

A Close Look at Sixty Years of Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

Debates about the value of applying corrective feedback in language teaching and learning has been prominent in the recent years by respecting the past, understanding the current values, proofs and directions and finding new perspectives to change the future of corrective feedback (CF). The purpose of this article is to examine how CF found its way through the history of its development from 1950s to the new millennium and to present a review of CF in English language teaching. A close look at the history of CF helps teachers and researchers become familiar with different views about the CF and change their methodological perspectives on CF and try to apply the research findings to language pedagogy. The article concludes with some general suggestions about standard ways of receiving feedback by students, the development of CF through complex systems, and the development of CF for specific purposes.

Keywords: corrective feedback, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s to new millennium

INTRODUCTION

The current familiar term “Corrective feedback” has been variously named in the history of the fields of second language teaching and learning, linguistics and psychology and unfortunately “to a large extent, researchers in these three approaches have been isolated from one another, each ignorant of the others’ stands on the issues” (Schachter, 1991, p.89).

Table 1. Various terms for CF

Field	Term
Pedagogical field of second language teaching/learning	Corrective feedback
Linguistic field of language acquisition	Negative data or Negative evidence
Psychological field of concept learning	Negative feedback

The various terms for CF in their respective fields have been mainly used for *descriptive or explanatory purposes*. In this respect Schachter (1991) presents a summary of commonly used fields which apply corrective feedback terms for their *descriptive or explanatory purposes* in Table 2. According to these fields CF is provided for the second language (L2) learners, first language (L1) learning child, or the experimental subjects (as the case may be).

Table 2. Commonly used fields which apply corrective feedback terms

Input in	Feedback on output for	By
First language (L1) learning	(L1) learning child	Other native speakers such as parents
Second language (L2) learning	(L2) learning student	Teachers or other peers
Experimental subject	Research Subjects (as the case may be)	Experimenter

The non-interactive input in the form of texts that learners listen to or read or the input from different interactions help learners to produce output and to receive feedback on their attempts at production, in particular feedback that points out and corrects their errors i.e., CF (Ellis, 2008). During oral or written interaction, participants may negotiate for meaning due to a lack of understanding. As part of this negotiation, *learners receive feedback* on their language production, potentially helping to draw attention to linguistic problems and leading them to notice gaps between features of their inter-language and the target language.

By providing learners with information regarding their linguistic and communicative accomplishments or failures, this *interactional feedback* creates a favorable environment for L2 development and a tendency for researchers to study different aspects of CF.

We limit our attention herein to the type of CF provided to the second language learning student, but we sometimes needed to focus on negative data or negative evidence in linguistic field of language acquisition or negative feedback in the psychological field of concept learning when we felt they are integrated with each other or when they could help us create new perspectives.

1950S

A glance through the previous decades of language teaching shows that the combination of "feedback", which was stemmed from Weiner's (1948) cybernetic notion, described processes by which a control unit gets information about the effects and consequences of its actions. It was later on used in different fields and particularly in educational settings (Ahangari & Amirzadeh, 2011). Therefore, it is not weird that 1950s were relatively quiet for pedagogically inclined applied linguists to deal with CF.

A slight historical glance back at the study of SLA in the 1950s & 1960s quickly reveals that for a long time there had been no principled approach to language teaching based on error, for a long time CF meant nothing more than simple corrections of the learner's speech production, but in the late 1950's and 1960's this started to change because increased political, educational and occupational opportunities for communication among countries created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages. In 1950s alone we saw the emergence of contribution to the avoidance of this sin, "the error" and overcoming its influence (Lennon, 1991).

Some of the earliest error correction research of 1950s and 1960s was in linguistics such as the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis and some in psychology such as the Behaviorism. At that time error was considered to result from differences between the native and the target language and teaching aimed to prevent errors occurring and grammatical accuracy was stressed and, thus, errors were avoided at all costs. Since then there have been a number of different understandings about the causes of errors and how best to deal with them in teaching (Dabaghi, 2010).

A typical research example is Uriel Weinreich's (1953) publication "Languages in Contact" which was primarily interested in how different languages influence each other when they come in contact. This phenomenon which later was called "*language interference*" came from the influence that usually the *stronger language* has on the *weaker one*. Weinreich's great contribution was to posit a psychological or psycholinguistic *explanation* for language interference. This view put language teachers in a quandary of hope and mystery: how was one to apply this revolutionary view of language in practice? Weinreich also suggested that any speaker of two languages (the *stronger language* and the *weaker one*) will tend to identify sounds, words, structures and meanings in one language (probably the *stronger language*) with corresponding elements in the other language (perhaps the *weaker language*), that is to say, speakers of two or more languages are engaged in a systematic process of making "interlingual identifications" (Weinreich 1953, p.7 & Lennon 1991, p. 2).

The sudden popularity of contrastive analysis school of linguistics put language teachers in another dilemma of courage and puzzle: how was it possible to identify the areas of difficulty a particular foreign language would present for native speakers of another language? Robert Lado one of the pioneers of contrastive analysis tried to answer the question in his book "Linguistics Across Cultures (1957)", by systematically comparing the two languages and cultures.

In the pedagogical field of second language teaching and learning, helping the students get the correct answer (CF) was considered absolutely essential. If the students made errors or did not know the answer, the teacher supplied them with the correct answer (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 19).

In spite of such pedagogical persistence on error correction there had been no scientific research advocates. It was an essential activity for which there was no theory. There is

no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory. If we did not have access to the literature that offers such a rationale or justification, perhaps it was our fault after all.

The widely embraced behaviorist view grew into favor in the 1950s. The most controversial claims came from the field of psychology.

When applied to second or foreign language learning, the behaviorist view assumed that language learning was advanced when the learners made repeated and active responses to the stimuli. These responses were then reinforced when repeated time after time to shape and form habits that consisted of automated responses elicited by a given stimulus. Therefore the implications for language teaching were that language learning would take place through exact imitation and repetition of the same structures over and over. Furthermore, this new theory amassed evidence that that teachers needed to focus their teaching on structures which were believed to be difficult. By considering this implication, it can be inferred that error correction or CF provided by language teachers could serve as the stimuli to which language learners would actively respond in order to promote effective language learning or acquisition (Corpuz, 2011, p. 8).

The behaviorist view of error correction was destined to grow into disfavor at the end of 1950s. Challenges came from the big splash that Chomsky (1959) and latter his MIT colleagues made.

According to Chomsky, language learners create novel structures that they have never learned or received before, rather than simply reproducing sentences or utterances to suit particular situations. Learners are able to create new sentences by internalizing rules, rather than a string of words. Chomsky also states that the process of language learning is not only complex but also abstract. Some of the structural aspects of language could not possibly be learned by students on the basis of language stimuli to which learners are exposed. This criticism led to the decline of the behaviorist theory for error correction, and linguists started viewing the nature of learning within a naturalistic and communicative perspective. Furthermore, it can be inferred from Chomsky's criticism that providing error correction may have a minimal effect on student's language development because structural aspects of a target language are learned through internalizing the rules of the language, rather than repeated responses to stimuli (Corpuz, 2011, p. 9).

The continuous parroting of potentially rote material was not creating communicatively competent learners because behaviorism advocated a very mechanistic approach to avoiding and correcting errors. "A great effort was made to get students produce error-free utterances, and if errors occurred, they were immediately corrected and followed by repetition of the correct patterns" (Hendrickson, 1978, p. 388).

The Audiolingual Method (ALM), based on behaviorism and structuralism, was very popular in L2 classrooms. Error correction was seen as helping learners to form good habits by giving correct responses instead of making structural mistakes. Behaviorists viewed errors as inevitable, but strove to avoid and overcome them by providing speedy examples of correct responses (Leaph, 2011).

The CF in 1950s according to Frisby (1957) was mainly considered to have three processes in learning a language “receiving the knowledge from the teacher or the educational materials, fixing it in the memory by repetition, and using it in actual practice until it becomes a personal skill” (Marquis 2005, p.2).

1960S

Frequently cited studies of errors and CF in 1960s are Brooks (1964), Skinner (1957, 1968), Ferguson (1965), Mackey (1965), Corder (1967) and Selinker (1969). The 1960s is a significant decade for the development of CF because of “the emergence of second language acquisition (SLA) as a significant field of enquiry within applied linguistics” Waters (2007, p.5).

A historical glance back at literature of language teaching in the 1960s quickly reveals that CF in the 1960s seemed to be controlled with linguistics approaches Corder (1967) and audiolingual methodology Pitman (1963); Brooks (1964), Selinker (1969) and especially Brooks (1960) who believed that providing corrections was the teacher's job.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s language teaching practices were based on the idea that language learning occurred through imitation Skinner (1957), and that this process could take place in the classroom through what was called dialog memorization and pattern drills Hendrickson (1978). Since this “audio-lingual” method placed its emphasis on imitation, L2 language teachers were trained to correct students’ errors as soon as they occurred and the teachers asked their students to repeat the correct form.

Based on Brooks (1960) well known quote “In such teaching contexts errors were likened to sin; Brooks believed that like sin, error had to be avoided and its influence must have overcome, but its presence was to be expected” (p.58), language teaching guides then suggested methods which would help stop or minimize error production. Brooks’ (1960) logic was presented in his guide by stating that avoiding error was a principal method and the way he presented was to observe and practice the right model but it was not clear which model he meant and the teacher had to practice the model a sufficient number of times. If I could have visited Brooks I would have asked him how many times would be a sufficient number of times for different sexes, ages, nationalities, cultures and students with different native language backgrounds and probably in different regions with different temperatures. Brooks also claimed that overcoming an error had a principal way and recommended to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model. We searched

the research literature of the 1960s, I supposed that if we couldn't find any experimental data to prove Brooks claims it must be my fault.

Little by little the 1960s made CF more complex and valuable as researchers started coming up with new theoretical bases for CF first the errors should have been considered "venial sins" and not "actual sins" anymore and gradually as valuable assets and not sins anymore as they were considered to in 1950s and in the beginning of the 1960s, so by the mid-1960s, some L1 acquisition researchers such as Mackey (1965) and Corder (1967) tried to demonstrate that "children's linguistic errors were 'systematic', they highlighted two issues the first one was that children did things that they had not been taught to do before and the second was that they all succeeded in learning the language of their caregivers" (Nicholas et al., 2002)

Another issue that shaped the 1960s was Chomsky's (1965) that raised serious questions by stating that children constructed a grammar by using input together with innate linguistic knowledge to formulate hypotheses about possible grammatical rules, test them out on further input, holding, revising or abandoning them as necessary Schachter (1991).

A special version of CF in first language acquisition entitled "expansions" was first observed and developed probably by Brown and Bellugi (1964) with which the caregivers rephrased the child's incomplete telegraphic utterance in a complete sentence as an adult's response to the child's attempt. Later on, in response to this idea Cazden (1965) found that "modeling" led to more developmental progress than "expansions" of the children's utterances (Farrar, 1990, p. 613, Nicholas et al. 2002, p. 723).

The next issue that demonstrated the gradual and dynamic nature of CF and also led to the rejection of the views of the previous decade was Corder (1967), according to which "supplying the correct form is not a suitable form of CF because it prevents the language learners from testing alternative hypotheses" (p. 168). He also proposed that pushing language learners in their output, rather than helping them with correct forms, could benefit their interlanguage development. He also focused on pushing language learners in their output, adapting teachers/researchers to learners' needs, studying the errors to see if the student's second language has developed and if teachers' training methods and techniques have been effectiveness. In addition to those mentioned, Corder highly contributed to the development of CF that was underway.

The 1960s was a period of adolescence for CF. Subsequent decades have seen the field expand enormously. The researchers in this decade tried to make CF more complex by elaborating new terms and posing new questions related to CF, new terms such as "uptake" Austin (1962), "input" and "intake" Corder (1967) and key issues such as who should provide the CF (Brooks 1960), how should they be corrected and which specific errors should be corrected (Corder 1967). To address the first issue the audio-lingual teaching methods believed that providing corrections was the teacher's job Brooks

(1960), but later studies dealing with CF concluded that teachers were interrupting their students too often to provide explicit corrections and lengthy explanations. To resolve the second issue Corder (1967) pointed out that providing feedback in an explicit way may be ineffective. To answer the third issue Corder (1967) distinguished “error” which is a result of lack of knowledge and “mistake” which is a performance phenomenon. They must have been very proud of themselves because researchers of the new millennium still have controversies on the ideas they tackled in 1960s.

The controversy over the topic of error correction, however, still remained unresolved in the 1960s. For years and years, error correction had been a matter of hot altercation and strife among language practitioners and researchers. Attitudes towards error correction ranges from the utter abolition of errors before 1960s to strong disapproval of error correction as being noxious and unjustified in the late 1970s and to a more serious view of the need and value of error correction in the 1970s and 1980s (Salteh & Sadeghi, 2012).

1970S

Frequently cited studies of errors in 1970s are Selinker (1972), Corder (1976), Hendrickson 1978, Chomsky 1974 and Chomsky, 1979. A historical glance back at literature of language teaching in the 1970s quickly reveals that second language acquisition (SLA) was established as a significant field of enquiry within applied linguistics Waters (2007) and the CF of the 1970s seems to be controlled at the beginning with contrastive analysis and error analysis and later on with applied linguistics and SLA researchers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several researches such as Nemser (1971); Selinker (1972); Adjemian (1976); Corder (1976) pointed out that the language of second language learners is systematic and that language learner errors are not random mistakes but evidence of rule-governed behavior.

In the beginning of 1970s the CF was still under influence from Contrastive Analysis and Error analysis to transformational-generative grammar in linguistics and from behavioristic view of language acquisition to a more cognitive view of language acquisition in psychology and from audiolingualism and its mechanistic approach to a more humanistic approach of language teaching (Hendrickson, 1978).

In the early 1970s Wardhaugh (1970) who was under the influence of Contrastive Analysis and Error analysis pointed out the *strong version & the weak version* of Contrastive Analysis hypothesis and the third *version* of the Contrastive Analysis was exhibited by Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) to help describe the function of errors of the 1970s. Wardhaugh (1970) helped hit the final nails in the coffin of "Contrastive Analysis" where he pointed out that the CA hypothesis can exist in two versions: a strong version and a weak version and then Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970, p. 184) helped bury it by third version of the Contrastive Analysis. None of the versions could help predict many problems which are apparent in learner's actual performance. That is why the enigma of CF continued through the history to the new millennium. "Contrastive

Analysis which was criticized by the supporters of error analysis focused on differences between L1 and L2 and it ignored various factors which might affect the second language learner's performance such as his learning and communication strategies, training procedures, overgeneralization, ... and does not predict many problems which are apparent in learner's actual performance ..." (Khansir, 2012, p. 1028).

As an alternative to contrastive analysis, error analysis which had emerged in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues Rustipa (2011) tried to help teachers find the difficult areas that the students faced. It was also supposed to help teachers to focus on comparing language learners' and the errors made in the target language to allow for prediction of the difficulties involved in acquiring a second language (Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982). To support such comparisons Richards (1971), who was under influence of error analysis, classified errors observed in the acquisition of English as a second language as a result of overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. Dulay and Burt (1972) also gave their own categorization of student errors as goofs, developmental goofs, ambiguous goofs, unique goofs. Corder (1975) mentioned that there are three types of errors such as errors caused by the learner's over-generalizing of rules, errors caused by teaching techniques Schuniann and Stenson (1975) and Svartvik (1973) and errors caused by first language interference.

The decline of error analysis soon started by many criticisms from Brown and Hanlon (1970) and Chastain (1971) to Levine (1975), Chaudron (1977) and Schachter et al. (1977). Schachter et al. (1977) for example argued that "the analysis of errors in isolation ... excludes the other corpus from consideration, the classification of errors that are identified is not usually proper, statements of error-frequently are quite misleading, the identification of points of difficulty in target language is usually not very correct, the ascription of causes to systematic errors may not be right, and the biased nature of sampling procedures supplies another point of criticism of EA ... data collection and selection of informants is biased and ...drawn statistically significant findings from such samples may be a questionable practice" (Khansir 2012, p. 1030).

The voice of language teachers could also be heard from the beginning of the 1970s, a typical example is Chastain (1971) who began to stress the use of language for communication and instead of asking their students to produce error-free sentences in the foreign language, started *motivating their students to simply speak*. Teachers were encouraged to create an atmosphere in which the students felt comfortable to talk, an atmosphere in which students were *not constantly being corrected* or urged to produce completely flawless sentences Chastain (1971). These views began to have their influence on methodological suggestions for the classroom and they continued to have force.

By the end of 1970s the researches based on learners' uptake and the effects of recasts and prompts started to emerge. Chaudron (1977) for example figured out that "uptake

is a main immediate measurement of the effectiveness of CF because he believed that uptake with repair provides evidence that learners have noticed teachers' corrections and are able to deploy them while no uptake indicates learners' failure in noticing the corrective intention of the feedback" (Quoted in Ding 2012, p.90). He also believed that "first and foremost, teachers' intention to correct learners' ill-formed utterances should be *signaled* somehow: for example, by repeating learner errors with heightened intonation or paralinguistic cues (i.e., hand signals, a funny face, and raised eyebrows). Chaudron (1977) on the basis of his analyses of students' performance in the classroom found that teachers' corrections that worked best were those that clearly indicated to the student the locus of the error" (Kim 2014, p. 11).

At the end of 1970s Hendrickson (1978) helped to change the direction of the research by framing the five unanswered questions about CF such as (Should learners' errors be corrected? When should learners' errors be corrected? Which errors should be corrected? How should errors be corrected? Who should do the correcting?), and many researchers devoted their effort into this direction.

One of the souvenirs of the 1970s is that second language researchers did not agree about the terms, categories and types of the errors. All in all, the CF of the 1970s was mostly descriptive in nature. This decade complicated the debate that had started before and the complexity proceeded into the 1980s in which the certainties of the 1970s have disappeared. This debate seeded new views not only in first language and second language acquisition but also in experimental research and was mainly approached by linguists, psychologists and researchers in SLA.

1980S TO PRESENT

Since the beginning of 1980s there had been a plethora of qualitative, quantitative, statistical, interpretative, experimental and non-experimental researches related to the highly controversial issues of CF.

By the advent and entrance of research techniques in different research areas in SLA in 1980s and 1990s we can see that CF is beginning to deal with almost everything in SLA such as "interaction" Chun et al., (1982), "Classroom practice" Krashen (1982) & Seliger & Long (1983), "Teacher-student interaction in bilingual classrooms" Nystrom (1983), "CF in native nonnative discourse" Day et al. (1984), "student writing" Zamel (1985), "Focus-on-form and CF in Communicative Language Teaching: Effects on second language acquisition" Lightbown & Spada (1990) etc. the list is hopefully endless. The research power has helped researchers to discover the effects, relationships, differences, similarities, causes of CF with, on, in or over any possible issues in SLA.

Since 1980s we have seen that the research questions based on CF are getting longer, more complicated and more professional. The issues of CF have increased in a great extent. In this respect Kim (2014) summarized the current issues of not only the first language acquisition but also the issues which are being debated in CF in second

language acquisition such as “learners’ noticing of CF (CF as a trigger for learners’ noticing of gaps, learners’ noticing and the extent of explicitness of CF and direct measure of learners’ noticing of CF), the mismatches between teachers’ intentions and learners’ interpretation (Learners’ internal systems and fine-tuning CF) and the roles of different type of implicit CF: self-generated repairs vs. recasts (Types of L2 Acquisition and Learners’ Immediate Incorporation of Feedback)” (Kim 2014, pp.6-18). In the recent decades we had also been concerned with many hot issues of CF in the computer assisted language learning such as Razagifard and Rahimpour (2010), Faghieh and Hosseini (2012) and Hosseini and Hosseini (2014). It is clearly impossible cope with all topics and issues of the aforementioned field in one single study.

There also appears to be a growing consensus among the majority of researchers concerning the significance of the role played by CF in the process of SLA both in oral and written discourse Tatawy (2002).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Since 1950s we had been dealing with complexity and constant change in the researches related to CF. As Farhady (2011) wrote in his book “following any theory would give different definitions for the variable under investigation. ... He also believes the *measurability* of [a] variable will change because of the way it is defined” (P. 77). The definitions offered for “error” and “corrective feedback” in a particular research project may not be the most agreed upon or acceptable definitions. However, within the context of the research, the readers will understand what they stand for.

Considering Farhady (2011), it can be inferred that if theories vary then the definitions and the measurability of CF and errors will vary too. Probably that is why “corrective feedback” and “error” have had so many definitions so far. From 1950s to the end of 1970s we can hardly observe general agreement or concord among researchers about CF in different fields but the growing consensus since 1980s will be definitely more meaningful, intense, international and for specific purposes in the future decades. One suggestion to get to such CF ideal is to culturally and educationally prepare, motivate and teach *our capable language learners* to search and ask for standard ways to receive CF for as many mistakes or errors they face as soon as possible in their language learning process from reliable sources and people with standard tools, techniques and discourses in different cultures.

Another suggestion is to study CF through “complex systems” Freeman & Cameron (2008). CF seems to be a complex phenomenon. This complexity is reflected in the controversies that surround such issues as whether to correct, what to correct, how to correct, and when to correct. According to Ellis & Jiang (2009, p.15) “different perspectives on CF are offered by interactionist/cognitive theories and sociocultural theory”; but probably it is also beneficial to invite other theorists from other branches of SLA science to focus, emerge and establish new perspectives on CF. One way to cope with this complexity as language teachers is to seek comfort of routines in language

teaching and another way is to downplay the constant change that we experience by turning the living, dynamic world of language teaching in to named objects and thinking about them as fixed entities, as lesson planning, teaching, motivating, giving and receiving feedback, testing or learning. According to Freeman & Cameron (2008) “the power of the field of complex systems comes not only from its application to many different disciplines, but also from the fact that it can be applied to many different levels” (p. 1). CF can also be generally applied to many sciences of human and specifically to SLA field of study. “The agents or elements in a complex system change and adapt in response to feedback ... the complex systems have no distinct permanent boundaries; they are not a ‘thing’ themselves. They exist only through the fluxes that feed them, and they disappear or become moribund in the absence of such fluxes” (Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 2). CF which seems to be a complex system comes in to being due to certain conditions, and it is sustained by them. When these conditions change, such as when mistakes or errors appear in L1, L2 orally or written, CF types are changed, sustained or through the learners’ improvements it is eventually decreased. Of course the overall CF process or system remains and if the conditions that cause the CF prevail, then a new type of CF might be spawned further. However, the particular perturbation caused by the original conditions disappears in the absence of the fluxes that fed the CF. So it is suggested that CF be scrutinized through the complex systems theories.

The next suggestion is that it is time to change the teachers’ point of view from CF as a general term toward CF for specific purposes. If we can develop language for specific purposes we can also plan, design and implement CF for specific purposes in first language acquisition, second language acquisition, computer assisted language learning and experimental research environments.

CF has reached an exciting stage in its development. As CF researchers increase our connection with other branches of science such as linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, language testing etc. we continue to push the field forward, uncovering new insights and helping both researchers and practitioners reach a better understanding of the dynamic, socially situated, and cognitive processes of acquiring a second language through CF.

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