

## **Corrective Feedback in English Language Teaching and Learning: Which Way to Go?**

**Ruth Abaya**

Maasai Mara University,  
Narok, Kenya.  
ruthbayake@yahoo.com

---

**Abstract:** *The rise in popularity of the communicative approach in language teaching since the late 1970s primarily focusing on language for meaningful interaction and for accomplishing tasks rather than on learning rules has intensified debate among teachers and researchers on corrective feedback or error correction in second language learning. The concept of corrective feedback has been under analysis for long especially since Hendrickson's study in 1978 in which he questioned if errors should be corrected and if so which ones, when and how the errors should be corrected.*

*Subsequent studies have investigated the types of corrective feedback as well as the use and effectiveness of those types in various contexts and even the impact of those types of error treatment on uptake. Despite these studies, corrective feedback remains one of the most contentious issues in second language teaching and there is no consensus about its application.*

*While some view it as a natural part of the second language learning process that facilitates learning, others view it as a source of feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness that exert a potentially negative and detrimental effect on learning the target language. Despite this contention, corrective feedback is an actuality of second language pedagogical practice in the school setting and is mainly influenced by teachers' beliefs. At times these teacher beliefs come into conflict with learners' perspectives. This mismatch can be detrimental to learning thus this study's attempt at understanding which corrective feedback strategies would be more beneficial for language learning.*

*The study adopts a qualitative approach involving two teachers of English and twenty nine students. It uses qualitative data collection methods including observations, the qualitative semi-structured interview format, focus group discussions and the nominal group technique to investigate the issue.*

*The findings of the study indicate that correction strategies that provide students with clues for them to generate their own repair such as metalinguistic feedback are probably the most beneficial type of correction to the learners.*

*The pedagogical implications are that teachers should embrace correction strategies such as metalinguistic feedback while shunning strategies that simply give the learner the correct answer.*

**Keywords:** *corrective feedback; perspective; repair; metalinguistic feedback*

---

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The rise in popularity of the communicative approach in language teaching since the late 1970s primarily focusing on language for meaningful interaction and for accomplishing tasks rather than on learning rules has intensified debate among teachers and researchers on corrective feedback (CF) or error correction (EC) in second language (L2) learning. The concept of CF has therefore been under analysis for long especially since Hendrickson's study in 1978 in which he questioned if errors should be corrected and if so which ones, when and how the errors should be corrected (Smith, 2010). Appearing on the surface to be simple and straightforward, these questions have been explored by scholars over time in a variety of L2 classroom settings and have proved quite complicated. A lot of research on CF continues to centre on them.

Subsequent studies have investigated the types of CF as well as the use and effectiveness of those types in various contexts and even the impact of those types of error treatment on uptake. Despite these studies, error correction (EC) remains one of the most contentious issues in L2 teaching and

there is no consensus about its application (Ancker, 2000). Stances on its usefulness generally fall into three schools of thought. On the one hand, some studies contend that EC is inadvisable as it may hinder learners' language development rather than facilitate learning by raising the students' level of anxiety. This denies the students communicative ability by making them hesitant to speak as they are afraid to make errors (Krashen, 2003).

On the other hand, Azar (2007) views EC as a natural part of the L2 learning process while McDonough (2005) views it as an aid to L2 learning given the right circumstances. They argue that EC helps L2 learners notice the gap between their utterances and the target forms. This elicits uptake or repair that promotes changes in the learners' interlanguage systems leading them to the next linguistic developmental stage.

Amidst this contention, our observation in the research context, a Kenyan secondary school setting, reveals that EC is an actuality of L2 pedagogical practice and is mainly influenced by teachers' beliefs. This is in accord with Yoshinda's (2008) observation that teacher preferences and opinions regarding EC have been shown to influence their classroom practices albeit within the limits of time, the activity in focus and the communicative flow. The errors they correct, when and how they correct them therefore depends on the teachers' beliefs, preferences and opinion, often without considering what is most effective. It is therefore necessary to investigate corrective feedback strategies in particular contexts and determine what works best for the learners and enhances L2 learning. It is against this background that this study sets out to explore the extent of uptake of correction by the learners for the various corrective feedback strategies applied by the teachers.

Other than informing my own repertoire of teaching methods to help me make the best use of oral CF by engaging pedagogical practices that are most effective, the information from this study may also offer insights to researchers and curriculum designers about the most effective CF strategies in the context of the study and lead to suggestions for the teaching of English. It may thus have the potential to influence the practice of teachers in similar contexts. This study may also provide a framework for a relevant approach to error treatment and thus help design and implement appropriate in-service Professional Development programmes on CF. This study may also contribute to the limited literature on learner uptake of various CF strategies.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION (FFI)**

Ellis (2001) observes that FFI is a generic term for EC alongside 'focus on form' (FonF), 'focus on forms' (FonFS) and 'negotiation of form.' He therefore describes FFI as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (p. 2). In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research on the effects of FFI, Norris and Ortega (2001) identify the different theoretical approaches that lead to three positions: noninterface position, strong interface position and weak interface position.

However, it is the weak interface theory of second language instruction proposed by R. Ellis (1994b) that corresponds well with EC in this study. According to this theory, explicit knowledge plays a role in SLA by facilitating the process of 'noticing the gap' where the learner's interlanguage can prompt negative feedback (feedback indicating that the learner has made an error) in the form of a recast (N. Ellis in Fotos & Nassaji, 2007). In the recast, a teacher reformulates the student's error or provides correction without directly pointing out that the student's utterance was incorrect. These recasts make the gap apparent in the contrast between them and the erroneous utterance.

The weak interface position thus holds that if L2 material is placed within a meaningful context in an inconspicuous way, but is made sufficiently salient for further processing, it may draw learners' attention to 'notice' the form of the target language and hence acquire it (Norris & Ortega, 2001). Highlighting forms in the input therefore increases the likelihood of them being noticed and subsequently used. Spada and Lightbown's (1993) study also supports the hypothesis that FFI and EC can align L2 learners' interlanguage more closely with the target language. It is with this theoretical underpinning that this study focuses on EC and more specifically the learners' uptake.

### 3. RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design in order to understand how learners respond to the various corrective feedback strategies.

The study was carried out at Greenvale (Pseudonym for school); a two streamed co-educational public secondary school in the western region of Kenya. English as a subject was structured under the Languages department and had two teachers who operated a system they referred to as “vertical teaching.” This was a situation where one teacher taught all streams A from form 1- 4 and the other stream B. The study focused on only two Form Three ESL classes in order to achieve a more precise and in depth inquiry.

The participants of the study were two form three teachers of English; Timothy and Anne (the names have been altered to conceal their identity) alongside 29 students chosen with the help of the participating teachers. The following is a brief description of the participants:

**Table 1.** *Summary of Participants*

Pseudonyms	Descriptions
Timothy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Male</li><li>▪ Bachelor of Education Arts</li><li>▪ English and Literature</li><li>▪ 12 Years Teaching Experience</li><li>▪ Four Years at Greenvale</li></ul>
Anne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Female</li><li>▪ Bachelor of Education Arts</li><li>▪ English and Literature</li><li>▪ 2 ½ Years Teaching Experience</li><li>▪ One Year at Greenvale</li></ul>

The students were of varied performance levels including those making slow progress but not those with special needs, average students and those making significant progress. Gender representation was to some extent considered in the selection although no comparative work was intended in the study. Two students participated in the one on one interview, seven in the focus group and the remaining 20 in the nominal group procedure.

For the purpose of data triangulation which strengthens the reliability and validity of an investigation (Creswell 2009), we employed several qualitative data collection methods. we observed six lessons, three for each teacher, while observing participants’ activities as unobtrusively as possible though maintaining a visible presence in the setting. (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). Each of the lessons lasted about 40 minutes. To maintain focus on the factors under study, we used a pre-prepared observation checklist which was filled in during the observation. We also made detailed field notes to describe what was going on in class so as to achieve an in depth observation. We audio recorded the observed lessons using a digital recorder for later comparison with the field notes.

We conducted one on one semi structured interviews post observation with each of the two teachers and two students from my sample who had been corrected during the lessons observed. We used semi-structured interview guides to enable me collect only the relevant data in a systematic and focused manner. Each of the interviews lasted between 30 – 45 minutes. We also conducted a Focus Group Interview with seven student participants for 36 minutes. Their interactions and group dynamics allowed the participants to build on each other’s comments to produce ideas or details that did not occur in the individual interviews (Lodico, Spaulding, Voegtle, 2010).

We then conducted the nominal group procedure in four groups of five students each to balance the influence of individuals by limiting the contribution of the vocal members. The groups were presented with one question at a time from a pre-devised schedule of questions and the members wrote down their solutions privately. Each then stated his or her answer and the answers were recorded then ranked before selecting the groups’ preferred answer.

**Table 2.** Provides an overview of the research design

<b><u>RESEARCH QUESTIONS:</u></b>	
RQ 1. What are the common grammatical errors that the students in form three ESL classes make?	
RQ 2. What are the prevalent error correction strategies in the ESL classes of two teachers in form three?	
RQ 3. How do the students in the two ESL classes prefer their teachers to correct their grammatical errors?	
RQ 4. How do the students respond to these error correction strategies?	
<b><u>STRATEGY:</u></b> Case study of two classes.	
<b><u>DATA COLLECTION METHODS</u></b>	
1. Classroom observation	Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 4
2. Interviews-one on one semi structured	Research Questions 1, 2, 4
3. Focus group interview	Research Questions 3,
4. The nominal group technique	Research Questions 1,2,3
<b><u>SAMPLE</u></b>	
✓ 2 teachers of English	
✓ 29 form three students	

The data analysis process was ongoing and ran concurrently with the progressive collection of data, interpretation and writing of the report. In this case data was reviewed shortly after collection in order for me as researcher to familiarize with it and restructure subsequent interviews or observations by considering emerging issues related to the study.

In consideration of potential ethical issues, including the recognisability of the participants, certain details about the research setting and participants are not specified in this paper. All the names used for both the school and the participants are therefore pseudonyms.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The discussion of the findings proceeds under four themes developed from the research questions namely the common grammatical errors, the prevalent correction strategies, preferred correction strategies and the learners' response to the correction strategies.

##### 4.1. The Common Grammatical Errors

The classroom observations revealed a variety of grammatical errors in the students' spoken language. During the six lessons observed, a total of 42 grammatical errors occurred. They included subject verb agreement errors such as "players *has* to take instructions," and wrong choice of pronouns such as, "it is *they* choice." Others were preposition errors such as "walk *with* a car," word order, omissions, wrong choice of tenses and other sentence construction errors. Many more non-grammatical errors such as pronunciation errors occurred during these lessons. Table 3 provides a summary of the distribution of grammatical errors identified during the lessons observed.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Grammatical Errors

Identified error types	Frequency of occurrence during lessons observed
Subject verb disagreement	8
Pronoun errors	8
Preposition errors	7
Tenses	6
Construction errors	6
Word order	4
Omissions	3
Total	42

According to the teachers, these errors largely occur as a result of limited exposure of the learners to English as they seldom use it beyond the classroom and instead use the L1, a fact that we observed through interaction with the students throughout the duration of the study.

#### 4.2. The Prevalent Correction Strategies

Most of the 42 grammatical errors in the lessons observed, specifically 79% (33), were treated using different techniques by means of which errors were corrected either by the teacher or self and peer-corrected by the students. The other nine errors went uncorrected.

As far as the EC techniques are concerned, the data revealed that the most common type of correction was ‘recast’ which accounted for 55% (18 of the 33) error correction instances. Here are some examples:

Student: He did not *say* about...

Teacher: (Reformulates student’s utterance) He did not *mention* about...

Student: (repeats the teachers’ utterance and continues).

In another instance, a student said:

Student: Wingers two.

Teacher: Two wingers.

Student: Yes... (Acknowledges and continues).

In yet another instance, the student simply ignored the teacher’s reformulation and continued.

Elicitation was the next most common type of correction while clarification request and metalinguistic clues were used to an equal extent. The study did not reveal any evidence of explicit correction but repetition was produced with other forms of feedback.

Table 4 provides a summary of the distribution of correction strategies identified during the lessons observed.

**Table 4.** *Distribution of Correction Strategies*

	Correction Strategies						
	Recast	Elicitation	Clarification Request	Metalinguistic clues	Explicit correction	Repetition	Uncorrected
Subject verb agreement	2	3					3
Tenses	2		2				2
Preposition errors	2			3			2
Pronoun errors	1	6					1
Word order	4						
Omissions	3						
Construction errors	4		1				1
<b>Total</b>	18 (43%)	9 (21%)	3 (7.5%)	3 (7.5%)			9 (21%)

Interestingly, the interviews gave a totally different picture from the observation data represented in Table 4. Of the eleven descriptions given in the interviews, five pointed to the description of the use of metalinguistic clues where the teacher pointed out an error and in some cases the contravened rule or gave a comment suggesting the utterance is wrong without giving the correct form.

Explicit correction was also implied in three of the descriptions given by the participants. Here, the teacher pointed out the error then corrected it or had it peer-corrected by other students. The interview data had only three descriptions hinting at the use of recasts, a significant departure from my earlier observation where recasting was the dominant correction strategy.

The contradicting views from the interviews probably reflect what the learners and the teachers think should be taking place but are not able to actualize. The teachers and learners may be in

support of the use of metalinguistic clues but circumstances such as class size and time constraints do not allow for their use given the pressure of syllabus coverage that exists in the examination oriented Kenyan curriculum. The teachers may therefore have simply opted to recast or reformulate their learners' deviant utterances and move on. Class size and time constraints as well as concern over negatively impacting the students emotionally with public explicit feedback could also partly explain why some errors went uncorrected.

The findings imply that there often exists a disparity between the correction strategies learners and teachers expect and the ones actually practiced in the classroom setting due to these intervening circumstances. It is therefore necessary to find out the prevalent correction strategies so as to establish the discrepancy between expectation and practice. Awareness would then mitigate the disparity and bring harmony between expectation and practice to enhance language learning.

#### 4.3. Preferred Correction Strategies

The findings revealed that the learners prefer the explicit correction of their errors. Their explanation is that direct correction makes them notice the error and easily take up the correction. The learners' preference for explicit correction is probably due to their low linguistic ability that is evident in the kind of errors they make such as basic agreement, preposition and pronoun errors. As explained by Lyster and Ranta (1997), explicit correction provides students with the correct forms and the only uptake is a repetition of the correct form provided by the teacher. Learners may therefore prefer it as they are not under pressure to produce any student generated repair. However, the teachers argued for the use of metalinguistic clues. This disparity in the opinion of the learners and the teachers therefore implies that it is necessary to understand the learners' preferred correction strategies in order to effect correction that benefits the learners and enhances language acquisition.

#### 4.4. Learners Response to Correction Strategies/uptake

Two types of uptake appeared in the data: uptake that produces an utterance still needing repair and uptake that produces a repair of the error on which the teachers' feedback focused.

Table 5 provides a summary of the distribution of uptake.

**Table 5.** *Distribution of Uptake*

Feedback Type	Total	Uptake	Repair	Needs Repair
Recasts	18	10	7	3
Elicitation	9	9	7	2
Clarification Request	3	3	2	1
Metalinguistic Clues	3	3	3	0

Although Chaudron (1977) in Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) suggests that the immediate measurement of effectiveness of any type of corrective reaction would be a frequency-of-count of the students' subsequent correct responses, this standard proved difficult in this case given the short duration of the study and limited number of observations. During the observations, the target students did not necessarily make similar or related utterances where repair or the learners' autonomous ability to use the corrected features could be estimated. However, as Lyster and Ranta (1997) suggest in their study on CF and implications for classroom teaching, uptake that results in repair of the error can be prioritized as successful and as evidence of learning. Though this may not constitute evidence of acquisition, it may be indicative of noticing and may even be facilitative of acquisition (Loewen, 2007 in Fotos & Nassaji, 2007).

Based on this argument to categorize the uptake that led to repair in the observed lessons as evidence of learning and taking this sample to represent the whole, we can deduce from the findings that metalinguistic clues are probably the most beneficial to the learner as all instances of their use led to uptake with repair. This runs contrary to Lyster and Ranta's (1997) finding that the most successful type of feedback resulting in student's repair was elicitation. However, the findings of the present study portray elicitation as the second most successful feedback type resulting in students' repair. Since metalinguistic questions are so similar to elicitation that further evidence concerning how they differ is warranted (Smith, 2010), the findings seem to point to a

higher level of effectiveness of feedback types that call for student thinking and engagement such as metalinguistic clues and elicitation.

The findings also depict recasts as the least effective correction type as any uptake with repair was basically a repetition of the correct form provided by the teacher rather than student generated repair.

### 5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Bearing in mind that CF is usually provided for the sake of enhancing learning of the target language, it is important that teachers in particular contexts should know what may work best for the learners. Teachers of English can benefit by taking time to find out how they currently address learner errors. They could do this through observation by a colleague or through audio recording a number of lessons so as to be aware of their practice and align it with the best practice.

Teachers are thus encouraged to become aware of correction strategies that benefit the learners most. From the present study, although the learners voiced preference for explicit correction, their uptake shows that if teachers allow students time and provide appropriate cues for the learner to think and engage, more often than not the learner will come through. The least effective technique of correction is simply giving learners the answer. Teachers should therefore embrace correction strategies that provide students with clues for them to generate their own repair such as metalinguistic feedback and elicitation while shunning strategies that simply give the students the answers such as recasts.

Pre-service teacher educators need to ensure that the curriculum they use to train teachers of English includes a component on the treatment of learner errors that will prepare the teachers to handle correction in a way beneficial to the learners. In-service professional development (PD) teachers also need to organize PD programmes based on a framework that takes into account the effectiveness of various correction strategies in order to achieve a relevant and effective approach to error treatment that suits the learners.

Curriculum designers such as the Kenya Institute of Education need to sensitize teachers on the best practices of CF. This could for example be through revising the conceptual framing with a more research led syllabus that takes into account, the most beneficial forms of correction that could ensure uptake in a particular context.

### 6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent of uptake of correction by the learners for the various corrective feedback strategies applied by the teachers in order to determine the most effective or appropriate strategy. The findings reveal that errors of agreement and use of the wrong pronouns were the most common and that recasts followed by elicitation were the most prevalent correction strategies used to correct them. The learners expressed preference for explicit correction while the data on their response to the correction strategies showed the use of metalinguistic clues as perhaps the most effective correction type in terms of uptake.

The results of this study, appraised against literature reveal a glaring similarity with studies elsewhere such as Sheen (2004) in the overwhelming dominance of recasts in the teachers' classroom practice. More studies need to be carried out in the area of uptake and effectiveness of oral CF in East Africa in order to understand the most effective correction strategies in this context.

### REFERENCES

- Ancker, W. (2000). Errors and corrective feedback: Updated theory and classroom practice. *English Teaching Forum*, 38(4), 20-24.
- Azar, B. (2007). Grammar-based teaching: A practitioner's perspective. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 11(2), 1-12.
- Chaudron, C. (1977). A descriptive model of discourse in the corrective treatment of learners' errors. In *Learner uptake in communicative ESL lessons*, Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H. and Loewen, S. (2001) *Lang. Learn.* 51(2): 281–318.

- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Ellis, N. (2007). The weak interface, consciousness, and form-focused instruction: mind the doors. In *Form-focused Instruction and Teacher Education. Studies in Honour of Rod Ellis* (pp. 17-34). S. Fotos & H. Nassaji (Eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994b) 'A theory of instructed second language acquisition' in N. Ellis (ed.). *Implicit and Explicit learning of languages*. San Diego, Calif: Academic.
- Ellis, R. (2001). Investigating form-focused instruction. *Language learning* 51, Supplement 1: 1-46.
- Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in language acquisition and use*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lodico, M. G., Spaulding, D. T. & Voegtler, K. H. (2010). *Methods in Educational Research-From theory to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Loewen, S. (2007). The Prior and Subsequent use of forms targeted in incidental focus on form In *Form-focused Instruction and Teacher Education. Studies in Honour of Rod Ellis*, (pp. 101-116). S. Fotos & H. Nassaji (Eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lyster, R. & Ranta, L. (1997). Corrective feedback and learner uptake. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 20, 37-66.
- McDonough, K. (2005). Identifying the impact of negative feedback and learners' responses on ESL question development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 27, 70-103.
- Norris, J., & Ortega, L (2001). Does type of instruction make a difference? Substantive findings from a meta-analytic review. *Language learning* 51, Supplement 1: 157-213.
- Sheen, Y. (2004). Corrective feedback and learner uptake in communicative classrooms across instructional settings. *Language Teaching Research*, 8(3), 263-300.85.
- Smith, H. (2010). *Correct me if I'm wrong: Investigating the preferences in error correction among adult English language learners*. M. A. Thesis. University of Denver.
- Spada, N., & Lightbrown, (1993). Instruction and the development of questions in L2 classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15: 205-224.
- Yoshida, R. (2008). Teachers' choice and learners' preference of corrective feedback types. *Language Awareness*, 17, 1, 78-93

#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



I am a Kenyan. I hold a Bachelor of Education (B.ED) (Arts) degree with English (major) & Kiswahili (minor) from University of Eastern Africa, Baraton- Kenya. I also hold a Master of Arts (MA) degree in Linguistics from Maseno University- Kenya. I am currently undertaking my doctorate degree (Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics) –P.HD at Maseno University – Kenya