

# CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON GIVING CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN TESOL SESSIONS

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**Abstract-** Giving corrective feedback in classes has widely been discussed in Second Language Acquisition focusing on the requirement of the feedback and the types of feedback based on the time and the purpose of providing them. The relevant literature has identified six types of feedback: explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition. These are categorized mainly into two groups: explicit feedback and implicit feedback. It is believed that both types have their own advantages and disadvantages. This paper first highlights the difference between explicit and implicit feedback prior to critically evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of both taking the research finding into account. The discussion of explicit and implicit feedback as corrective feedback methods still leaves questions with the classification of feedback types as 'explicit' and 'implicit'. The discussion of research findings indicates that explicit feedback has an edge over the implicit feedback based on the benefits that they bring to second language learners. SLA theories also support the effectiveness of explicit feedback over implicit feedback. The empirical studies highlight that metalinguistic feedback is more useful than implicit methods such as recasts.

**Keywords-** feedback, implicit, explicit, metalinguistics

## I. INTRODUCTION

Giving corrective feedback in class is one aspect that has received wider attention in the language teaching process. There are several facets into this aspect such as whether giving feedback is required, what type of feedback is suitable and how feedback should be given; however, the main question that language teachers often

need to answer is what type of feedback should be given to students. Lyster and Ranta (1997) identify six different corrective feedback types that can be used in classroom. They are explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition. These are categorized mainly into two groups: explicit feedback and implicit feedback. It is believed that both types have their own advantages and disadvantages.

I teach English language at a university in Sri Lanka to students who are usually in either B1 or B2 level of English language proficiency (i.e. pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate level) according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Language Policy Unit, Strasbourg, n.d., p. 24) and I have faced instances that I needed to decide what type of feedback should be given to these students. I have attempted all the types mentioned earlier and realized that most of my students prefer explicit corrective feedback. However, I have observed instances that even implicit feedback has a positive effect on learners' acquisition of target language features. Explicit and implicit feedback has received both praise and criticisms in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature and this paper critically reviews them in light of my own experience. The paper first highlights the difference between explicit and implicit feedback and then moves on to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both taking the research finding into account.

## II. EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT ISSUE

According to Lyster and Ranta (1997) in Explicit Correction the teacher provides the correct form to students after directly indicating to the student that the

language produced is erroneous. *Recast* means that the teacher reformulates the erroneous language produced by the student without mentioning that the learner has committed an error or explicitly giving the correct answer. *Clarification requests* involve the teacher indicating to the student that he/she misunderstood/did not understand the language produced by the student or the student has committed an error by asking questions such as ‘Pardon me?’ (p. 47). This also does not involve explicit indication of the error. *Metalinguistic feedback* involves giving information of the kind of error committed by the student using comments, questions or information such as ‘Can you find your error?’, ‘It’s masculine’ (P. 47). Lyster and Ranta identify this also as a feedback type that does not explicitly provide the correct form. *Elicitation* involves the teacher eliciting the correct form of language by means of pausing his/her own utterance to let learners fill in the blank. *Repetition* means that the teacher repeats the error made by the learner with a varying intonation to indicate that the learner needs to pay attention to that.

Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006, p. 340) note that explicit feedback ‘overtly’ indicates to the learner that an error has been made; however, implicit feedback does not include an explicit indication of the error. According to this definition and based on Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) explanation of the features of these six types of feedback, only explicit correction can be identified as an explicit corrective feedback type since only that type explicitly indicates to the learner that an error has been committed. However, Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) classify metalinguistic feedback as an explicit feedback type. They seem to ignore the fact that metalinguistic feedback does not necessarily indicate to the learner that an error has been committed nor the correct form is given to the learner explicitly. Thus, their classification seems to contradict with their own definition of explicit and implicit feedback. They also note that recasts sometimes can act as an explicit feedback method if the correction made by the teacher is stressed or if there is a varying intonation that indicates the correct form which draws learners’ attention to the correct form. However, this also contradicts with their definition of explicit feedback since the clarity of indication of the error in varying intonation or stress is debatable and it is less explicit.

Most empirical studies on explicit and implicit corrective feedback use explicit correction as a method of explicit feedback and recasts as an implicit feedback type. As Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) suggest some studies

consider metalinguistic feedback as an explicit type. If metalinguistic cues are combined with an explicit indication that an error has been committed, it is possible to classify metalinguistic feedback as an explicit type. Havranek (2002) also note that situational and linguistic factors are very important for the success of the corrective feedback in foreign language classroom, and the success rate easily increases when the corrective feedback is incorporated with metalinguistic features such as form and structure. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback combined with an explicit indication of the error are considered explicit feedback types and all others are treated as implicit types.

### III. WHAT TYPE OF FEEDBACK IS MORE SUITABLE: IMPLICIT OR EXPLICIT?

#### 3.1 What do SLA theories say?

There is a debate whether second language learners need explicit corrective feedback. This can be linked to the theoretical debate between explicit and implicit learning. Implicit learning is thought to be unconscious and explicit learning is conscious (Ellis R., 2009). The knowledge gained by implicit learning is considered implicit i.e. acquisition is natural and thus the learners are unable to describe this (Ellis N., 2008). This is mainly evident in L1 acquisition where children do not learn explicit L1 rules. When children learn their L1, corrective feedback is also least important since L1 is normally acquired based on various social activities and exposure (de Vries et al, 2010). The knowledge gained through explicit learning is considered explicit i.e. learners can explain what they have learnt such as grammar rules in a language. Ellis N. (2008) believes that particularly adults need explicit learning when learning an L2 since what they can acquire implicitly through the exposure is limited. Krashen (1985) in contrast points out that the process involved in acquiring an L1 is in action when acquiring a second language due to the influence of Input Hypothesis. Therefore, it is not necessary for the language teacher to deliberately teach the structures if sufficient input is provided because learners can acquire the structures naturally by processing the input provided. This claim has been refuted however in many empirical studies done on L2 learning by adults.

Swain and Lapkin (1995) identify four functions of output in SLA: noticing, hypothesis testing, metalinguistic and

enhance fluency. In this context metalinguistic is relevant since it focuses on internalize linguistic knowledge as an important aspect; therefore, explicitly getting to know the forms of language is considered important for nonnative speakers to understand a foreign language. It is also believed that certain salient features of second language can be acquired effectively through explicit metalinguistic knowledge of the target language (DeKeyser, 1995; de Vries et al, 2010). Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis also indicates a similar view that learners need to pay conscious attention to the language features in the input provided to them in order for the learning to take place. Since conscious learning is explicit, the process of noticing also seems to be explicit learning. Moreover, Schmidt (2010) argues that noticing only is not enough for language learning, learners should proceed to the next step which is understanding the noticed language and that involves metalinguistic knowledge.

Since explicit learning of L2 gains considerable theoretical support, it is possible to predict that explicit feedback may also play an important role in L2 learning. Bitchener and Knoch (2009) highlight that explicit feedback has four main benefits: it reduces confusion among learners, it provides useful information to learners making it easier for them to resolve more complex errors, it provides more information on hypotheses and it is immediate. However, Lee (2003) warns that teachers might misinterpret the meaning that learners want to express and thus may provide unnecessary words/phrases to learners as explicit feedback.

Several SLA researchers highlight that adult learners prefer receiving corrective feedback (Ayoum, 2001; Carroll & Swain, 1993; Carroll, Swain & Roberge, 1992; Mackey & Philp, 1998). For example, Carroll et al. (1990, 1992 as cited in Carroll & Swain, 1993) explain that explicit feedback could help adult second language learners to learn individual words. Hulstijn (2002, p. 206) points out that explicit learning inculcates "explicit verbalizable metalinguistic knowledge" and it thus involves in concept formation and concept linking. However, Hulstijn also points out that explicit learning is more suitable for adult learners.

The students that I teach are of eighteen to twenty-two years old university students who read for their bachelor's degrees in English medium. They learn English as a second language apart from learning other subjects in English. When teaching these adult students, I have noticed that

they expect the teacher to 'teach grammar'. By 'grammar' they mean that they need explicit explanations of the target structures. Moreover, when receiving feedback, they expect the teacher to explain why an error is an error and the correct answer. Radecki and Swales' (1988) and Lee's (2005) studies also indicate that usually L2 learners prefer explicit feedback. Since literature also suggests that explicit feedback is suitable for adult L2 learners, my students' preference of feedback type goes hand in hand with the type of feedback suitable for them.

### 3.2 Empirical evidence

It is also important to analyze the results of empirical studies to understand what type of feedback is more beneficial to second language learners. As mentioned earlier, use of the term 'explicit feedback' in empirical studies is debatable to a certain extent. There are several studies which use metalinguistic feedback along i.e. metalinguistic cues in the form of instructions, comments or questions without explicitly indicating to the learner that an error has been committed or giving the correct form, as 'explicit feedback' and there are some other studies that use explicit correction and/or metalinguistic feedback with an overt indication of the error and the correct form as 'explicit feedback'. This section of the paper discusses the findings of both types of empirical studies.

Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) compared metalinguistic feedback (without overt indication of the error) with recasts (implicit feedback) and they found that the group who received metalinguistic feedback increased explicit and implicit knowledge of target language rather than the recast group. An example of the metalinguistic feedback provided, "Learner: He kiss her, Researcher: Kiss – you need past tense, Learner: He kissed" (p. 353) highlights that there is no explicit indication that the language produced is erroneous nor the correct form is given. Fawbush (2010) who also used a similar design in his study reports that metalinguistic feedback has more impact on the post task performance than the implicit feedback. Zorhabi and Eshani (2014) used one implicit feedback and one explicit feedback group in their study and the implicit group received corrective feedback by means of the researcher underlining the error and the explicit group received the correct forms apart from the researcher underlining the incorrect form. Zorhabi and Eshani report that both groups demonstrated an improvement in the post task; however, explicit group

outperformed the implicit group. Campillo (2003) in a study that had two L2 groups: one receiving metalinguistic feedback similar to the metalinguistic feedback that Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) used and the other receiving repetition of error and recasts (implicit), identified that the latter group performed better than the former in the post-test.

Three studies out of four discussed above report that 'explicit feedback' is more beneficial for language development than the implicit feedback and only Campillo reports otherwise. However, it is possible to question the methodology that they have applied in providing explicit feedback since the learners were not overtly informed of the errors that they committed on any of these occasions. One may argue that the intonation or stress of the word 'Kiss' in the example given by Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) may indicate that it is erroneous; however, how explicit the indication is questionable. There is a possibility that learners may understand that the stress indicates an error, but some may not. For example, Sinhala is a phonetic language and thus it is difficult for most of my students who are L1 Sinhala speakers to understand stress and intonation in English. Thus, they may not understand the stress variation in the previous example of metalinguistic feedback. Due to such reasons, it is questionable whether the findings of these studies clearly indicate the effectiveness of explicit feedback.

However, there are number of studies which have used explicit correction or metalinguistic feedback with an explicit indication of the errors committed as explicit feedback methods. In an early study Carroll and Swain (1993) compared explicit correction with implicit feedback (modeling the answer) and found out that the explicit group performed better than the implicit group in the post-test. In a study by Falhasiri et al (2011), the students who received explicit feedback on their written language production were informed of their errors and they received metalinguistic explanations with the correct form. The implicit group received only the correct form without an indication of the errors or metalinguistic explanation. This study highlights that the former group was able to reduce the number of errors than the latter group in the post production task. Dabaghi (2008) and Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) used recasts and explicit feedback (providing the correct form with an indication of the error along with metalinguistic explanation) in their studies and the results indicate that explicit group gained higher scores in the post task than the implicit group.

Khoshsima and Farid (2011) used two groups: one received explicit feedback that clearly indicated the error, location and metalinguistic explanation of the violation of rules and the other received implicit feedback by means of just informing the location where the error has occurred. The results indicate that the explicit group could improve the written accuracy than the implicit group. Yilmaz (2012) conducted an investigatory study on the effects of negative feedback types and she identifies explicit correction and recast as the two prominent negative feedback types. The results of this study indicate that there are clear benefits of explicit correction over recasts. In another study Yilmaz (2013) compared explicit only (explicit correction), implicit only (recasts) and a mixture of explicit and implicit (explicit correction on the first two occasions when the errors occurred and recasts when the same errors occurred later) feedback types and has identified that explicit only and the mixed group outperformed the implicit group. Sheen (2004) who compares four communicative classroom settings in Canada, New Zealand and South Korea also points out that the average uptake rate of explicit feedback (explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback) is higher than the average uptake rate of implicit (recasts) feedback.

The analysis of this group of empirical studies highlights that there is a clear indication of the usefulness of explicit feedback over implicit feedback in L2 learning. Moreover, if the previous group of studies that have not used metalinguistic feedback without an overt indication of the errors is also taken into consideration, it is evident that metalinguistic feedback plays an important role as a corrective feedback type in SLA. Participants in all the studies discussed above are second language learners of English; therefore, based on these empirical evidence, it is possible to predict that learners in my classes may benefit more from explicit feedback than implicit feedback.

All studies except one have used adults aged between 17 and 28 as the participants (Campillo, 2003; Carroll & Swain, 1993; Dabaghi, 2008; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Falhasiri et al, 2011; Khoshsima & Farid, 2011; Sheen, 2004; Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2009; Yilmaz 2012, 2013 and Zorhabi & Eshani, 2014). Fawbush's (2010) participants are between the ages of 12 to 13. Dabaghi (2008), Falhasiri et al (2011), Campillo (2003), Khoshsima and Farid (2011) and Yilmaz (2012, 2013) have used university undergraduates as the participants of their studies. Both the age and the context of the participants of these empirical studies are similar to my context;

therefore, there is a high possibility that the results of these studies are applicable to my context.

The participants of these studies belong to different levels of English language proficiency: beginner (Fawbush, 2010), lower intermediate (Campillo, 2003; Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Falhasiri et al, 2011; Khoshsima & Farid, 2011 and Zorhabi & Eshani, 2014), intermediate (Dabaghi, 2008 and Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen, 2009) and a combination of beginner to intermediate (Yilmaz, 2012, 2013). The students that I teach belong to lower intermediate to upper intermediate levels of proficiency. Moreover, the target features that these empirical studies have used are relevant to the language forms that I have to teach. For example, structures such as past tense -ed (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006 and Fawbush, 2010), articles (Campillo, 2003; Khoshsima & Farid, 2011; Yilmaz 2012, 2013), subject-verb agreement (Khoshsima & Farid, 2011), present and past simple tense (Zorhabi & Eshani, 2014) and English dative alternative (Carroll & Swain, 1993) are taught very often in my classes and thus the empirical research findings that have been discussed in this paper are applicable to my context.

Apart from the main findings of these studies, there are several other aspects highlighted in them which are useful for me as a language teacher. Khoshsima and Farid (2011) have identified that explicit feedback assists more with the development of early language features and the implicit feedback is more suitable to develop late features. Early language features are identified as the language structures that learners acquire at an early stage of language learning and the late structures are the features that they develop later in the language learning process. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen's (2009) study showed that the explicit group could improve the written accuracy than the implicit group which is a short-term improvement. The delayed post-test indicates that the benefits of both types of feedback in the long run may be minimal. Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Ferris and Helt (2000) are also of the same opinion that indirect feedback is more effective in the long run. Havranek (2002) points out that giving students another opportunity to produce the language components which had been composed with errors before the explicit corrective feedback and rechecking whether the students produces the correct form can accurately improve the selected students' knowledge of the discussed language component. These additional findings indicate that explicit feedback may be more useful for learners who are in the lower proficiency levels. Explicit feedback also

has its own drawbacks and language teachers should be aware of them when applying explicit feedback methods in L2 teaching.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The discussion of explicit and implicit feedback as corrective feedback methods still leaves questions with the classification of feedback types as 'explicit' and 'implicit'. Some researchers use explicit correction as explicit feedback and some others consider metalinguistic feedback also as an explicit feedback method. The discussion of research findings indicates that explicit feedback has an edge over implicit feedback based on the benefits that they bring to second language learners. SLA theories also strengthen the argument that explicit feedback is more effective. The empirical studies highlight that metalinguistic feedback even without an explicit element is more useful than implicit methods such as recasts.

Since most of my students are undergraduates with a background of learning English language for almost twelve to thirteen years at primary and secondary school, they are mostly aware of the metalinguistic terms and thus this context opens the possibility of giving more explicit metalinguistic feedback. Moreover, the opportunities for me to interact with the students are higher since two to three hours are allocated for each lesson giving sufficient time to focus on metalinguistic explanations when necessary. By considering the research findings, the preference of my students and theoretical explanations on explicit and implicit feedback, it is possible to conclude that explicit feedback as a corrective feedback method may be more suitable for my teaching context.

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