

## THE ENGLISH ACCESS COURSE STUDENTS' VIEWS AND PREFERENCES ON CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

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### ABSTRACT:

*Corrective feedback has for long been an area of interest to second language learning and teaching researchers. Most renowned researchers in this area, Lyster and Ranta (cited in Vasquez & Harvey, 2010) define corrective feedback as teachers' feedback to learners' erroneous or inappropriate utterances to provide correct forms, hints or clues to elicit learners' reformulations of their errors or inappropriate utterances. Different studies carried out have been preoccupied with comparing CF techniques in terms of their effectiveness. Most revisited techniques are recasts and elicitation prompts. This study explores English Access Course (EAC) students' perceptions on immediate oral feedback with an aim to find out their preferences, especially between recasts and prompts as corrective feedback techniques. This was a mixed-method study that collected data by means of interviews and questionnaires. The study comprised of 12 students registered for the (EAC) at the University of Namibia in the department of Language Centre. The study results reveal that students prefer recasts in terms of the affective states, but find elicitation prompts to be more effective in oral feedback than recasts in developing their proficiency in English.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Corrective Feedback, recasts, elicitation prompts, Second Language Acquisition, affective states*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The study explores students' views towards recasts and prompts as the most common techniques of corrective feedback used by teachers during classroom discussion. A recast is defined by Ammar (2008) as an utterance that involves the reformulation of learners' erroneous or inappropriate utterance, usually contrasting the utterance with the learners' erroneous utterance. Recasts occur immediately after the erroneous or inappropriate utterance. On the other hand, an elicitation prompt involves an utterance that strategically pauses in the middle of the utterance to invite a learner's self-correction. The teacher uses a partial repetition of the learner's erroneous or inappropriate utterance or asks the learner questions (excluding the use of yes/no questions) to elicit the learner's reformulation. There has been continuous and intensive research in the area of corrective feedback (CF) with a goal to investigate how corrective feedback contributes to second language learning. The most renowned researchers in this area, Lyster and Ranta define CF as teachers' feedback to learners' erroneous or inappropriate utterances to provide correct forms, hints or clues to elicit learners' reformulations of their errors or inappropriate utterances (Vasquez and Harvey, 2010). Intensive literature review on the work done on corrective feedback offers insights on a good number of CF dichotomies that include; positive vs. negative, implicit vs. explicit, verbal vs. non-verbal, direct vs. indirect, immediate vs. delayed, oral vs. written, group vs. individual, teacher vs. peer feedback and the list goes on. The account of these contrastive terms reveals how the domain of feedback has been of interest for various studies, which have been preoccupied by comparing different CF techniques in terms of their effectiveness as to second language learning/ teaching.

It is worth noting that the interest on CF is not new in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field. It has its roots in the early approaches, which view CF differently. For example two traditional approaches were of differing views about its role in L2 learning. According to Hong (2010), the Audio-Lingual Method, with its minimal or no tolerance of errors, viewed corrective feedback as the backbone in second language learning. The Natural Approach, on the other hand Hong considers corrective feedback unnecessary and counterproductive. In recent accounts of feedback research, there is a general consensus that corrective feedback is a contributing factor to English as Second Language (ESL) learning. Vasquez and Harvey (2010) outlines the shift of awareness among some L2 teachers who used to believe that error correction is discouraging and useless, but now testify their awareness of the interaction between corrective feedback and learners' development of the target language. Though there are various conflicting views on these different techniques, much of the available literature is more interested on recasts and prompts. Most importantly, it is crucial to note that differential effects of recasts and elicitation prompts have been revisited in research with the former being seen as more frequent than the latter, and the latter more effective than the former. For example, Ammar (2008) contends that elicitation prompts (giving a learner hints and clues that trigger self-correction) are more substantial than recasts (reformulation of a learner's utterance that includes the correct form) in developing the learner language.

Previous studies have also been interested in comparing teachers' choice of CF technique and learners' preferences. For example a study by Yoshida (2008) reveals two differing positions: Teachers preferred recasts as feedback because of time constraints and awareness of learners' cognitive styles, whereas learners preferred elicitation. In Yoshida's study, it is posited that elicitation is favored by learners because it offers them opportunity to think about their errors and the correct forms before receiving recasts from the teacher or peers. Even

though a lot has been done in investigating what technique would be more effective for second language learners, these learners are rarely given a voice to express their views regarding corrective feedback. The present study concentrated on EAC students' views on CF in general, and recasts and prompts in particular. The study raised an awareness of ESL teachers on both pedagogical and affective impacts of these two CF techniques on ESL students and learners. This study raised awareness to the teachers on how learners perceive and view feedback, and hence help them to work towards a more productive provision of corrective feedback in consideration of factors behind learners' perceptions. Questions addressed in this study were: Do EAC students manifest the need for immediate oral corrective feedback during lessons; what are EAC students' perceptions on recasts and prompts as the most used CF techniques in immediate error treatment and; do students have any preference as far as recasts and prompts are concerned?

### **The purpose of the study**

This study's purpose was to explore the EAC students' views towards recasts and prompts as the most common techniques of corrective feedback used by teachers during classroom discussions. The study further aimed at narrowing the assumptions and concerns in the CF field such as; language learning cannot happen without correction, correction cannot happen without feedback and feedback cannot be effective without learners' responses.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was primarily a qualitative case study with a quantitative data set to help inform the descriptions of the participants' responses. The study results were collected from 12 randomly selected students from the English Access Course at the University of Namibia by means

of questionnaires and interviews. These participants were of both genders: five were male and seven were female. The EAC students were deemed to be the most appropriate participants for this study as these are the students who are doing an intensive English course as a year course before they register for their aspired academic studies at any institution of high learning. Furthermore, these students are expected to have reached a proficient level at which they can communicate orally in any given situation.

The researcher gained access to the students with permission from the campus coordinator and the EAC students themselves as participants. The questionnaires allowed the study to overcome time constraints because it was closed-ended, hence easy to fill in a short time (Lindlof & Taylor, 2000). As for the interview, it helped in overcoming some disadvantages presented by the close-ended questionnaire, the lack of detailed information. Questionnaires were distributed to 12 students. These students were asked whether; their lecturer should correct errors made during their speaking in class, whether the lecturer should correct any mistake that the students make, and whether they should be interrupted for correction in case they make a mistake while speaking.

A focus group of 4 students from the same questionnaire respondents was chosen randomly and interviewed. For later reference, interviews were recorded under permission of the respondents. Lindlof and Taylor (2000) distinguish between structured interview and semi-structured interview in these terms: "While a structured interview has a formalized, limited set of questions, a semi-structured interview is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during interview as a result of what the interviewee says" (p.120). A semi-structured interview allowed flexibility during interview, and that way other related questions or follow-up could be discussed. Since the questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions, the main purpose of the semi-structured interview was to expand on the research questions for

detailed information on reasons behind students' responses to the questionnaire. For interview, a limited number (n=4) was chosen for practical reasons.

In fact, since the interview was comprised of open-ended questions, and was not on individual- basis but group, a small number seemed manageable in terms of time and analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Students' views from the two data sources (recorded interviews and questionnaires) were gathered and analyzed. Questionnaires were analyzed by main themes, namely students' opinions about whether or not to be corrected, interrupted with a prompt or recast, be provided a hint or a clue for self-correction or a recast for any error. Data from the interview was analyzed by listening to the recording and summarizing participants' points relevant to the research focus. Since the interview was semi-structured, this flexibility allowed the researcher and the participants to expand more on the questions, mainly on the reasons behind participants' choices. Participants' points from those expanded questions were also taken into consideration. During the interview respondents' points were summarized into main themes according to the research questions.

Firstly, data from the questionnaire is presented in a table and interpreted. Then, the interview responses are presented and interpreted as well. Questionnaire's respondents were generally asked to answer "agree/disagree/do not care" statements related to corrective feedback in speaking during lessons.

Table 1: EAC students' views on Corrective Feedback's CF

Table 1 above shows that all respondents (100%) agree that it

Statements	Agree		Disagree		Indifferent	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Lecturer should provide immediate corrective feedback to students during a classroom discussion	12	<b>100</b>	0	<b>0</b>	0	<b>0</b>
Lecturer should interrupt students and fix the erroneous utterance neither by a recast nor by a prompt	4	<b>33.3</b>	7	<b>58.3</b>	1	<b>8.4</b>
Lecturer should prompt the students to self-correct	8	<b>66.7</b>	4	<b>33.3</b>	0	<b>0</b>
Lecturer should provide a CF for any error students make while they are speaking	4	<b>33.3</b>	8	<b>66.7</b>	0	<b>0</b>
Lecturer should prompt students to self-correct	10	<b>83.4</b>	1	<b>8.3</b>	1	<b>8.3</b>

is necessary for the lecturer to provide corrective feedback to students in an ESL classroom. It is also shown from the data that 58.3% against 33.3% find it unadvisable for lecturers to interrupt a student for correction. Also shown in Table 1 is the fact that most learners (83.4%) favor elicitation prompts. Though all respondents manifested a need of corrective feedback, majority (66.7%) indicated that corrective feedback should not be provided for any error that the learner makes while speaking.

As mentioned earlier, a structured interview was meant to provide the researcher with detailed information on some of the study questions, and other questions which would stem from the interviewees' responses that bear relevance to the research objectives. Four students from the questionnaire respondents were invited to take part in the semi-structured interview. The researcher hoped to have more critical answers to complete and elaborate more on responses from the close-ended questionnaire.

Various students' opinions on immediate oral corrective feedback were collected through interview, with focus on recasts and elicitation prompts. Expansions on the interview questions are not presented in the table but they are analyzed throughout the section along with opinions on recasts and prompts.

Table 2: Students' opinions about recasts and elicitation

technique	Students' attitudes	
	Positive attitudes	Negative attitudes
Recasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-save time</li> <li>-save learner's face ( not face threatening)</li> <li>-are straight to the point</li> <li>-show teachers' responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are not interactive</li> <li>- are not always noticed as a CF</li> <li>- make learner passive</li> <li>- have short-term effects on cognition</li> </ul>
Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-are interactive</li> <li>-have long-term positive effects on cognition</li> <li>-help internalizing the concept being learned</li> <li>-show that the lecturer believes in the student's potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are time consuming</li> <li>- frustrating/embarrassing /confusing</li> </ul>

It is of outmost importance to note that it was not practical to interpret data statistically because, due to the nature of the interview (semi-structured), respondents were allowed to expand on their responses when the interviewer deemed it necessary. Therefore, the researcher judged it logical to present the data in sets of two techniques, and to present respondents' expanded views in a narrative way throughout the result section. During the interview, all respondents confirmed that they experience a need to be provided with CF. They "do not see any harm" in being corrected, as one of the respondents mentioned. Students' opinions about recasts and elicitation requests vary. Some students reveal that it is the responsibility of the lecturer to provide a correct answer or form (through recasts) to the students, instead of leaving them [students] struggle for self-correction, which might turn out a myriad time to be unsuccessful. One had this to say: "I sometimes get confused when the lecturer continues to ask me to try to get the correct answer. When I fail, I feel very embarrassed in front of my classmates".

On the other hand, elicitation prompts were claimed by students to strengthen the concept being taught, and make it clear what the errors are because sometimes lecturers' recasts are not noticed as correction but as the lecturer's confirmation of the answer given by the student. Students also indicated that as the lecturer gives hints and clues in effort to help them to self-correct, he /she reinforces their internalizing of knowledge. Some students revealed that elicitation helps them keep a live conversation with the lecturer and improves their interactive abilities as well.

In response to about how they feel in case of interruption for correction, three to four expressed their disagreement to interruption. They indicated that they would like the lecturer not to correct them in the middle of the sentence for their flow of ideas not to be perturbed. One articulates, "When the lecturer interrupts me to correct an error, I forget what I was saying and feel embarrassed." He also added, "And it's a waste of time too, because if he keeps interrupting everyone on any

small error, when will we finish the course?" Views about when to be corrected and on what error corrective feedback should intervene were differing, but majority manifested their preference of being corrected on salient errors and not being interrupted. However, one respondent said, "I want the lecturer to correct me before he forgets and when the structure or language item on which I have made errors is still fresh in my mind". She continues, "I always expect my lecturer to correct me when I am speaking, but he doesn't have to correct me on something that is not academic". One student pointed out that he considers the lecturer to be less knowledgeable about the topic being taught when he [the lecturer] ignores [doesn't correct] a mistake that was made by the students.

Throughout the course of interview sessions, students' responses implicitly reveal various feelings towards recasts and elicitation prompts. In the interview, one of the research participants noted that she feels inferior and useless when she makes a mistake and the lecturer simply says, "No, that's not correct". She added, "I like the lecturer who encourages me to be active and speak as much as I can, and when I make a mistake he/she says, 'ok, good attempt". Beside improvement in interaction between the lecturer and the students, they reiterate that when the lecturer encourages them to self-correct, they experience encouragement and a feeling that the lecturer is paying attention to what they say, and believes in their ability. It is crucial to note that although many students seem to like being corrected, it is however a fact that, views differ from student to student.

One student's comment on interruption by the lecturer mentioned, "When the lecturer interrupts me, whether she gives a correct answer or asks me to correct myself, I feel like she was not paying attention to my opinion, but only she was watching on my mistakes."

The study findings on the students' views on who should provide corrective feedback indicate that students always expect the lecturer to be the only source of reliable corrective feedback. One noted, "When

the lecturer points out an error, and I fail to self-correct, I do not want her to ask my colleagues to correct me, because I am afraid they will consider me “less intelligent than them” if they correct me. It was also noted from respondents’ views that when it happens that a peer provides feedback on the lecturer’s request, there is still need for her to provide the final correct answer, by repeating or rephrasing the students’ utterance.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to explore the English Access Course students’ views on two CF techniques, namely recasts and elicitation prompts. Prior to the research, it was hypothesized that students do not care whether the lecturer provides corrective feedback or not. In a thorough analysis, it was discovered from the questionnaires and interviews that mostly all students experience the need to be provided with a feedback in a language class. A study by Ammar (2008) reveals that the choice of the corrective feedback techniques is motivated by time restriction and students’ level. In this study, it is revealed that students’ attitudes towards CF are not only motivated by their eager to learn the language, but also by their emotional states. Students opine that they do not want to be frustrated, confused, look dull in case they fail to self-correct. Students further state that recasts, unlike eliciting, are less face threatening because feedback focuses on what is being learnt, not on every error. It is also noted from some respondents’ view that when it happens that a peer provides feedback on the lecturer’s request, he still needs the lecturer to provide the final correct answer. This confirms Amador’s (2008) research finding where learners preferred recasts and did not favor correction through elicitation prompts on the ground that the lecturer repeats exactly the correct model and hence helps them repair their faulty speeches. Some students are of the opinion that immediate CF interrupts and confuses them of which Rogers’s (2006) cautions that immediate oral feedback

should be delivered cautiously in a language classroom, especially when fluency and learners' flow of idea are concerned.

The latter leads to the conclusion that whether students like it or not, a lecturer will have a choice of a CF technique. Can we imagine that lecturers' intentions overlap with students' attitudes or preferences? For the lecturer, reasons for the choice may vary depending on a number of factors as Yoshida (2010) maintains, but what about students? Yoshida asserts that teachers' choices of recasts versus prompts differ based on various factors. In the current study, students' responses indicate that they too have preferences and these vary according to different factors. Their choice of recasts is linked to the value they attach to class time and to their emotional concerns. On the other hand, their preference to elicitation is linked to instruction processing, error negotiation, and negotiation of meaning. One student indicated that when the lecturer provides a correct answer (recasts), the error is likely to be reduced, but when the lecturer elicits (prompts), the errors disappear. This is what table 2 terms as long term effects on cognition from prompts, and short-term effects from recasts.

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study findings that students are aware that corrective feedback should focus on the form that is being learnt, and not on any tiny error that occurs during conversation.

The above also certifies students' eager to cover a lot during the course, as their views on table 2 about time-saving read, and hence shows how their choices are related to learning goals. Some attitudes in Table 2 also indicate some emotional needs that may motivate learners towards a CF choice. The "I like it when the lecturer says 'good trial'" is an indication that the emotional state of students has to be considered in providing feedback. Lightbown and Spada (2006) corroborate these findings that excessive feedback on errors can have a negative effect on learners' motivation. While Table 1 displays students' opinions, Table 2 clearly indicates attitudes students have towards recasts and prompts.

In fact, both of these techniques are viewed differently by students. Each, in the students' view, bears advantages and disadvantages.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Various researchers in this field have divided opinions on the effectiveness of corrective feedback due to its limitations. The results of numerous studies revealed that contradictory interpretations of recasts can be attributed to the different contexts in which recasts are implemented. In response to the dilemma of error correction, Kim 2010 warns that leaving students' errors unattended to might lead to the fossilization of ill-formed structures. Therefore, corrective feedback can be used as an effective way in eliminating possible non-target-like utterances in the students' inter-language. However, Kim also notes that despite the bulky literature on corrective feedback, there is a dearth of published discussion by ESL/EFL practitioners on corrective feedback especially recast and elicitation which leads to the unbalanced representation of data and conclusive results. In the light

of this study's findings, it draws to the conclusion the students' views and feelings should not be overlooked in choosing a corrective feedback strategy because they reveal more to the teachers.

It is through the research finding that more light is shed that it is by understanding the histories and lived experiences of language learners that the language teacher can create conditions that will facilitate learning one of these conditions is corrective feedback. The study findings therefore suggest that teachers do classroom research and inquiries that can inform them on appropriate practices; practices that are meant to enhance language learning goals. In the final analysis, it is worth noting that this research doesn't claim to be conclusive. First, it was only conducted in a short period (three weeks). Therefore, hasty analysis cannot claim to be conclusive. Additionally, the sample is not enough to represent all the English students' cases; hence ground for generalizing is limited. Further research on other factors that can motivate a choice of an effective feedback would be more informative to the teacher

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