Corrective feedback (CF) refers to teacher and peer responses to learners’ erroneous second language (L2) production. The recent burgeoning of research into oral CF is attributable to its pedagogical and theoretical significance. Practitioners are interested in whether, when, and how to incorporate CF in classroom instruction; theorists (for example Krashen 1981; Gass 1997) are divided over whether the negative evidence afforded by oral CF about what is ‘wrong’ or unacceptable in the target language is necessary for L2 development, or whether exposure to positive evidence about what is correct is sufficient by itself. Experimental studies to date have demonstrated that oral CF can facilitate L2 development but that its effects may be constrained by contextual factors and individual learner differences (Li 2010; Lyster and Saito 2010).

Lyster and Ranta (1997) identify six types of corrective strategy. Thus, one can respond to the erroneous utterance ‘He has dog’ by:

- reformulating it (recast): ‘A dog’;
- alerting the learner to the error and providing the correct form (explicit correction): ‘No, you should say “a dog”’;
- asking for clarification (clarification request): ‘Sorry?’;
- making a metalinguistic comment (metalinguistic feedback): ‘You need an indefinite article’;
- eliciting the correct form (elicitation): ‘He has ...?’; or
- repeating the wrong sentence (repetition): ‘He has dog’

Lyster and Ranta (ibid.) make a distinction between recasts and explicit correction on the one hand, and the other four feedback types on the other, in that the former provide the correct form and do not encourage a response from the learner (‘uptake’), while the latter, collectively called prompts, withhold the correct form and are more likely to be followed by learner uptake. For instance, in the following episode, metalinguistic feedback is followed by uptake involving self-correction:

**Student:** I go to a movie yesterday.

**Teacher:** You need the past tense.

**Student:** I went.
Regarding who should perform correction, Lyster (2004) argues that learners should be encouraged to self-correct via prompts, and that recasts are less effective because they may be perceived by learners as relating to the message being communicated rather than the problematic nature of a linguistic form. Also, feedback encouraging self-correction is relatively motivating and makes classes more dynamic and interactive. However, students may often expect teachers to correct, and self-correction is unlikely if the learner does not have basic knowledge about the linguistic form in question. One solution is to attempt to elicit self-correction, and to follow this by teacher correction if the former fails (Ellis 2010).

This ‘prompt-then-provide’ approach is also supported by Sociocultural Theory, according to which CF should be contingent (i.e. provided only when it is necessary) and tailored to the needs of individual learners (Lantolf 2000). Thus, ‘indirect CF’ (for example clarification request, elicitation, or repetition) should be favoured, at least initially, over ‘direct CF’ (recasts, explicit correction, or metalinguistic feedback), because excessive feedback can thwart learner autonomy.

Moving on to the issue of the timing of CF, teachers face the question of whether CF should be provided immediately after learners receive instruction on, or are exposed to, a linguistic structure. Given that some errors are developmental (that is, are a consequence of the learner’s developing internal language system and in this sense are similar to those made by children acquiring their mother tongue) and that it takes time to internalize linguistic knowledge, it may be advisable to assist learners only with errors which are not repairable via their own internal resources and which persist over time. At the more micro-level of the timing of CF, errors can be responded to during a task, in which case what is called ‘online CF’ occurs. ‘Offline CF’ refers to feedback after a task has been completed. Both online and offline CF can focus on a particular linguistic target or on a variety of linguistic features. Online CF (especially in the form of recasts) affords opportunities, according to Long (2007), for a brief timeout from the ongoing interaction for learners. It involves an immediate juxtaposition of the wrong and correct forms, and serves as an ideal form-focusing device in task-based language teaching. In the case of offline CF, the teacher can note down main errors and then go through them with the class. Willis and Willis (2007) are particularly in favour of providing CF during the post-task stage because, in this way, form-focused instruction is contextualized, and learners will not be predisposed to focus on a particular linguistic structure during the task. Willis and Willis argue that when linguistic forms are addressed in a pre-task phase, learners’ consequent obsession with form can undermine the primary focus on meaning, which is of overarching importance in a task-based or communicative approach.

A final issue is what errors to target. Hedge (2000: 289) suggests that teachers should respond to ‘errors’, which are due to a lack of knowledge about a linguistic item, rather than ‘mistakes’, which are non-systematic and occur as a result of factors such as fatigue. However, this is easier said than done because it is difficult for
teachers to distinguish errors from mistakes in spontaneous classroom discourse. Perhaps it is easier to follow Hedge’s other suggestion, that only ‘global’ errors (those which cause communication problems) be addressed, but not ‘local’ errors (those which do not). This suggestion, however, prioritizes the conversational function of oral CF and seems to neglect its generally recognized pedagogical importance, which is to provide opportunities for exposure to negative (as well as positive) evidence and the consolidation of L2 linguistic knowledge.

References

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