

Oral corrective feedback on L2 writing: Two approaches compared

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Abstract

Corrective feedback (CF) research conducted within a cognitive-interactionist framework has examined the effectiveness of specific types of CF (e.g. Ellis et al., 2006). In contrast, CF research conducted within a sociocultural framework has sought to show how tailoring the feedback to the learners' zone of proximal development assists learning (e.g. Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994). The study reported in this article was designed to compare these two approaches to investigating CF by examining two types of feedback on students' errors in oral conferences following two pieces of writing. Some students received 'graduated feedback' in accordance with sociocultural theory and others explicit feedback in accordance with cognitive-interactionist theory. The detailed analysis of the feedback sessions showed that while the graduated feedback was effective in promoting self-correction, there was no evidence of any systematic reduction in the level of assistance provided over time. In contrast, the explicit feedback resulted in less self-correction but was accomplished much more quickly.

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1. Introduction

Two theoretical paradigms afford very different views about how CF should be carried out and how it affects learning. The cognitive-interactionist paradigm conceptualizes CF in terms of a set of distinct strategies (Lyster and Ranta, 1997), which may or may not result in learners repairing their errors and which have differential effects on L2 learning. In contrast, the sociocultural paradigm (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994) conceptualizes CF as a negotiated and graduated process aimed at assisting learners to self-correct. These paradigms have led to different ways of investigating CF and also to different ways of conceptualizing learning.

1.1. Corrective feedback in the cognitive-interactionist paradigm

Corrective feedback strategies can be implicit or explicit. For example, 'recasts', which reformulate a learner's erroneous utterance, often take the form of confirmation checks and thus learners may fail to notice that they have been corrected. In contrast, an 'explicit correction', defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997, p. 46) as 'the explicit provision of

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the correct form ... the teacher clearly indicates that what the student said was incorrect', makes the corrective force totally clear to the learners. Carroll (2001) emphasized the importance of learners recognizing the corrective force of feedback and thus claimed that explicit CF is likely to be more effective than implicit feedback. Research which has investigated the effects of these two types of feedback (e.g. Ellis et al., 2006) lends support to this claim.

A potential limitation of explicit correction, however, is that it is less likely to elicit 'uptake' on the part of the learner than other types of feedback (e.g. 'elicitation') – see Lyster and Ranta (1997). Uptake constitutes the move in a corrective feedback episode where the learner responds to the teacher's feedback move. It can involve 'repair' (i.e. the learner produces the correct linguistic form) or 'no-repair' (i.e. the learner simply acknowledges the teacher's feedback or fails to correct the error). There is some evidence to suggest that uptake involving repair helps learning (Loewen, 2005) but this remains a controversial issue with Long (2006) claiming that uptake plays no significant role in L2 learning.

1.2. *Corrective feedback in the sociocultural paradigm*

Like the interactionist-cognitive paradigm, sociocultural theory (SCT) views language learning as interactionally driven but as occurring *in* rather than *as a result of* interaction (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, correction is not something done to learners but rather something carried out with learners. It enables the joint construction of a Zone of Proximal Development – a sociocognitive state manifest in interaction where learners are assisted to use linguistic features that they are not yet able to employ independently.

The key claim of SCT is that corrective feedback needs to be 'graduated' – that is, adjusted to the level of the individual learner to enable them to self-correct. In a key article, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) developed a 'regulatory scale' to reflect the nature of the graduated assistance that occurred when a tutor helped learners to correct errors in their written work. This scale was based on a continuum of corrective strategies employed by a tutor. It reflected how explicit or implicit the strategies were. For example, asking learners to find and correct their own errors was seen as an implicit strategy while providing examples of the correct pattern was considered a highly explicit strategy. At an intermediate level, the tutor just indicated the nature of an error without identifying it for the learner. Aljaafreh and Lantolf undertook detailed analyses of selected CF protocols drawn from the tutor–learner interactions to show how the degree of assistance provided for a particular learner diminished over time (i.e. it became increasingly less explicit and more implicit). In other words, learning was operationalized not in terms of whether learners could produce a linguistic feature correctly on their own but in terms of whether the extent of the other-regulation needed for a learner to self-correct reduced over time.

1.3. *Corrective feedback in language pedagogy*

In general, the advice given to teachers is to try to elicit self-correction from the learner rather than to correct directly and explicitly. As Harmer (1983, p. 63) put it, 'the object of using correction techniques is to give the students(s) a chance to get the new language right'. Brumfit (1977) proposed a model for correcting written errors that involved five main stages, starting from 'underlining a mistake and diagnosing it in the margin' and concluding with 'put a cross in each line with a mistake but do not show where'. The underlying idea was to gradually remove the amount of assistance the teacher provided so as to foster self-dependence on the part of the student. Brumfit's model did not include direct teacher correction. This preference for guiding learners to self-correct reflects a general principle that underlies thinking about CF in language pedagogy – as Scrivener (2005, p. 3) put it 'people learn more by doing things themselves rather than being told about them'.

In contrast, explicit correction is considered potentially damaging as it might elicit a negative affective response from the learner. Ur (1996, p. 249), for example, emphasized the importance of 'encouraging, tactful correction' and the need for sensitivity on the part of the teacher. From a pedagogic perspective, therefore, graduated feedback is favored and explicit feedback disfavored. Scrivener (2005, p. 301), however, noted one advantage of explicit correction – it 'may be the quickest, most appropriate, most useful way of helping'.

2. Aims of the study

In the study reported below we examine the interactions that occurred in a series of oral conferences between a teacher and low-intermediate L2 writers. With some learners the teacher provided 'graduated feedback' on the errors

in their writing, seeking to elicit a correction with the minimal amount of assistance. With other learners the teacher simply provided explicit feedback. We were interested in the differences in the interactions that occurred and also whether these changed over time. In the case of the graduated feedback we investigated whether there was any evidence of a reduction in the amount of assistance over time (i.e. whether the feedback needed to achieve learner self-correction became less explicit over time).

To this end, we investigated the following research questions:

1. To what extent is (a) graduated feedback and (b) explicit correction successful in enabling learners to self-correct their errors or uptake the teacher's corrections in writing conferences?

When learners receive corrective feedback in a writing conference they may succeed in self-correcting their errors, uptaking the instructor's corrections of their errors, or they may fail to do either.

2. What changes are evident in the successful implementation of (a) graduated feedback and (b) explicit correction over time?

This research question concerns the extent to which learning is evidenced in how the two types of feedback are implemented both within a single conferencing session and from one conferencing session to another.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were all adult students of L2 English in a New Zealand language school. They were assigned to one of two groups, the Graduated Group ($n = 7$) and the Explicit Group ($n = 8$). The Graduated Group came from the General English stream; 5 students were classified by the language school as pre-intermediate students (i.e. approximately IELTS band 3.5) and 2 as elementary students (i.e. approximately IELTS band 3.0). There were 5 males and 2 females aged between 18 and 29 years. Their first languages were Korean (2), Arabic (2) and Japanese, Thai and Spanish (1 each). They had spent an average of 2½ months in the language school. The Explicit Group came from the Academic English stream, where there was a greater emphasis on written English; they were classified as 'strong' pre-intermediate. There were 6 males and 2 females aged between 20 and 33 years. They had spent an average of 2 months in the language school. Their first languages were Korean (3), Mandarin (3) and Arabic and Thai (1 each) [1].

3.2. Target structures

Two structures were targeted for this study; past tense verb forms (e.g. simple past tense, use of auxiliary with progressive/perfective aspect/passive voice where a context clearly established that a past tense form was required) and use of the indefinite 'a' and definite article 'the' with count nouns. These structures vary with respect to complexity. The rule governing use of past tense is easy to understand and thus to learn as explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2008) whereas the rule for articles is more complex. Articles pose a considerable challenge for learners (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999), especially if there is no L1 equivalent as was the case with many of the learners in this study.

3.3. Design

The participants were given two narrative texts to reconstruct. Text reconstruction was chosen for the writing activity because of the need to elicit the use of the target structures; the use of past tense forms and indefinite and definite articles was a natural feature of the texts. This type of writing activity was also considered to be appropriate for the level of the students in the study and was a type they were familiar with. Each text varied between 310 and 335 words in length (see Appendix A for an example of one of these narrative texts). The first sentence of each narrative text, which was given to participants, set the context as referring to past time.

In the first writing task the participants were given 20 min to read a narrative text and were told that they could make notes and look up words if they wanted to. The text, along with their notes, was then removed and students were asked to handwrite it within 1 h. They then received conferencing according to the treatment group they were placed in. Between 2 and 4 weeks later the participants were given a new narrative text and, after making notes in the same way as for the first writing task, wrote the story based on this text. They then participated in a second feedback conference. Thus, the participants completed two writing tasks and received feedback on each.

3.4. Writing conferences

One of the researchers (i.e. not the participants' classroom teacher) took responsibility for giving feedback in all conferencing sessions. This researcher was a L1 speaker of English with experience of teaching ESOL in a variety of contexts. He is subsequently referred to as the 'teacher'.

Students in the Graduated Group received an intervention designed to provide the 'appropriate level of assistance' to encourage 'the learner to function at his or her potential level of ability' (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994, p. 468) – that is, the most implicit feedback that enabled the learner to self-correct an error. However, the teacher sought to provide feedback in a natural way (as in Aljaafreh and Lantolf) rather than to adhere to a precise scale. Students in the Explicit Group were given explicit correction as defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997). Participants in this group had their attention drawn to the section of the text containing the error and were then given the correction. In most cases (90%) this was accompanied by some form of metalinguistic explanation [2].

3.5. Coding the writing conference data

All the writing conferences were audio-recorded and transcribed. The first step in coding the data was to identify the feedback episodes. Each episode started with the teacher drawing the student's attention to the location of a specific error. In the case of the Graduated Group it ended either with a 'resolution' (i.e. either the learner self-corrected the error or uptook the teacher's correction) or with non-resolution (i.e. the learner failed to provide the correct form). In the case of the Explicit Group, an episode ended by the learner either uptaking or not uptaking the correction.

A scheme for coding the feedback episodes was developed. This was in two parts. The first part consisted of the different strategies that the teacher used to provide corrective feedback to the learners. Examples of these strategies are 'Indicating there is something wrong with a sentence' and 'Using a metalinguistic term to help locate an error'. The second part consisted of categories for coding the resolution or non-resolution of an episode. Appendix B provides the complete coding scheme.

Examples of CF episodes and their coding are provided below. In the Graduated Feedback example the coding of the teacher's strategies occurs from line 1 to 25 and the resolution in lines 26 to 29. The example begins with the teacher reading the sentence containing the error out loud and ends with the teacher acknowledging the learner's self-correction. In the Explicit Feedback example the episode again begins with the teacher identifying and correcting the error and ends with the teacher giving metalinguistic feedback.

3.6. Graduated feedback episode

1. T: Ok so let's begin. First of all I want you to look at this sentence here; 'he has a wife'
2. S: yes
3. T: 'but his wife fed up with him' [**read sentence containing error**]
4. S: yea
5. T: ok? Um do you see anything wrong in that sentence? [**indicate sth. wrong with sentence**]
6. S: ...
7. T: any errors any mistakes
8. S: hmm ... I'm afraid no.
9. T: ok let's look at this little bit here, do you see any mistakes or errors here [**narrow down**]
10. S: he has a wife he has a wife
11. T: Hmm

12. S: he has...a wife
13. T: Hmm
14. S: I don't know
15. T: ok how about the verb here 'he has' [**use metalinguistic term to locate error**]
16. S: he has
17. T: hmm
18. S: ...
19. T: ok no worries. Um, you've written the verb in the present tense [**give meta. description of error**]
20. S: yes
21. T: and that's wrong
22. S: It's wrong?
23. T: hmm
24. S: um... Ah, the past?
25. T: correct [**indicate student closing in on error**]
26. S: he had [**student self-corrects**]
27. T: correct [**teacher acknowledges correction**]
28. S: ahh
29. T: correct ok very good.

3.7. Explicit feedback episode

1. T: very good...ok then down here the new sentence 'puppieser ran over the fence' this should be 'the puppies' again [**read sentence containing error**][**supply correct form**]
2. S: the puppies [**student uptakes correction**]
3. T: same same problem as before um the noun needs an article before it so ye...yep...so the puppies ran over the fence' [**gives metalinguistic explanation**]

3.8. Analysis

To answer the first research question the number of times each learner was able to self-correct an error as a result of working with the teacher or to uptake the teacher's feedback if self-correction did not occur was calculated. The number of episodes where there was no resolution was also counted. To answer the second research question, a qualitative analysis of the strategies used to correct individual learners in the Graduated Feedback and Explicit Groups was undertaken. This focused on whether there was any evidence of change in the nature of feedback given within and across conferencing sessions.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the mean number of feedback episodes that occurred in the Graduated Feedback and Explicit Feedback Groups for each of the two structures in each writing conference. Students in the Graduated Group participated in more feedback episodes for both structures than those in the Explicit Group. The time spent on addressing errors in the two groups also differed. In total over both writing conferences, students in the Graduated Group spent an average of 26 min 18 s with the researcher while students in the Explicit Group spent an average of 10 min 39 s. Finally, Table 1 shows that the mean number of feedback episodes directed at both structures and in both groups declined from conference 1 to conference 2.

Table 2 shows the number of times the individual learners self-corrected, provided uptake-with-repair following the teacher's correction or failed to provide the correct form in response to the feedback received on all errors (i.e. past tense, articles and others). Resolution was much more likely to occur in the Graduated Group with many of the learners in the Explicit Group failing to provide the correct form at the close of an episode. The Graduated Group generally self-corrected, whereas the Explicit Group, when they did provide the correct form, did so by means of uptake-with-repair. Thus, the learners' responses to the two types of feedback were clearly very different.

Table 1
Number of feedback episodes.

| Group | Past tense | | | | | | Articles | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | Conf. 1 | | Conf. 2 | | Total | | Conf. 1 | | Conf. 2 | | Total | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Grad. <i>n</i> = 7 | 5.57 | 3.05 | 4.57 | 2.15 | 10.14 | 3.34 | 4.57 | 1.27 | 4.00 | 2.77 | 8.57 | 3.26 |
| Exp. <i>n</i> = 8 | 4.50 | 1.20 | 2.75 | 2.02 | 7.25 | 1.83 | 3.63 | 1.19 | 2.63 | 1.69 | 6.25 | 2.44 |

To investigate changes in the implementation of the two types of feedback, we calculated the average number of the teacher's feedback strategies in the first and last episodes involving each target structure during the two writing conferences. The results for each group are shown in Table 3. In the Graduated Group the number of strategies declined for past tense from the first episode in the first conference to the last episode in the same conference but then increased in the second conference. In this group there was little change in the number of strategies employed to address article errors either within or between conferences. In the Explicit Group the number of strategies employed to address both structures remained constant.

Averaging the number of strategies for the whole groups does not show what is happening with individual learners. Therefore, we also investigated changes in the feedback by randomly selecting two individual learners from the Graduated Group. Table 4 shows the specific types of the feedback strategies used to correct past tense errors in all the feedback episodes in the first and second writing conferences for student 4. Table 5 presents the same results for a different learner with respect to the teacher's treatment of article errors. Note that a lower number represents an implicit strategy and a higher number an explicit strategy. These results show that the teacher did execute the graduated feedback broadly in the manner required. That is, in addressing each error he began with an implicit strategy and then applied explicit strategies when this was required to achieve a resolution. However, the results do not show any consistent pattern of change in the teacher's choice or number of strategies either within a writing conference or across writing conferences. For example, in the first writing conference with student 4 (Table 4), the teacher used eight strategies, including very explicit ones, to correct the past tense error in feedback episode 1. In the next episode only two implicit strategies were needed and only three in episode 3, but in episodes 9 and 16 seven and eight strategies (including explicit ones) were required.

Table 2
Individual learner scores for self-correction, uptake of teacher correction and unresolved episodes.

| Student | Writing conference 1 | | | Writing conference 2 | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| | Self-correction | Uptake-with-repair | No resolution | Self-correction | Uptake-with-repair | No resolution |
| Graduated feedback students | | | | | | |
| S.1 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 1 | 2 |
| S.2 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 |
| S.3 | 12 | 4 | 0 | 12 | 5 | 1 |
| S.4 | 16 | 2 | 1 | 16 | 1 | 0 |
| S.5 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 1 | 1 |
| S.6 | 16 | 2 | 0 | 17 | 1 | 0 |
| S.7 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 16 | 2 | 0 |
| Explicit feedback students | | | | | | |
| S.8 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 7 |
| S.9 | 1 | 12 | 3 | 1 | 10 | 3 |
| S.10 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 1 | 6 | 5 |
| S.11 | 0 | 13 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 10 |
| S.12 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 7 |
| S.13 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 10 |
| S.14 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 4 |
| S.15 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 0 | 6 | 5 |

Table 3
Mean number of feedback strategies received by the two groups.

| Group | First conference | | Second conference | |
|------------|------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | First episode | Last episode | First episode | Last episode |
| Graduated | | | | |
| Past tense | 6.0 | 2.3 | 3.1 | 3.7 |
| Articles | 4.3 | 3.1 | 4.3 | 4.2 |
| Explicit | | | | |
| Past tense | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Articles | 1.9 | 2.0 | 1.9 | 2.0 |

5. Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to investigate two different ways of conducting CF. One way involved tailoring the feedback to enable the learners to self-correct with the least amount of assistance. This ‘graduated feedback’ is supported by the theoretical claims of sociocultural theory. The second way consisted of correcting errors directly. ‘Explicit feedback’ of this kind is supported by research based on cognitive-interactionist theories which has shown that it is more effective than implicit feedback (e.g. Ellis et al., 2006).

Extracts 1 and 2 from the transcripts of the CF episodes illustrate the key differences between these two types of feedback. Both extracts deal with errors in the past tense. Extract 1 provides a clear example of ‘graduated feedback’. The teacher begins in turn (1) by reading out the sentence in the learner’s story that contains the past tense error and indicating that something is wrong with it (both very implicit strategies). The learner fails to identify the error. Later in turn (13) the teacher introduces a metalinguistic term (‘verb’) to help the learner identify the error and then indicates the specific verb where the problem lies in turn (15) (‘take’). Finally, in turn (17) he specifies that the problem is with ‘form’ rather than choice of verb. This enables the learner to self-correct (turn (18)) and also to demonstrate awareness about the nature of the error (turn (20)). The whole episode consisted of 22 turns and shows how the teacher resorted to increasingly more explicit strategies.

5.1. Extract 1 (Writing conferencing session 1 – Episode 1)

1. T: ok ‘he take a cup of tea and toast’ um can you see any problem or mistake in that sentence?
2. S: ummm ‘he take a cup of tea and toast’ I think is it maybe take, maybe to said to him
3. T: say that again sorry?
4. S: ur I think is it maybe said to him h a v e spells

Table 4
Number, type and sequence of strategies used for past tense errors in writing conference sessions with Student 4 from the Graduated group.

| Session | Past tense episodes | Strategies used in sequence | Total no of strategies |
|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Writing conference 1 | 1 | 1,2,9,9,8(b),5,3,5 | 8 |
| | 2 | 1,2 | 2 |
| | 3 | 2,1,2 | 3 |
| | 4 | 1,2,3 | 3 |
| | 9 | 1,2,3,3,8(a),8(b),9 | 7 |
| | 10 | 1,2 | 2 |
| | 11 | 1,2,3 | 3 |
| | 14 | 1,2 | 2 |
| | 16 | 1,2,9,8(a),5,5,7,6 | 8 |
| | 18 | 1,2 | |
| Writing conference 2 | 6 | 2,1,3,8(a),5 | 5 |
| | 8 | 1,2 | 2 |
| | 14 | 1,2, 8(b),5 | 4 |
| | 15 | 1,2, 8(a),8(b),5,5 | 6 |
| | 16 | 1,2,8(a) | 3 |
| | 17 | 1,3,2 | 3 |

Table 5

Number, type and sequence of strategies used for article errors in writing conference sessions with Student 2 from the Graduated group.

| Session | Episodes | Type of strategies used | Total no of strategies |
|----------------------|----------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Writing conference 1 | 1 | 1,2 | 2 |
| | 2 | 2,1,3 | 3 |
| | 4 | 1,2,9,3 | 4 |
| | 6 | 1,2,9,3 | 4 |
| | 10 | 2,1,9,3 | 4 |
| | 11 | 1,2 | 2 |
| Writing conference 2 | 4 | 1,2,3,5 | 4 |
| | 5 | 1,2,3,8(b),5 | 5 |
| | 7 | 1,2,3 | 3 |
| | 9 | 1,2 | 2 |

5. T: ah 'he have a cup of tea'

6. S: yes

7. T: ah he have he take both are fine

8. S: Umm

9. T: both are fine

10. S: ahr is it maybe took his?

11. T: um no not really... but you're correct that the problem is with the verb

12. S: verb?

13. T: the verb 'take' the

14. S: hmm

15. T: form of the verb

16. S: he took

17. T: very good

18. S: oh god this needs a past

19. T: of course.

20. S: yes

Extract 2 taken from one of the students in the Explicit Group begins in the same way as **Extract 1** – the teacher reads out the sentence containing the error (turn (1)). He then corrects it in the same turn by providing the learner with the correct form (i.e. '**was** hitting'), emphasizing the tense-bearing auxiliary. The teacher then follows up in turn (3) with a metalinguistic explanation. The learner does not uptake the correction but builds on the teacher's metalinguistic comment in turn (4) by noting that she can't use the contracted form 'he's' when referring to the past. This explicit feedback episode consisted of only six turns and involved just two CF strategies, both very explicit.

5.2. Extract 2: (Writing conferencing session 1 – Episode 1)

1. T: Okay so we start with the second sentence un 'he's hitting erm two nail' um this should be 'he **was** hitting' (emphatic stress)

2. S: ahh

3. T: um because the story is in the past

4. S: ah yes I know so er I have a was don't use the XXX (i.e. the apostrophe 's)

5. T: correct

6. S: ahh yes.

Extracts 1 and 2 are typical of the corrective feedback episodes in the conferences with the Graduated Group and the Explicit Group. They illustrate the key differences between the two types of feedback. The episodes were on average much longer in the Graduated Group than in the Explicit Group as a result of the teacher's need to search for the least explicit strategy to prompt self-correction. Also, as **Table 2** shows, the learners in the Graduated Group generally self-corrected whereas those in the Explicit Group either failed to produce the correct form or else just

produced uptake-with-repair following the teacher's correction. Thus, we can claim with confidence that the two types of feedback were implemented as intended and resulted in very different kinds of 'conversations' with the learners.

The answer to the first research question is, therefore, very clear. The Graduated Feedback was successful in enabling learners to self-correct. The teacher only supplied the correct form as a last resort so the learners in this group needed to make the correction themselves. In those episodes, where the teacher did provide the correction, it was nearly always uptaken by the learners. Out of a total of 221 Graduated Feedback episodes, only 8 failed to achieve resolution. In contrast, the Explicit Feedback was much less successful in achieving a resolution (out of 206 episodes 98 failed to be resolved) and when resolution did occur it consisted of uptake rather than self-correction.

Evidence of 'learning' as this is understood in SCT requires demonstrating that learners need less assistance to self-correct over time. It was investigated by examining the extent and nature of the feedback provided to both groups. The Explicit Feedback, by definition, afforded little possibility for reducing the assistance given to the learners, and there was no reduction in the number of strategies employed either within or between the two conferencing sessions. There was clearly much more opportunity for reducing assistance in the Graduated Feedback. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) claimed that over time the learners they investigated needed increasingly less explicit forms of feedback to self-correct their errors. The less explicit strategies listed in Appendix B are numbers (1)–(4) while the more explicit are (5)–(7), and (9). In Extract 1 above (the first corrective feedback episode this learner participated in), the teacher needed to use explicit strategies (i.e. (5) and (9)) for the learner to self-correct. In the second feedback episode in the same writing conference, shown in Extract 3, implicit strategies (i.e. (1) and (2)) sufficed. Here we can see that the teacher only needed to indicate that something was wrong with the learner's sentence for him to self-correct 'go' in this episode. A further implicit prompt enabled the learner to correct 'stay'. It would seem, then, that 'learning' in the SCT sense has taken place. However, when we look at a later episode in the same writing conference (see Extract 4), we find that once again explicit forms of correction are needed. In fact, in this extract the student failed to self-correct 'thank' even after very explicit assistance so that the teacher ended up doing it for him.

5.3. Extract 3 (Writing conferencing session 1 – Episodes 2 and 3)

1. T: ok 'sometime he go to work but often stay home' do you see any problem with that sentence?
2. S: sometime he got to work but he often stay home ah I think is it maybe this wen went
3. T: yes, correct um ... no no please don't write
4. S: oh
5. T: sorry
6. S: XXX
7. T: that's ok um that's correct un and there's another problem with this sentence as well ' sometime he go to work but often stay home'
8. S: hm, hm
9. T: there's another problem
10. S: he went to work but often stay home often er this is it's past? It should be stayed.
11. T: very good.

5.4. Extract 4 (Writing conferencing session 1 – Episode 16)

1. T: ok 'mr martin thank Mr Li for honest and give 1 million dollar to Mr Li'
2. S: hmhm
3. T: can you see a problem with that sentence?
4. S: mr martin thank thank erm than to Mr Martin no?
5. T: no
6. S: thanks – 's'
7. T: no but you're correct there's a problem with the verb
8. S: thank
9. T: you use 'thank'
10. S: thaaank hmm

11. T: 'Mr martin thanked Mr Li' because it is past time
 12. S: uhuh

Extracts 1, 3 and 4 all come from conferences involving the same learner. Table 4 shows the number and type of strategies used in the various episodes involving past tense errors in both writing conferences for this learner. It is clear that there is no systematic reduction in the explicitness of the teacher's strategies over time. However, it is also clear that if we were to 'pick and choose' episodes (for example, the episodes in Extracts 1 and 3 above) it would show that the level of assistance did reduce from one episode to another. But to claim that 'learning' has occurred it is necessary to show that there is a *consistent* pattern of reduction in the level of assistance provided and this requires examining *all* the feedback episodes for an individual learner, something that Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) did not do. Our answer to research question 2, therefore, is that there was no clear evidence to show that 'learning' in the SCT sense (i.e. Level 2 learning) had occurred.

6. Conclusion

The results of the study demonstrated that Graduated Feedback was effective in enabling learners to self-correct. In contrast, Explicit Correction was less effective in this respect and also the learners did not consistently uptake the correction provided by the teacher. Both sociocultural theory and cognitive-interactionist theories propose that self-correction and uptake involving repair are beneficial for learning. In this respect, therefore, Graduated Feedback might be considered more effective. However, the ability to self-correct or uptake is not in itself evidence that learners have fully internalized the correct form. Indeed, the fact that the teacher had to frequently correct the same error type with both groups of learners is evidence that 'full' development had not taken place.

Sociocultural theory claims that 'learning' is evident if there is systematic reduction in the degree of assistance needed for the learners to self-correct their errors over time. However, the results of the study failed to demonstrate this. The amount of assistance required was highly variable both within the same feedback session and between sessions. Thus the results fail to support the findings of Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) study. There is no consistent evidence showing that self-regulation was taking place. One explanation for the difference in the findings of Aljaafreh and Lantolf's study and this study might be differences in the design of the two studies. However, we consider this unlikely. The participants in both studies came from similar levels in University ESL programmes and were likely to have been of similar ages [3]. The procedures followed were the same. In both studies the learners completed their pieces of writing in class and then engaged with a researcher (who was not their regular teacher) in the feedback sessions. In both studies the graduated feedback was conducted in such a way as to 'offer just enough assistance to encourage and guide the learner to participate in the activity and to assume increased responsibility for arriving at the appropriate performance' (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994, p. 469). Also, both studies investigated articles and tense marking [4]. The explanation for the difference in the results probably lies in how the data were analyzed. Aljaafreh and Lantolf provided a microgenetic analysis of selective feedback episodes with no explanation of why these episodes had been chosen. In this study, a more systematic, quantitative analysis of the feedback episodes was undertaken in addition to a qualitative analysis of illustrative protocols.

It is not possible to conclude which type of feedback — graduated or explicit — is the more effective. This was not the purpose of our study. However, we would point out that Explicit Feedback can be executed easily and quickly and thus consumes much less time than Graduated Feedback. In this respect, perhaps, it can be considered more efficient. It would be possible to justify the time taken to execute Graduated Feedback if it could be shown that this aids self-regulation. But there was no evidence that this was the case. The results of this study suggest that the current pedagogic emphasis on eliciting self-correction from learners bears some rethinking if the aim is to correct in an efficient manner.

7. Notes

1. The sample was a convenience one. The lower-proficiency students were chosen to receive graduated feedback on the grounds that they were more likely to need the extended assistance this provided than the higher-proficiency students.

2. One reviewer noted that the length of the two feedback treatments was very different. This is correct. However, it does not constitute a threat to the design of the study as the difference in length simply reflects the difference in type. Graduated feedback is often lengthy; explicit feedback is shorter.
3. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) did not give the ages of their participants.
4. Aljaafreh and Lantolf also investigated prepositions and modal verbs.

Appendix A

Read the following story and make sure you understand it.

- If you want to you can look up any words you don't know
- Take notes about the key people and key events in the story.

When you have finished reading the story we will take it away and your notes and ask you to write it out in your own words in as much detail as possible.

Puppies for sale

A farmer had some puppies he needed to sell. He painted a sign advertising the puppies and nailed it to a post. As he was hitting the last nail, he felt someone pull on his overalls. He looked down into the eyes of a little boy.

'Mister,' he said, 'I want to buy one of your puppies.'

'Well,' said the farmer, 'these puppies come from fine parents and cost a lot of money.'

The boy dropped his head for a moment. Then reaching deep into his pocket, he pulled out a handful of change and held it up to the farmer.

'I've got thirty-nine cents. Is that enough to have a look at the puppies?'

'Sure,' said the farmer.

He whistled. 'Here, Dolly!' he called.

Dolly ran out from the doghouse followed by four little puppies. The little boy pressed his face against the fence. His eyes danced with delight as he saw the puppies.

As the dogs made their way to the fence, the little boy noticed something else stirring inside the doghouse. Slowly another puppy appeared; this one was much smaller than the others. Out it came. Then in a somewhat awkward manner the little puppy began walking with difficulty toward the others, doing its best to catch up.

'I want that puppy,' the little boy said, pointing to the runt.

The farmer knelt down at the boy's side and said, 'Son, you don't want that puppy. He will never be able to run and play with you like these other dogs would'.

With that the little boy stepped back from the fence, reached down, and began rolling up one leg of his trousers. He revealed a steel brace running down both sides of his leg attaching itself to a specially made shoe. Looking back up at the farmer, he said,

'You see, sir, I don't run too well myself and he will need someone who understands.'

The world is full of people who need someone who understands.

Appendix B

Coding for teacher's work to resolve error

1. Read sentence/clause containing error
2. Indicate there is something wrong with the sentence/clause
3. Narrow down to smaller unit
4. Use a metalinguistic term to help locate error e.g. 'there's a missing word here', 'there is a missing word before newspaper', 'you need an article before incredible'

5. Give a metalinguistic description of error e.g. ‘you’ve written the verb in the present tense’ ‘the problem is with the verb looks’
6. Give a metalinguistic/grammar explanation e.g. someone who *understands* because it’s third person
7. Supply correct form
8. Indicate that learner’s attempt at correcting error is not successful
 - (a) Direct rejection of error
 - (b) Indicates learner is closing in on correction
9. Reject learner’s incorrect identification of error.

Coding for resolution

1. Episode is resolved by
 - (a) Student self-corrects
 - (b) Student uptakes correction
2. Teacher acknowledges student’s correction
3. There is no resolution.

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