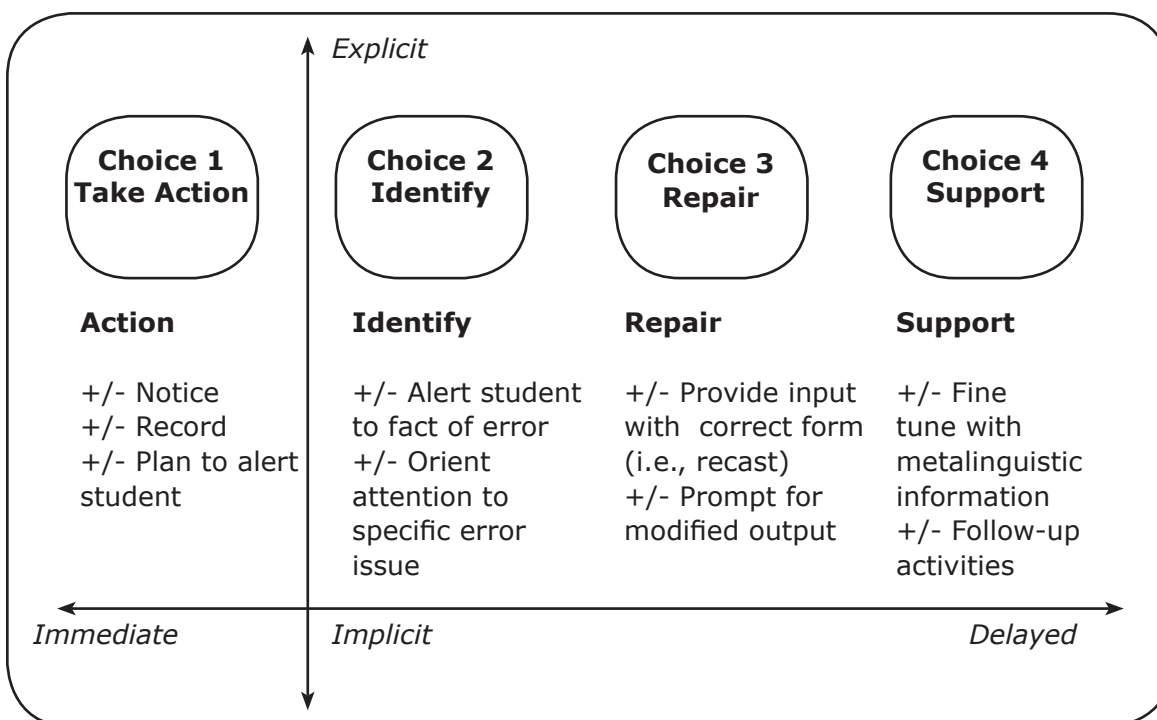

Figure 1. Error Feedback Attributes Model

The main benefit of this attributes model is that it highlights choices available to teachers that allow them to customize feedback for the specific needs of the learner. For students who demonstrate a great degree of anxiety and discomfort about oral error feedback, for instance, teachers might provide recasts or prompts with little or no identification of the error. While for students who possess confidence, teachers might more boldly identify the fact an error was committed and, possibly, the specific nature of the error.

The power of considering feedback from an attributes model rather than a feedback type approach comes in the recognition of more decision points for tailoring oral error feedback to individual learner needs. After dispensing with the identification issue, teachers can focus on repair. Repairs, like the identification attribute, include at least two options: (a) providing input, or a correct model, and (b) requiring student modified output, or production. As with the identification attribute, the teacher could use neither, one, or both. If repair is undertaken, the goal is to fix the form, which students may or may not explicitly notice. Recasts are the quintessential example of how teacher provide repair with input. Prompting students to modify their utterance, with confirmation checks, comprehension questions, or via repeti-

tion is an alternative to recasts. Teachers sometimes use both techniques in the same error feedback interaction (Margolis, 2007).

The final decision points in this Error Feedback Attributes Model regard providing support for the learning that potentially occurred during the feedback interaction. This support could be seen as schema building, that is, helping learners connect the new information to what they already know. One way is through fine-tuning (Doughty, 1993; Han, 2001), explaining, for example, that modals never take tense and do not act like other verbs. Follow-up activities, such as error feedback logs or revisiting an error at a later time might also support student learning.

These three decision points offer opportunities to teachers, opening error feedback interactions to a variety of unique attributes, avoiding the one size fits all limitations of feedback type models. The model also recognizes that time itself is an important attribute to consider. Feedback can be immediate or delayed. It can also be a brief interaction or a lengthy one. Adding these attributes and three sets of decisions to the error feedback repertoire expands the ability of teachers to provide meaningful feedback to oral errors.

EVALUATING FEEDBACK EFFECTIVENESS

Researchers use post-tests or counts of learner uptake to measure the effectiveness of error feedback. These techniques, however, may be of only little use to teachers, given that curriculum goals and the moment-to-moment lesson management constraints may draw attention away from specific errors. Yet, if teachers cannot determine the efficacy of their own error feedback strategies, how can they be certain that time devoted to error feedback is not wasted?

One way to address error feedback is to discuss it with students. For higher levels, having students write or talk about good and bad language learning experiences might raise the issue. For lower levels, a checklist or survey might help discover learner attitudes toward oral error feedback. Another tried and true approach is to videotape or audiotape the class. Then, the teacher can (a) listen to it alone and make her own assessments about the feedback interactions, (b) ask a colleague to listen and discuss the feedback interactions together, and / or (c) have the students listen and comment about the interactions. Any of these approaches will help identify attributes of stronger and weaker error feedback interactions. Alternatively, keeping a record of oral error feedback interactions and the forms they addressed allows the teacher to create follow-up activities that will provide information about the feedback's efficacy. These techniques can identify qualities that make a teacher's error feedback have greater impact, but whether the error feedback in fact advances second language acquisition remains difficult to ascertain. Studies that find evidence for error feedback efficacy generally focus their feedback on a limited set of select forms, repeat the attention to these forms often, and engage students in practice that requires use of these forms.

If teachers consider ways to evaluate their own oral error feedback interactions, this attention alone is bound to lead to improvement. Keeping in mind, moreover, that feedback choices are not limited to a type, such as prompt or recast, opens many choices for teachers, including identification of the error, repair options, and support, as discussed above. The critical issue for consistent effective oral error feedback is to recognize the individual student needs at the time of the error and carefully select the feedback attributes most appropriate to the moment.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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