DECISIONS REGARDING ORAL NEGATIVE FEEDBACK REVISITED

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Abstract: Negative feedback has important pedagogical implications. Teachers need to review scientific literature to find out some help for decision making the classroom. The aim of the present manuscript is to offer a review of key issues regarding error correction in the foreign language classroom for teacher trainees, foreign language teaching practitioners and researchers. It is a documental review based on iconic papers which have been considered cornerstone on the topic as well as some recently published research. Researchers have offered possible answers to those questions, but as not all teaching contexts and students are the same, error treatment choices also vary. The decision about when to correct is closely related to how to do it. Subjective variables (e.g., affective, cognitive) are expected to be considered when selecting specific NF. Lack of sound consistent empirical data shows the need for more research to clarify remaining issues on negative feedback.

Keywords: Corrective feedback, oral errors, classroom interaction, English teachers, teacher trainees.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have tried for decades to answer important questions regarding error correction in the language classroom. Some of those questions are related to correcting students after erroneous target language productions. The ones about whether to provide learners just positive evidence or also to include negative feedback (NF) still concern foreign language teaching practitioners. Ellis (2009) claims that negative feedback is clearly a topic of importance in teacher education programs and there is growing evidence that it can play an important role in enhancing linguistic accuracy. The key problem teachers' educators still face is how to handle this complex issue.

Decades of research have been conducted to find helpful answers for teachers to make the appropriate decisions about providing NF, but much is yet to be done. Authors have conducted laboratory and classroom studies addressing the issue in different teaching and learning contexts such as foreign language (Balcarcel, 2006; Tsybina, Girilametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2006; Perdomo, 2008), second language (Oliver & Mackey, 2003); some research have included children (Oliver, 1995; Tysibina, *et al*., 2006), high school and higher education students (Perdomo, 2008). Those studies have examined negative feedback in different second and foreign language settings and methodologies ranging from documental reviews and observational studies to more complex designs.

The NF issue is so complex that it is constantly necessary to give teachers and teacher trainees more

information about it. The aim of the present manuscript is to offer a review of key issues regarding error correction in the foreign language classroom for teacher trainees, foreign language teaching practitioners and researchers who are interested on interactional feedback. The author presents, in the first place, an approach to the concept of oral negative feedback, followed by a brief exposition on the importance of negative feedback and a discussion on some questions presented some decades ago by Hendrickson (1978), but still being relevant in the language teaching context: what to correct, when and how students should be corrected as well as who should correct them, among other. The author expects the audience to find the present paper useful for rethinking about NF during oral interaction in the language classroom and to propose new research ideas aiming to solve real problems they face in their teaching practice.

APPROACHING THE CONCEPT OF NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Students can receive both positive and negative feedback. On the one hand, positive evidence or positive feedback (PF) is useful for the teacher to affirm that a learner response to an activity is correct (Ellis, 2009). On the other hand, NF is considered to be any response towards errors and mistakes made by the students, that is, any indication to the learners that the use of the target language has been inaccurate (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). NF can be provided for written and oral discourse; however, for the present research the focus was on oral inaccurate students' oral productions. In this sense, in the present paper, NF would refer to teachers' reaction when students do not produce a target like utterance during an oral task.

In the literature, terms like 'corrective feedback' (Lightbown & Spada, 1999), 'negative evidence' (Dekeyser, 1993; Oliver, 1995; Long & Robinson, 1998), 'interactional feedback' (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000), 'negative feedback' (Perdomo, 2008), 'error correction' and 'error treatment' have been used to refer to NF. For the purpose of the present paper, being clear that the focus is on oral interaction, those terms will be used interchangeably to refer to teachers' reaction after students' ill-formed utterances. It is relevant to mention that 'negative evidence' is used in the field of language acquisition, 'negative feedback' is used by cognitive psychology; and 'corrective feedback' is observed in the field of language teaching (Schachter, 1991). Nevertheles, in the literature they have been used, even interchangeably, referring to NF.

Key words related to negative feedback

There is a wide list of concepts regarding NF. It is important to know them to perform a more successful research on the issue and to be updated on the field. Perdomo (2014) states that some teachers and researcher might miss important information because they do not use the appropriate keywords when searching in journals and databases. Let's review some of those and their relationship to NF.

Uptake: It refers to the types of students' responses as immediately following the provided feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). It is a student made reformulation after teacher's feedback (Dos Santos & Moraes, 2004). It has been found to be useful for assessing feedback effect, even when some authors might disagree. Uptake can be classified as (1) repair uptake, (2) needs repair uptake (modified and unmodified), and (3) acknowledgment (Asari, 2012).

Intake: It is detected input that goes beyond what is held in working memory for immediate recognition and

comprehension (Reinders, 2012). Definitions of intake come into three broad categories: as a product (Corder, 1967; Krashen, 1978; Faerch & Kasper, 1980; Sharwood, 1993; Carroll, 2001) as a process (Hatch, 1983; Boulouffe, 1987), and as a combination of both (Kumaravadivelu, 1994).

Repair: It is a corrective activity of troubles in conversation, during interactions (Yasui, 2010). Repair has a basic 3-steps structure: (1) production of the trouble-source, (2) the initiation of the repair, and (3) its completion (Kasper, 1985).

Saliency: Saliency concerns the noticeability of the feedback by students, but in NF literature it can be also associated to grammatical structures. It has been associated to feedback effectiveness by some authors who claim that more salient feedback types tend to be more efficient. Noticeability of NF has been found to be related to the grammatical target it addresses (Kartchava & Ammar, 2014).

Noticing: It takes place when the students realize that they are being provided some input from which they could learn. NF noticeability seems to depend on the grammatical target it addresses (Kartchava & Anmar, 2014). Proficiency has been reported as helpful for noticing less salient feedback (e.g., Perdomo, 2008).

Feedback recognition: it is a situation in which the learner is able to recognize the corrective nature of NF but failed to locate the source of error (Rassaei & Moinzadeh, 2014).

All the terms described above are important for a better understanding of oral NF in language teaching and learning and for enhancing scientific information gathering. However, they are not all the concepts and terms to include when doing research on the issue. Hence, teachers, teacher trainees and researchers should constantly increase their own list as long as they find more of those words, terms and concepts.

Taxonomies for negative feedback

Different researchers have devoted time to deeply research classroom interaction, specifically on aspects concerning NF. There is no consensus on NF classification, but all the taxonomies proposed by diverse authors are helpful for the study and understanding of NF. Several types of NF following different criteria have been found in the literature since Lyster and Ranta (1997) who after observing classroom interaction described six types of NF, namely: explicit correction, recast, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition.

Later, authors talked about 'preemptive' and 'reactive' negative evidence. The former refers to grammar rules explanations and the latter to a NF that can be either explicit (i.e., overt error correction) or implicit (i.e., communication breakdowns and recast) (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Reactive NF, according to its saliency, can be either implicit or explicit. Gass (1999) went beyond that simple taxonomy and classified implicit and explicit negative feedback direct and indirect. In other words, she talks about implicit direct negative feedback, implicit indirect negative feedback, explicit direct negative feedback and explicit indirect negative feedback.

The knowledge of the previous explanation is useful to understand combinations like 'implicit negative

feedback', 'explicit negative feedback' and 'explicit direct negative feedback' which have been used by authors like Long and Robinson (1998), Gass (1999), Rodríguez and Perdomo (2002) and Perdomo (2008), among other.

Lyster (2002) classified feedback moves as explicit correction, recasts and prompts. Lyster and Mori (2006) posit that recasts and prompts are interactional feedback, as opposed to corrective feedback. Besides, according to who provides the feedback it can be other-repair (provided) (including explicit correction and recast) and self-repair (prompt) (metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, repetition and clarification request) (Loewen & Nabei, 2007).

As can be observed, during the last two decades terminology referring to NF has become broader. Teachers and researchers must take that into account to find useful information about this topic which has important pedagogical implications for language teaching practitioners and students.

IMPORTANCE OF NF IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Language teachers and researchers cannot ignore that NF may play a role in assisting learners to attend to and incorporate those aspects of language not acquired through positive evidence alone (Oliver, 1995). NF constitutes an ideal 'dimension' of 'practice' in that all language teaching practitioners will need to make decisions about whether, how, and when to correct their students' errors and also because the decisions they make depend on their overall theory of teaching and learning (Ellis, 2009).

Negative evidence lets teachers know about students' progress and input needs, but it has not always been seen like that. The first language teaching methods saw errors as undesirable production and, as such, they should be avoided and corrected when produced. It was after language and language learning theories started to change that errors and mistakes were considered as a normal part of language acquisition and learning process and error treatment began to be different too.

Communicative Language Teaching advocates created a balance between what audiolinguists and cognitistvists had said and suggested that an error should be viewed as evidence of learners' linguistic development instead of 'a sin to be avoided and even punished'. They also recognized the need for fluency and this allows teachers to leave some errors uncorrected (Rezaei, Mozaffari & Hatef, 2011).

That change of mind about NF in the language learning process has led to changes in research interests going beyond the fact of correcting to the effects of correction on learning. That explains why, in the lasts decades, Second Language Acquisition theory (SLA) recognizes the importance of corrective feedback and there has been an increasing number of studies to examine the relationship between feedback and L2 learning (Rezaei *et al*., 2011). From a pedagogical perspective, NF is a crucial element in the language learning process because, as Shaechter (1998) states, learners' output is also input for themselves and their classmates; hence, lack of NF might cause that some hypotheses stay incorrect.

In this vein, some authors have concluded that when applied at a specific moment, corrective feedback could help to improve strategies of learning and it would give enough confidence to students when producing (Hernández, Gómez & Jiménez, 2010); however, most research is needed to clarify remaining doubts about what

type of NF might be more beneficial for students in different language teaching contexts.

WHAT TO CORRECT?

To answer this question it is important to clearly define errors. They are defined as a deviation from the norm of the target language (Ellis, 1 994); to this point authors might still agree. However, the controversy appears when we talk about the perception of errors as part of the language learning process (Perdomo, 2014).

Chaudron (1977) established the difference between 'error', 'mistake' and 'attempts'. He explained that 'error' is related to competence, 'mistake' is related to performance, and 'attempts' are differentiated from errors because they are failures produced when the students try to use a structure they do not know and take it from another language. A clear differentiation of the abovementioned terms is needed for teachers to decide whether they have to provide negative feedback. To help teachers with this task, Ellis (1997) proposed a two ways method to discriminate errors and mistakes: (1) by observing the consistency of the ill-formed utterance and (2) by providing direct feedback (which was hardly critiziced).

Errors have also been classified according to proposed taxonomies. For instance, Burt (1975) talked about 'global' (errors that hinder communication because they do not let the hearer to get the intended message) and 'local' errors (those affecting a part of the sentence and did not prevent the message to be understood).

What to correct goes beyond the differentiation of error, mistakes and attempt. It is also related to the focus of teaching (i.e., meaning vs. form; accuracy vs. communication) and to specific language aspects to be learned such as pronunciation and grammar, for instance. Those issues would have an influence on the decision about what, when and how to correct. Besides, what to correct is related to the amount and types of error students make in a single utterance. In this sense, methodologists generally advise teachers to focus attention on a few error types rather than try to address all the errors learners make (Ellis, 2009).

Furthermore, what to correct would partially depends on students' proficiency and the kind of task students are performing. Teachers should know about students' proficiency because, as stated by Gómez (2006), a problem occurs when teachers correct students' errors which are beyond their level. In that case, they might not realize that they are being corrected.

WHEN SHOULD STUDENTS BE CORRECTED?

Error correction is definitely needed at some point in the learning process to a lesser or a wider extent (Gómez, 2006). Tomczyk (2013) states that having already decided that an error should be the subject of treatment, a teacher is supposed to choose from three possible options when to deal with an erroneous item: immediate, delayed or postponed correction.

Tomczyk (2013) found that both immediate and delayed corrections were the two forms mostly used by teachers; however, at the present time there still controversy on the appropriateness of each of them. The type of NF might also be a feature to consider for deciding when to correct. Once again, it takes teachers to reflect on the focus of the class and the task. Tomczyk (2013) noticed that, in a class where the focus was on communication, immediate correction seemed to be more popular for pronunciation errors whereas delayed NF was preferred by

teachers for grammatical errors.

In sum, the choice about when to correct should be taken depending on both, the kind of NF and the teaching focus. In that sense, immediate implicit NF would be useful at any time of the conversation when communication is the goal, while immediate explicit NF would be advisable when the goal is grammatical accuracy over communication. Nevertheless, more research on the issue is needed because there is not sound empirical evidence to arrive to a solid conclusion concerning immediate and delayed NF efficacy in different FL teaching contexts.

HOW SHOULD STUDENTS BE CORRECTED

The questions guiding the present discussion cannot totally be analyzed in isolation; they are related one to another. However, some studies have been conducted to carefully answer each one of them. How to correct students when producing erroneous utterances has been a source of research for several years, but before reviewing what authors have found it is important to remember that 'how' in this context is referred to the type of NF (e.g., explicit vs. implicit; input-providing Vs. output-prompting) in terms of its effectiveness.

Different investigators have devoted time an effort to study NF effectiveness in a variety of contexts (e.g., Oliver, 1995; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Long, Inagaky & Ortega, 1998; Ayoun, 2001; Rodríguez & Perdomo, 2002; Oliver & Mackey, 2003; Balcarcel, 2006; Tsybina, *et al.*, 2006; Perdomo, 2008). Some of them have studied explicit negative feedback compared to implicit (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Rodríguez & Perdomo, 2002; Perdomo, 2008), but there still much work to do because none of those NF types have proven to be effective in most contexts what makes still necessary to do research to state the trends for their effectiveness.

It is important to notice that there is not a unique formula for NF use because there are some factors related to NF effectiveness and the process of language learning. Hence, as Ellis (2009) posits, teacher educators avoid prescribing the strategies that teachers should use. Partially, it is because they are uncertain about which strategies are the effective ones, but it also almost certainly reflects their recognition that the process of correcting errors is a complex one involving a number of competing factors.

Balcarcel (2006) recommends taking into account the students' level of proficiency of the language in order to teach what is appropriate and to provide the adequate negative feedback. In this context, implicit NF has been criticized due to the lack of saliency and because it has been found to be less effective with low proficiency students (Perdomo & Rodríguez, 2002). Explicit NF, on the contrary, has been found to be effective for low proficiency students (Perdomo & Rodríguez, 2002) even when it has shown higher levels of anxiety in students which is not always negative because there is a kind of anxiety leading to learning.

Oral errors correction has been seen as both positive and negative because there are variables related to failure and success. Gómez (2006) indicates that being able to know about students' individual learning styles and preferences will give teachers the clue so as to know whether we should correct them or not and how error correction could improve their linguistic and communicative competence.

Zhang, Zhang and Ma (2010) describe the task of providing effective oral error feedback as difficult and

complex involving many challenges and complexities. They also add that probably the most difficult aspect of the correction process is tailoring corrections to individual students.

In sum, difficulties to select the way to correct include the fact that factor like students proficiency, teaching focus and students' cognitive and affective variables need to be considered as groups and as individuals.

WHO SHOULD CORRECT?

Teachers are expected to provide negative feedback to their students. However, Ellis (2009) highlights that they should be prepared to vary how to correct in accordance with the cognitive and affective needs of the individual learner. In fact, this means they do not need to follow a consistent set of procedures for all students.

Even when teachers are expected to provide students NF, they are not the unique who can do it. Students can also self-correct and correct their classmates. Tomczyk (2013) suggests an order for NF provision: self-correction, then peers correction (in the case when self-correction does not work), and finally, teacher correction (if no one knows how to repair the erroneous form).

In the literature, several studies have been conducted to study the effectiveness of those forms of NF provision. Among the problems related to learner self-correction Ellis (2009) highlights, first, that learners typically prefer the teacher do the correction for them; and second, that learners can only self-correct if they possess the necessary linguistic knowledge. In other words, students might be able to correct mistakes, but the might not be able to correct errors.

Hernández and Reyes (2012) conducted a study in which they found that teachers do consider that they are not the only who can and must correct errors. However, language teaching practitioners do not think that peers are good correcting at their classmates and hence, peer correction can be harmful for the relationships among students. The author of the present discussion respectfully would say that the solution to a bad peer correction would not be avoiding it but educating students to provide proper feedback to their classmates. It would be very useful, especially if one takes into account that students do not only practice the language in class with the teacher but also when they study and share with their mates. In this vein, researchers' interest on peer correction has increased and studies like Sato and Lyster's (2012) have focused on teaching students how to provide corrective feedback during peer interaction.

Teachers' participation in the classroom for giving NF and monitoring self and peer-correction is essential. Tomczyk (2013) found that although peer correction and self-correction have many benefits and the majority of teachers declare to promote these types of correction in the classroom, the students seem not to appreciate them and they expect their teachers to rectify what they do not know.

SOME OTHER VARIABLES RELATED TO NF

As stated before, questions on what, how, when and who correct cannot be studied in isolation. Students are, as any human being, complex individuals which should not be treated as if they were all cognitive and affectively equals. Ellis (2009) recommended teachers to be ready to vary when responding to those NF questions for each student in accordance with the cognitive and affective needs of the individual learner. It means

that they are not expected to follow a consistent set of procedures for all students.

Proficiency is among the most studied cognitive factors related to NF effectiveness in the classroom, which has been found to be related to NF effectiveness in different contexts (e.g., Ammar, 2008; Perdomo, 2008).

Anxiety is a very important affective matter related to oral NF in the classroom. Among those that have studied that relationship is possible to mention Rassaei (2015) who observed that high anxiety level students tend to benefit more from implicit NF like recast. Ellis (2009) posits that teachers should monitor the extent to which NF causes anxiety in learners and should adapt the strategies they use to ensure that anxiety facilitates rather than debilitates.

As it can be observed in the literature, another source of interest for researchers in the field of NF has been students' awareness and perception of NF among other. Affective variables and other subjective variables have also started to be researched, for instance, teachers and students beliefs about negative feedback have recently been addressed and becoming more popular among investigators because they might influence teachers' choices and NF effectiveness (e.g, Hernández & Reyes, 2012; Rassaei, 2013; Kartchava & Ammar, 2014). However, more studies should be conducted concerning motivation for language learning and students' attitude towards the language itself among other.

Little attention has still been paid to the study of negative feedback from the learner's perspective. Among the few studies found, not many have approached the study of learner's perception of negative feedback (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Rassaei, 2013) which is an issue that also needs to be studied as well as cognitive factors related to NF and learning (Yilmaz, 2012).

In sum, NF study goes beyond the surface of classroom interaction; it should include all subjective factors related to learning and researchers have noticed it and have started to address different issues that a decade ago was not seen as important. It results in a promising soil for novel researchers because there is still much to be said and done.

CONCLUSIONS

Terminology regarding NF has notably increased during the last decade. Teachers and researchers who perform effective searches on the topic are those who manage those updated terms (e.g., negative evidence, interactional feedback, implicit negative feedback, explicit negative feedback, indirect explicit negative feedback, learners' uptake, among other).

A set of questions were addressed for the present paper, concerning them it is possible to conclude:

- What to correct? Students might require NF when making mistakes, but it would not be necessary when attempts appear.

- How to correct? If the focus is set on accuracy explicit NF would be suitable whereas if the focus is on communication any form of NF would be appropriate. However, subjective variables (e.g., affective, cognitive) are expected to be considered when selecting specific NF forms from the two

main trends (implicit and explicit).

- Who should correct? Students need to be enhanced to correct themselves and they need to be monitored when doing it. Peer correction should be a theme of discussion in the classroom because a culture of relaxed peer correction would be beneficial for students. Teachers must not just concentrate on providing NF, but also on helping students to monitor their own progress and on monitoring peer corrections in oral activities. More research on the issue is still needed.

- When to correct? Benefits of immediate and delayed NF rely on the focus of the task which is supposed to be previously clearly stated. The decision of when to correct is closely related to how to do it. Then, immediate-implicit NF would be useful for oral activities in communication-centered classes whereas delayed-explicit NF would be pertinent when grammatical accuracy is being pursued.

In sum, NF is a dynamic matter; teachers need to be careful with decisions regarding it because it has important pedagogical implications. Foreign language teaching practitioners need to realize that what could be effective for a group of students might not necessarily be effective for others. Teachers must also be aware of all variables related to NF to enhance its effectiveness. Finally, teachers cannot ignore that their role as facilitators is strengthened by accomplishing the role of researchers in their own teaching contexts.

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