Coded Corrective Feedback: In Search of a Compromise

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Deviation is a natural phenomenon in language learning and indeed in learning any new skill. It is a necessary part of the learning process since no learner can leap from zero competence to full native or near-native competence in a day. Language learner's deviations are by definition due to incomplete mastery of the code. However, learners may also deviate from an intended linguistic norm for a variety of psycho-physiological reasons such as fatigue, quick writing or speaking, carelessness, divided attention, memory lapses and so forth. The latter type of deviation is random and often referred to as performance deviation, including mistakes, slips and lapses. Deviations due to the incomplete knowledge of the language are competence deviations and are referred to as "errors" (e.g., Brown, 1987; Corder, 1981; Ellis, 1990; Michaelides, 1990). Hence, the terms 'mistakes or slips' and 'errors' are used in this study to refer to 'performance' and 'competence' deviations respectively.

A very common practice in second or foreign language teaching is the detection and correction of mistakes and errors in the hope of enhancing the learning process. Provision of corrective feedback is deemed important in classroom learning situations where the students' exposure to the language is not rich enough for self-correction and rapid learning as in naturalistic situations where the language develops without deliberate teaching or correction. This article sheds light on techniques used in providing corrective feedback on the written compositions of EFL university students, particularly the use of correction codes or symbols.

Mini-Survey Findings

Language teachers provide corrective feedback in a variety of ways:

a.   Mere indication of the location of the deviation

b.   Writing correction codes or symbols

c.   Giving rules and explanations leading to the correct forms

d.   Direct correction by writing the correct forms

For the purpose of this study, these four techniques were presented to 102 Arabic-speaking EFL university students. They were asked to indicate the technique they preferred.

They were also asked to say briefly (in only two lines) why they preferred that particular technique. Most of the students (99 of them) preferred the use of correction symbols. These ninety students unanimously said they wanted to be given the chance to correct their deviations by themselves. Hence this article is intended to discuss the rationale behind the students' preference by listing as many reasons as possible justifying the use of coded feedback when correcting the written compositions of EFL university students.

Competence vs. Performance Deviations

As discussed earlier, the students' deviations fall into two categories: "competence" deviations (i.e., errors) and "performance" deviations (i.e., mistakes). The errors are expected to decrease with increased proficiency. Mistakes and slips, on the other hand, may not be affected by the progress made in learning EFL since they are not due to the lack of competence in the language. In other words, university students, after nine or more years of EFL study, are not expected to make the same amount of errors they used to make at the stages of their general education. Errors are distinguished from mistakes and slips on the grounds that the students cannot correct themselves in case of errors (e.g., Corder, 1981). Some researchers, however, believe that it is not always easy to differentiate between these two types of deviation. Van Els *et al* (1984), for example, maintain that a learner may be able to correct himself on the basis of his explicit knowledge of the rules but continue to produce the same incorrect forms in spontaneous language production. Faerch and Kasper (1984) and Lengo (1995) attribute this to the instability of the learner's competence. McKeating (1981) points out that self-correction is not a reliable criterion to tell whether a deviation is an error or a mistake. He says that a learner may know that one of two forms is correct and when the teacher indicates a form as incorrect, the learner knows that the other form is correct and produces it.

Hussein (1971) and Xiaochun (1990) suggest a two-step procedure to differentiate between errors and mistakes. First the student revises his work to correct any deviations he can identify, then the teacher points out the remaining incorrect forms and asks the student to correct them. The deviations that the student can correct will be mistakes while the ones that remain uncorrected will be errors. However, a deviation may remain uncorrected simply because it escapes the teacher's or the student's observation. Another problem in following these steps is that, in large EFL classes, teachers have neither the time nor the energy to go through their students' compositions more than once. The difficulty of distinguishing errors from mistakes combined with the difficulty of correcting students' compositions more than once constitute grounds for using correction symbols. Giving rules and explanation leading to the correct forms may in many cases be a waste of time and effort since not all of the students' deviations are errors.

Mere underlining of a deviation may confuse the student and, sometimes, lead him to replace an incorrect form by another incorrect one. For example, if the teacher underlines a verb because of its incorrect tense, the student might think that it is a vocabulary or spelling deviation.

Hypothesis Verification

Many researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1982; Odlin, 1986; Zobl, 1995) talk about acquisition and learning as two different processes of language development. Acquisition refers to the process of internalizing a linguistic form through subconscious assimilation as a result of exposure. Learning, on the other hand, refers to the process of paying conscious attention to the formal features and patterns of the language. The resulting types of linguistic knowledge are referred to as implicit and explicit knowledge respectively. The "learning" process involves hypothesis formation and verification; the internalisation and use of linguistic forms by observing the language data and arriving at a rule. In EFL situations, this universal rule-discovery process is aided by grammar instruction and error correction as a short cut to the learning of the forms and structures which the limited classroom input may not cover (e.g., Terrell, 1991).

As discussed earlier, the 90 students who preferred the use of correction symbols wanted to correct their deviations by themselves. It was indicated earlier that the use of symbols gives the students the chance to correct their performance deviations (i.e., mistakes). This technique also gives them the chance to verify their hypotheses. As McKeating (1981) points out, when the student knows that one of two forms is correct but he does not know which, the teacher's indication of the incorrect form may lead the student to modify his incorrect hypothesis (see also Edge, 1989; James, 1998; Michaelides, 1990; Norrish, 1983). Needless to say, if the student manages to correct the deviation, it will be difficult to tell whether it was an error or a mistake. However, the student might not be able to correct the deviation simply because he does not know any other form or he might replace the incorrect form by another incorrect one. In this case, it will be reasonable to provide the correct form directly if the teacher has the time and effort to follow the steps proposed by Hussein (1971) and Xiaochun (1990).

The Need for Feedback

Some researchers (e.g., Bolitho, 1995; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994) and language teachers maintain that the students need and want feedback on their production believing that it is useful. Feedback refers to any kind of response from the teacher to the students' output. It could be positive or negative. Negative or corrective feedback ranges from mere indication of deviations to lengthy instructions and explanations. Hence, when we say the students in classroom learning situations need or want

feedback, it does not necessarily mean that they need or want their deviations replaced by correct forms. In other words, the need for feedback could not be taken to refer to the need for the provision of the correct forms or rules and explanations. Horner (1988:213) equates feedback with direct correction when he says "feedback is an essential part of language acquisition, and correction is generally accepted as its classroom equivalent." According to him, correction is the teacher's response to the deviations by providing the correct linguistic forms. However, in natural language acquisition situations, linguistic deviations go uncorrected in most cases and feedback is usually on content rather than on form. Thus, feedback is a cover term for both positive and negative response to form as well as content.

The need for feedback can be understood as the need for information indicating the extent of learning rather than the extent of 'not learning.' Every time the students look forward to seeing their compositions free from deviations and hence free from corrections. No student would be glad to see his work covered with negative feedback, otherwise the teacher would not see signs of disappointment and frustration on the faces of his students when they see their compositions cluttered up in red. The need for and the usefulness of feedback may be motivated by the fact that it results in temporary improvement of the students' accuracy. The deviations disappear when the students rewrite the compositions incorporating the teacher's corrections. Once they are asked to write on another topic or on the same topic sometime later, the students make the same mistakes and errors. This has lead Ellis (1990) and Truscott (1996) to conclude that error treatment is not likely to have any effect on language development.

Extensive reviews of error correction literature and the findings of experimental studies comparing various ways of providing corrective feedback (e.g., Hillocks, 1982; Horner, 1988; Kepner, 1991; Leki, 1990; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986) indicate that there is no significant difference between direct correction, naming errors, and offering rules and explanations. Such a conclusion should encourage composition teachers to use correction symbols, a technique which can save their time and effort and at the same time satisfy the students' need for feedback and self-correction.

Teachers' Inconsistency

Language teaching research is rich in statements about the teachers' inconsistency in their provision of corrective feedback (e.g., Ellis, 1990; Nystrom, 1983; Truscott, 1996). Teachers may either use more than one technique simultaneously, use one technique in one assignment and use another technique in another assignment, or use one technique with one student and a different technique with another student. Allwright (1975) believes that the teacher should not be consistent in order to cater for the individual differences between the students. However, one of the main reasons of the teach-

ers' inconsistency is the large classes they teach—at least 35 students in a class—and the large number of deviations - mistakes and errors - in one composition, especially in low proficiency EFL situations. In such situations it might be nowhere near possible for a teacher to get to know the individual differences between the students.

When providing feedback on the written compositions of a large class, the teacher may begin with a combination of two or more techniques and end up only indicating the location of the deviations without even naming them irrespective of the students' individual differences. If a teacher teaches more than one large class, selection of certain deviations for treatment may not resolve the problem of inconsistency. Some 'mistakes' may get corrected and some 'errors' may go uncorrected. Faced with the problem of large classes and the complexity of the process of responding to deviations, some teachers give up not only the idea of correcting students' compositions but also the idea of giving them writing assignments. Thus, the use of clear and understandable coded corrective feedback might be a good idea to alleviate the task.

Psychological and Educational Considerations

According to James (1998:354) "learning is most successful when it involves only a limited amount of stress, when students are relaxed and confident and enjoying their learning." Such an environment conducive to learning could be created, among other things, by adopting a less threatening and less traumatic technique of providing corrective feedback. The teacher should not dominate the treatment process by depriving the students of the opportunity to correct themselves. As discussed earlier, in addition to performance deviations (mistakes and slips), there might be some "errors" which a learner can correct by modifying his incorrect hypotheses. Provision of coded feedback can help in self-correction of such deviations, thus making the environment more hospitable and face-saving (see also Van Lier, 1998). The use of correction codes that name the deviations can be less frustrating to the students than the other types of corrective feedback that cover the composition with the teacher's red ink. Self-correction is also believed to lead to better retention, (e.g., Edge, 1989; Leki 1991).

Regarding the issue of the individual differences discussed earlier, provision of corrective feedback by means of using symbols respects these differences. One student's mistake may be another student's error and one student's error today may become a mistake at some point in the course of learning. Even in small classes, students differ in the number and type of the hypotheses they formulate and in the number of the incorrect hypotheses they are ready to modify and incorporate in their interlanguage. In the face of such a complex learning process, a lot of the explanations, rules and direct corrections provided by the teacher may be a waste of time and effort. Such variations among the students in hypothesis formation and verification could be addressed by

using correction symbols which give the students the opportunity to deal with their deviations according to their own needs, interests and learning stages.

The use of correction symbols is in line with the problem-solving and discovery approach to education. Involvement of the students in the correction process can also be a step toward a learner-centered approach to language teaching. Giving the students the chance to correct their own deviations means acknowledging their ability to shoulder the responsibility of their own learning, thus making for learner autonomy. As in the other aspects of learner-centered language teaching, the role of the teacher will be seen as one of guiding students rather than spoon-feeding them. The students' own contribution to the learning process through self-correction, among other things, entails a change from the traditional teacher-centered situation where the teacher is seen as an authority, a source of knowledge who does most of the work in the classroom, (McGreal, 1989). One more reason that could be added to problem-solving, learner autonomy, and learner involvement is that students' self-correction of their deviations "helps them develop a self-critical attitude" (Xiaochun, 1990:34). Furthermore, self-correction, according to Michaelides (1990), trains the students in using their power of reasoning.

Conclusion

Provision of corrective feedback is a long standing tradition in language teaching. Some teachers believe that it is useful; others feel that they are obliged to respond to their students' production even if the students do not ask for feedback. Still other teaches correct deviations simply because the students need feedback and ask for it, but they themselves may not be convinced of its usefulness. Teachers respond to their students deviations in a variety of ways. The most frequently used techniques are: mere underlining, providing symbols, providing rules and explanations, and direct correction. Mere indication of the location of the deviation may confuse the students and lead to the replacement of an incorrect form by another incorrect one. Explanations and direct correction may be a waste of time and effort since not all deviations are "errors". The students may not understand the rules and explanations or may not be able to do what they are instructed to do. Direct correction deprives the students of the opportunity of self-correction and problem-solving. In the face of these and other drawbacks, EFL teachers may choose to provide corrective feedback by using simple and clear correction symbols. This technique can save the teachers' time and effort, especially in large classes. It addresses the students' need for self-correction and respects the individual differences between them. In view of the obligation to respond to the students' deviations and the skepticism surrounding the effectiveness of this practice, the use of coded corrective feedback may help the teachers arrive at a compromise.

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