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## To Err is Human: ESL Learners' Perception and Preference on Oral Corrective Feedback (OCF) in Classroom Practices

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### **Abstract:**

*The interest in error correction feedback has been very intense both in second language teaching and research. Few studies, however, have delved into learners' perceptions and preferences especially in Malaysian polytechnic setting. Hence, this study aims to investigate the preferences of English as Second Language (ESL) learners in terms of the oral corrective feedback they receive from their teachers and the oral corrective feedback method preferred by the learners. The quantitative data were elicited through a two-part questionnaire administered to the learners studying in a polytechnic institution in Penang, Malaysia. Descriptive statistics was employed in analyzing the data. The findings revealed that explicit method of error correction was the most preferred method of oral corrective feedback. Moreover, learners are receptive of receiving corrective feedbacks and they prefer the errors to be corrected by teachers as opposed to classmates or self-correction.*

**Keywords:** Oral corrective feedback, spoken errors, ESL learners' attitudes and preferences, multicultural education, language teaching, intercultural communication

### **1. Introduction**

In an English classroom speaking activity, some learners made quite glaring errors in communicating with their fellow group mates. Their pronunciations were out, sentence structures and grammars were incomprehensible and you, being the language instructor, feel obliged; wanting to correct each word that came out from these learners. However, you refrained from doing so as you are still considering possible corrective feedbacks you could use to approach them so as not to discourage these learners of yours from participating in future class discussions. The given situation is one of those daily dilemmas a teacher often experiences in English classroom speaking activities of which brings us to the focus of this paper (1) exploring ESL learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks (OCF) in speaking activities and (2) investigating the OCF types preferred by ESL learners.

#### **1.1. Problem Statement**

There have been numerous reports of the lack of English language proficiency among local Malaysian learners. According to the annual Education First English Proficiency Index, Malaysia's position decreased from 22nd place in 2018 to 26th place in 2019. The country's English proficiency score of 58.55 is now ranked third place among Asian countries behind Singapore (66.82), and the Philippines (60.14). In the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) it was reported that the operational proficiency in English is much lower than the expected level.

According to (Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome, 2017) the high unemployment rate (in Malaysia) among graduates is often caused by their lack of English proficiency and communication skills. Furthermore, according to Selvaratnam (2018), poor command of English is recognised as the chief reason for employability decline. He revealed that apart from their interpersonal and leadership skills, thousands of public university graduates were unemployable by the private sector primarily because of their lack of fluency in English. Thus, the industry is increasingly finding it difficult to accommodate most of our so-called graduates due to them. Therefore, there is a need to increase teachers' awareness on the importance of oral corrective feedback and to assess the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback in L2 learning. A better understanding of learner and teacher perceptions of CF can help teachers reflect on their own practice and make the best decisions for their learners. As Vasquez and Harvey point out, raising teachers' awareness about CF can lead to a reflective re-evaluation of their actions in the classroom (Vásquez & Harvey, 2010).

#### **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to find out the attitude and preferences of learners towards oral error correction techniques employed by language teachers in classroom situation. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- Examine ESL learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks in speaking activities

- Investigate the oral corrective feedback method preferred by the EFL learners

### 1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- What is the learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks in speaking activities?
- What is the oral corrective feedback method preferred by the learners?

### 1.4. Significance of Study

Despite its status as second language in Malaysia, the average English proficiency level of polytechnic learners remains low. Not only so, there are not many existing studies that delved into the oral correction feedback among polytechnic learners in Malaysia. Thus, it is essential for researchers and educators to look into the perception of polytechnic learners towards oral corrective feedback and types of oral preferred by the learners in speaking activities to gain insight on the best approach to be adopted (and adapted) hence maximized the teaching and learning experience. It is also hoped that this study enables educators to implement more appropriate techniques to remedy the situation in their efforts to help their learners improve their English proficiency level.

### 1.5. Limitations of Study

This study will focus on the polytechnic learners from two courses; Accounting and Business Studies from Commerce Department with a fairly small sample size ( $n=30$ ), making those results less likely to be generalized to a different context. This study focuses on learners only from these two courses and not learners from all courses were being taken into account. Therefore, the analysed data will only look into the perception of the learners from these two courses. Due to the restricted and small-scaled study which did not take into account other variables such level of proficiency, achievements, learning environment, etc., the results of this small-scale study cannot be generalized and represent the entire large population of polytechnic learners.

### 1.6. Definition of Terms

#### 1.6.1. ESL

ESL refers to English as a second language.

#### 1.6.2. ESL Learners

The term refers to learners who study English as a second language.

#### 1.6.3. OFC

OFC refers to *oral corrective feedbacks*. These feedbacks help both language instructor and learners to improve the level of proficiency by identifying the error in spoken language.

## 2. Literature Review

To start with, language is vital in communication as much as communication to our daily life. Say, a practically correct usage of English allows speakers to interact with people; a platform for an individual to express his idea or himself better. How do we define a good and correct usage of language then? Allwright and Bailey (1991) describe errors as learners' language form that deviates from the model language (TL) they are trying to master. An implication could be derived from this is that, a good correct language usage should not deviate from the model language (TL) form. Very often learners of English find themselves sandwiched between being expected to 'not deviate' from the English language or follow the communication grounding i.e., to get their message(s) cross without taking much consideration on the errors. This situation has resulted in learners experiencing high level of anxiety when communicating in English classroom hence withdrawal by some.

### 2.1. If 'To Err Is Human', Then Why Are Error Corrective Feedbacks Important?

Agreeing to an old saying "To err is human," it is indeed normal for learners of English to make countless of errors in communicating what is more being a non-native speaker. Besides, addressing those errors could also be a challenge to ESL instructors given the fact of learners' diversity in personality, language background, motivation and acceptance. However, shall the errors impair the receiver's understanding, this is when a language instructor comes to the rescue i.e., to address those mistakes by helping the learners to identify them hence avoid the errors being fossilized. James (1988) describes language as uniquely human and errors are often seen as off the beaten track. Coder (1967) supports the statement by saying that errors reflect a systematic display of the learners' underlying knowledge of the language. Hence, by adapting appropriate corrective feedbacks to address errors in English classroom speaking activities, a language instructor could help restructure the aforementioned 'systematic display'.

### 2.2. Corrective Feedbacks Primary Ground

Like a doctor treating his patient by prescribing a list of medications, a language instructor is also equipped with basic procedures in treating learners' errors. Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) list out three principal procedures in treating a learner's errors. First, learners are given directly or indirectly the indication of errors. At this stage, the role of a language

instructor is to assist learners in identifying the errors made. Second, the learner is then provided with the correct model language (TL) form by the instructor. This could also be done directly or indirectly depending on the learners' responses. Finally, the learner is provided information on the essence of the errors. This is the most vital part where the 'restructuring of systematic display' takes place. This restructuring is then called corrective feedbacks of which later is extended to OCF focusing solely on English oral classes. There are countless debates on OCF between language practitioners. OCF as viewed by Cognitive Theory is to facilitate L2 development especially when learners focus on meaning, commit errors and receive the treatment (Ellis & Sheen, 2011). Contrary, socio-cultural studies believe that learning takes place indirectly i.e., through participation in social, cultural and linguistic settings of which learners achieve self-regulation through self-correction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). This statement is further discussed by Skill Acquisition theorists whereby target language (TL) learning experience is more meaningful if gradual transition from effortful and automatic use of the TL is brought into practice (DeKeyser, 2007).

While OCF promotes 'noticing' by developing learners' specific spoken accuracy, second language acquisition also involves fluency (Cher Azad, M.H., Farokkhi, F., & Zohrabi, M, 2018). Accuracy refers to the extent to which language is used in performing a task conforms to the TL norms (Ellis, 2003). Fluency, on the other hand, refers to rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid and efficient translation of thought into language (Lennon, 2000). Regardless, OCF may not be effective as it addressed on forms rather than content (Tingfeng, Fu & Nassaji, H. 2016) as committing attention to one area might cause lower performance in others (Skehan, 1998).

### 2.3. Types of Oral Corrective Feedbacks (OCF)

Repeated errors present in English classroom oral activities could interrupt with the learners' production, development and overall performances. Shoufeng Li (2010) mentioned that these errors, if persist, will lead to fossilization i.e., learners' 'nontargetlike form' will be imprinted in their lexical and linguistic corpus hence will negatively impact a learner's language acquisition. In Feedback: At the heart of – but definitely not all of – formative, Wiliam describes feedback as 'information given to individuals or groups about their own preference' (2018, p. 5). Having feedbacks from the instructor may either result in learners' modified output (Şakiroğlu, 2020) or cause humiliate and embarrass in learners (Ölmezer-Öztürk & Öztürk, 2016). Thus, it can be said that oral corrective feedbacks offer ways to correct those imprinted lexical and linguistics corpora. The OCF framework which is adopted and adapted by this study comes from Yaseen. Alzebaree, Hussein, Ali Ahmed, & Idrees, Ali Hasan (2018) of which is based on the one developed by Lyster and Ranta (1997). As mentioned earlier, this model is adapted hence the eight types of OCF: repetition, clarification, explicit, implicit, metalinguistic, recast, and elicitation.

#### Example situation

Teacher : Where did you go yesterday?

Learner : I go to the park with my friends.

Types of CF	Definition	Examples
No correction	No action taken on the error. Conversation continues as usual.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher : Really? What did you do there? ....
Repetition	Repeats the learner's error while highlighting the error or mistake by means of emphatic stress.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher : You mean, you went to the park with your friends yesterday?
Clarification	Indicates that the learner's utterance was not understood and asks the learner to reformulate it.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher : I-GO-YESTERDAY?
Explicit	Indicates an error has been committed, identifies the error, and provides the correction.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher : You should use past tense 'went' because it happened yesterday.
Implicit	Implicit error correction is implied by restating the mistake correctly, rather than the correction being overtly stated or explained.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher: Where DID you go yesterday?
Metalinguistics	Gives technical linguistic information about the error without explicitly providing the correct answer.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher: Class, how does the verb change when we talk about the past activities?
Recast	Reformulates all or part of the incorrect word or phrase, to show the correct form without explicitly identifying the error.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher: I went to the park with my friends yesterday.
Elicitation	Prompts the learner to self-correct by pausing so the learner can fill in the correct word or phrase.	Teacher : Where did you go yesterday? Learner : I go to the park with my friends. Teacher: Yesterday, I..... (and learner self-correct)

Table 1: Types of OCF

Adopted and Adapted from: Yaseen. Alzebaree, Hussein, Ali Ahmed, & Idrees, Ali Hasan, 2018

## 2.4. ESL Learners' Perception

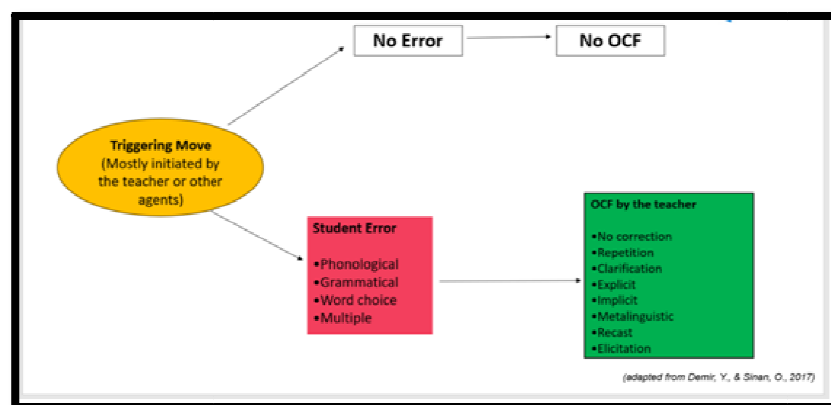


Figure 1: Model of Error Treatment Sequence

Language learners very often are aware of their spoken language limitations yet failed to recognize what are the limitations. These learners are also aware of the advantages OCF offers to the development of their speaking skills. Research conducted by Suryoputro & Amaliah (2016) presents learners' view on OCF; a platform to increase their error-making awareness which then motivates learners to engage more in speaking activities and improve overall grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary performances.

## 3. Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher examines suitable method and process of data collection in this chapter. The purpose of this study is to examine ESL learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks in speaking activities investigate the oral corrective feedback types preferred by the EFL learners

### 3.1. Research Approach and Research Design

In terms of research approach, this study used quantitative approach. Quantitative research uses objective measurement to gather numeric data that are used to answer questions or test predetermined hypotheses. In this study, the descriptive survey design was used in order to fulfill the research. Furthermore, survey research is employed to collect information about a group's views (Ary et al., 2010), which is relevant to objectives of current study.

### 3.2. Setting and Participants

The current study was conducted at a polytechnic institution in Penang, Malaysia. The participants enrolled in a Communicative English course in the fourth semester of the second year at the polytechnic. The participants of the current study were selected by means of convenience sampling. Sixty learners aged between eighteen and twenty were selected from two classes being taught by the researcher. There are 13 learners from Accountancy course and 12 learners in Business Studies course who answered the questionnaire, making the number of samples in this study as 30 in total.

### 3.3. Instrument

Survey research design was used to carry out this research. The information was collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed to the subjects. By using questionnaire, it not only allowed the researcher to collect large amounts of data within a short amount of time, but also allowed greater anonymity to the respondents and without the intervention of the researchers for example an interviewer (Gay et al., 2011). The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and of their anonymity in the research.

A modified questionnaire from Park (2010) was used to gather the data. It consists of two sections. Section A consist of learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks in speaking activities while section B consists of the learners' preferences for the various error correction types used by language teachers in class. For Section A, the questionnaire contained 14 questions in the form of statements with a five-point Likert scale. Each Item had Likert type scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) at the end of the statement. "Strongly agree" was worth 5 points, and "strongly disagree" was worth 1 point. The items were divided into six categories: necessity of error correction, frequency of error correction, timing of error correction, types of errors, methods of corrective feedback, and delivering agents of corrective feedback.

Meanwhile, Section B gathers information on the preferred error correction methods of the learners. The items consist of eight corrective feedback methods namely clarification request, repetition, implicit feedback, explicit feedback, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, recasts, and no corrective feedback. The learners were asked to rate each Item on a 5-point scale, from "Very effective" to "Very ineffective." "Very effective" is worth 5 points, and "very ineffective" is worth 1 point.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

In this research, descriptive analysis based on mean score value is used to identify the learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks and the oral corrective feedback method preferred by the learners. To measure the level of mean score, Table of Mean Score Interpretation constructed by Nunnally and Berstein (1994) is used in this study. The table is as shown in Table 2.

Mean Scale	Level
1.00 – 2.00	Low
2.01 – 3.00	Medium Low
3.01 – 4.00	Medium High
4.01 – 5.00	High

Table 2: Table of Mean Score Interpretation (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994)

##### 4.1. Data Presentation and Analysis

- Research Question 1: What is the learner's perception towards oral corrective feedbacks in speaking activities?

Descriptive Statistics			
	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I believe it is good to receive corrective feedback when I make mistakes.	4.66	.6064
2	I want my spoken errors to be addressed immediately even if it interrupts my conversation.	3.43	1.278
3	I want my spoken errors to be addressed after I finish speaking.	3.80	1.242
4	I want my spoken errors to be addressed after the speaking activity itself.	3.36	1.066
5	I want my spoken errors to be addressed at the end of class.	2.73	1.31
6	I feel corrective feedback is needed to treat serious spoken errors that impairs the listener's understanding of what is being said.	4.06	.907
7	I feel corrective feedback is needed to treat even the less serious spoken errors that do not impair the listener's understanding of what is being spoken.	3.43	1.006
8	I feel corrective feedback is needed to treat frequent spoken errors.	3.83	.833
9	I feel corrective feedback is needed to treat less frequent spoken errors.	3.40	.894
10	I feel corrective feedback is needed to treat individual learner's errors.	3.76	.678
11	I feel corrective feedbacks is better to be addressed in small discussion group.	3.53	.937
12	I prefer my spoken errors to be corrected by myself.	1.83	.698
13	I prefer my spoken errors to be corrected by teachers.	4.70	.534
14	I prefer my spoken errors to be corrected by my classmates in an open discussion	3.23	1.072

Table 3: Learners' Perception of Receiving Error Correction Feedback

Table 3 above shows the responses of the learners on learners' perception of error correction. There is a clear tendency that learners are receptive in receiving OCF over having their error being neglected as stated in Item 1 (4.66). For the learner's preferences when it came to the providers of corrective feedback, the result shows that the learners choose teachers to correct their errors with the highest mean Item13 (4.70) whereas "errors to be corrected by myself" in Item12 has the lowest means (1.83). Meanwhile "errors to be corrected by my classmates in an open discussion have a mean of 3.23. The results of this current study reveal that the participants preferred oral CF by their teachers, due to their high level of trust in teachers' ability to correct their errors, as opposed to classmates or self-correction. This was supported by Papangkorn (2015), who found that learners preferred to receive CF from their teachers. Park (2010) also

has found out that learners prefer their teachers to provide feedback and that classmates are the least favorable sources. Similarly, Méndez et al. (2012) in a study at a university in Mexico concerning EFL instructors' perceptions of oral CF and learners' preference for CF, identified that: (1) learners relied on teachers to correct their oral errors and (2) instructors believed that teachers were more qualified than peers to give CF. The findings also indicate that learners do not mind if the corrective feedbacks are to be addressed in small discussion group as stated in Item11 (3.53).

As for the appropriate time to correct learners' spoken errors, Item3 "after I finish speaking" has the highest mean of 3.80. This result is consistent with the result of a study by Elçin and Öztürk (2016) which found that EFL learners preferred delayed oral CF (i.e., a teacher waiting until the learner has completed his/her utterances before offering corrections), as this prevents learners from being interrupted or embarrassed. Papangkorn (2015) also reported that EFL learners preferred their teachers to offer CF after they had completed their speaking task, finding this the most effective time to correct oral errors. Learners also agreed that their spoken errors should be corrected as soon as they are made even though it hinders the flow of conversation as stated in Item2 (3.43). However, in Item4 (3.36), some of the learners regarded "after the speaking activity itself." Learners believe that correcting spoken errors after they have completed the communicative tasks allow them to engage in communication without interruption caused by error treatment. Item5 which refers to "address the errors at the end of class" received the lowest mean of 2.73. This is due to the reasons (1) low attention span among learners as the class is about to end hence (2) learners' motivation is no longer channeled to the learning session anymore.

As to the types of errors should be corrected the items consists of five types of errors: serious spoken errors, less serious errors, frequent errors, infrequent errors, and individual errors. As seen in Table 4, Item6 (4.06) "to treat serious spoken errors that impairs the listener's understanding of what is being said." received the highest mean from the learners. This is followed by Item8 "to treat frequent spoken errors." with the mean of 3.83. The findings for Item10 "to treat individual learner's errors" (3.76), Item7 "to treat even the less serious spoken errors" (3.43) and "to treat less frequent spoken errors" (3.40) respectively. According to Hendrickson (1978), learners do not like to be corrected for each minor error they make. This practice ruins their confidence and motivation to use the TL.

- Research Question 2: What is the oral corrective feedback method preferred by the learners?

Descriptive Statistics			
	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I prefer the whole question to be repeated.	3.20	1.156
2	I prefer to repeat myself and make changes if necessary.	2.83	1.341
3	I prefer the errors to be repeated and emphasized by the change of voice tone.	3.90	1.093
4	I prefer to receive the correct form with explanation.	4.20	.961
5	I prefer to self-correct myself by completing the sentence again.	3.36	.850
6	I prefer to continue the conversation without any error-correction.	3.03	1.188
7	I prefer to be given a clue or hint on my spoken error.	3.66	.994
8	I prefer my errors to be correctly repeated without pointing out the error (there is no change of voice tone either).	4.16	1.019

Table 4: Learners' Preference towards Error Correction Method

It can be seen from Table 4, that most of the learners prefer the explicit error correction in Item4 (4.20) more than the other methods. However, this is just a small difference compared with recast in Item8 (4.16). Explicit feedback helps the learners to learn what the target-like form is by directly pointing out the error, whereas recast can help them to learn the correct pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure. This result is consistent with several other studies have also reported that explicit feedback is a common preference among learners (Atma & Widiati, 2016; Genç, 2014; Kim, 2015; Öztürk, 2016). Learners may favour explicit feedback due to a form-focused rather than communicative perception, as they expect their teachers to provide grammatical explanation.

From Table 4, it shows that most of the learners prefer repetition in Item3 (3.90) followed by metalinguistics in Item7 (3.66). Ammar and Spada (2006) also identify repetition as a useful feedback type since it provides opportunities in which learners can self-repair their errors. Learners' preference for repetition error correction in this study may be due to the fact that most of the learners find it easy to construct grammatically correct sentences but may not be sure whether or not their utterances are appropriate in specific contexts. Elicitation in Item 5 (3.36) was rated slightly lower than implicit method in Item1 (3.20). For Item 6 which refers to give no correction to learners' errors, it has the mean of 3.03. Interestingly, learners viewed clarification as ineffective with the lowest mean of 2.83. This finding is parallel with Mendez and Cruz. (2012) which found clarification was the least preferred oral corrective method.

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestions

It is imperative to point out that institution where the study was conducted, there are courses with high enrolment, consequently classes are usually large. With a large class, it is difficult to spend much of the teaching-learning periods handling learners' errors. This study provides information that may contribute to a clearer understanding of learners' perceptions of error correction in classroom practices. This study also suggests that teachers might want to consider employing a variety of methodologies in orally correcting learners' errors to meet the expectations of learners. As

Ellis (2009) suggested, all teachers should try to explore their learners' CF preferences, agree on general best practice guidelines, and establish common goals and expectations. With these results at hand, it is then essential for teachers to consider the preferences and attitudes of the learners on oral corrective feedback before or during the course. This would enable teachers to provide a learning atmosphere in which their students feel assured that their errors are noticed and corrected when necessary. This study indicates that learners have a variety of preferences for types of oral corrective feedback thus teachers should have the capacity, awareness and knowledge to meet the expectations of the learners. This can ensure the teachers to offer the most appropriate oral correction method to suit the learners' needs and eventually achieve the best teaching and learning results.

For future research, it is recommended to focus not only on learners' preferences but also teachers' preferences as the agreement from both sides is important in deciding the process of providing corrective feedback.

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