

## **To What Extent Do Student Preferences for Oral Corrective Feedback Match Teacher Practice in the Chinese High School EFL Classroom? A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the extent to which Chinese High School EFL students' preferences for Oral Corrective Feedback (OCF) matches with teacher practice. Studies in other contexts (Huong, 2020; Lee, 2013; Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, 2016; Sung and Tsai, 2014; Yoshida 2008) show that student preferences and teacher practice do not always match, which may negatively affect learning outcomes (Plonsky and Mills, 2006: p. 55). Transcriptions of two lessons and interviews with three students were used for data analysis and discussion. The results of this study found that student preferences for OCF and teacher practice did not always match, with participants generally preferring explicit forms of feedback that allow them to see where they made the error, and how to correct it. The study revealed a great deal of individual variation with regards to preferences for OCF, thus, practitioners should take these individual differences into account when providing OCF.

### **Introduction**

Providing feedback to correct students' errors can play a crucial role in facilitating second language acquisition (Han, 2015; Li, 2010; Lyster et al, 2013). However, how best to provide this feedback remains a complex issue (Ellis, 2009: p. 6). Several studies have shown that student preferences for Oral Corrective Feedback (OCF) do not always match teacher practice (Huong, 2020; Lee, 2013; Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, 2016; Sung and Tsai, 2014; Yoshida 2008); this may have a negative impact on learning outcomes (Plonsky and Mills, 2006: p.55). This study aims to better understand the researcher's OCF practice and investigate to what extent this matches student preferences. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help the researcher take action to adapt their teaching practice to better meet learners' needs.

The study will involve a small group of Grade 10 (aged 15-16) students in an international department of a privately-run, or *minban* (see Wang and Chan, 2015) school in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. The students are from a variety of English-learning backgrounds: proficiency levels are mixed, with some of the students being more accustomed to state-run school teaching styles, often characterised by being teacher-centred (Halstead and Zhu, 2009; Qi, 2018) and examination-driven (Kirkpatrick and Zang, 2011). Participants are in the early stages of preparation for IELTS, and aim to score between a 6-7 (thus need to balance both fluency and accuracy) in order to study abroad (IELTS, 2021).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Types of OCF***

Six types of CF as defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997: p. 44) are commonly used when investigating OCF (see Lee, 2013; Martin and Alvarez Valdivia, 2017; Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, 2016; Park, 2010; Tasedemir and Arslan, 2018; Zhang and Rahimi, 2014). These include: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic clue/feedback, elicitation and repetition. Although rarely included in studies, Sheen and Ellis (2011) and Lyster et al (2013) differentiate between conversational and didactic recasts, as these serve different functions. Some studies also include explicit correction + metalinguistic explanation (Huong, 2020; Saeb, 2017; Tomzyck, 2013), with others including translation (Panova and Lyster, 2002; Roothoof, 2014; Sung and Tsai, 2014). An explanation and example for each OCF method can be found in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 Types of OCF**

OCF Type	Explanation	Example (S says “I go there yesterday”)
Explicit Correction + Metalinguistic Explanation	Directly points out error and provides correct form, alongside a metalinguistic comment	T: You should use simple past here: “I went there yesterday”
Metalinguistic Clue/feedback	Brief comment, aiming to elicit self-correction	T: Is that the right tense?
Elicitation	Question or “fill the gap”, aiming to elicit self-correction	T: I _____ there yesterday
Explicit Correction	Provides learner with correct form, often with emphasis placed on the correction	T: I <u>went</u> there yesterday
Recast (didactic)	Provides students with correct form, although there is no communication issue	T: I went there yesterday
Repetition	Repeats incorrect utterance, often with emphasis on the error	T: I <u>go</u> there yesterday
Recast (conversational)	Provides students with correct form to clarify a misunderstanding	T: I went there yesterday
Clarification request	Phrase used to indirectly point out error	T: Pardon?
Translation	Translates student utterance into target language/gives explanation in L1	S: 我昨天去了 T: I went there yesterday

(adapted from Ellis, 2009: p 8-9; Sheen and Ellis 2011: p. 594; Lyster et al, 2013: p. 5; examples provided by researcher)

Other variables may include (but are by no means limited to) (Brookhart, 2008 cited in Tasedemir and Arslan, 2018):

### ***Timing***

OCF can be delayed (after the student has finished speaking), immediate (interrupting the students) or post-delayed (after the class) (Ellis, 2009: p. 11). For form-focused activities, immediate correction is often used; delayed correction is more common for meaning or fluency-focused activities (Yoshida, 2008: p. 80).

### ***Source of Feedback***

OCF can come from the teacher, peers or the students themselves (Zhang and Rahimi, 2014: p. 432), with teachers often being the most frequent and preferred sources of OCF (Martin and Alvarez Valdivia, 2017: p. 4; Tasedemir and Arslan, 2018: p. 4). However, there is some evidence that self-correction may be more effective at promoting acquisition than teacher or peer feedback. (Lyster, 2004; Ferris, 2006 cited in Ellis, 2009: p. 7).

### ***Student Preferences for Oral Corrective Feedback vs. Teacher Practice: Is There a Mismatch?***

Whilst student preferences for OCF have received a great deal of attention in recent research (Martin and Alvarez Valdivia, 2017; Park 2010; Renko, 2012; Roothoof and Breeze, 2016; Tasedemir and Arslan 2018; Saeb, 2017; Zhang and Rahimi, 2014), these studies do not compare student preferences for OCF to observed teacher practice. Five studies researching this issue (Huong, 2020; Lee, 2013; Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, 2016; Sung and Tsai, 2014; Yoshida 2008) indicate that this mismatch is present. Yoshida investigating a tertiary-level Japanese L2 classroom, found teachers used recasts most frequently, as a time- and face-saving measure; however, all but one interviewee preferred having enough time to correct the error themselves (p. 89).

Huong's study in a tertiary EFL setting in Vietnam showed similar results; recasts were frequently used, yet were students' least preferred method of OCF (p. 149). Elementary-level adult EFL learners in Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk's study often found recasts ineffective, as they didn't help them understand their errors (p. 119). Conversely, a group of advanced-level adult ESL students were quite favourable towards these (Lee, p. 225). Both beginner and advanced level adult students of Chinese in Sung and Tsai's study also preferred recasts, particularly for pronunciation errors (p. 46-47). Unlike the other studies, this matched with teacher practice, with recasts accounting for 48% in the beginner group and 41.2% in the advanced group (p. 43).

Three of the above-mentioned studies (Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk; Lee; and Huong) found students preferred explicit correction, helping students in Lee's study (p. 226) notice and quickly correct their error(s). This was not frequently used by teachers in any of the studies; Huong (p. 146) found explicit feedback was hypothetically favoured by teachers (p. 147), yet only accounted for 8.2% of total OCF, compared to 24.59% and 26.23% for recasts and clarification requests respectively. Explicit feedback was also infrequently used in Sung and Tsai (p. 43). Students were somewhat favorable towards to this type (p. 46), although a participant noted that they would prefer prompts for self-correction (p. 47).

Students in Yoshida (p. 89) preferred elicitation and clarification requests over explicit correction. However, Lee (p. 225) found clarification requests were both highly used by teachers and led to learner repair, yet were students' second-least favourite OCF type. Interviewees found clarification requests unclear, and potentially embarrassing (p. 226). Furthermore, they believed clarification requests lacked specific information or explanation about their error, and would like follow-up questions after a clarification request (p. 227). One could assume they would prefer these not to contain meta-linguistic feedback, as interviews showed this was students' least preferred OCF type (p. 225). During focus-group interviews, students in Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk voiced similar opinions, finding meta-linguistic feedback too 'terminological' (p. 121) and

‘anxiety-provoking’ (p. 122). Huong (p. 147) showed teachers theoretically preferred metalinguistic feedback, although this only accounted for 13.11% of observed OCF acts. Meta-linguistic feedback was also infrequently used in Sung and Tsai (p. 43).

Only Yoshida and Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk investigated timing of OCF in their studies. Yoshida found delayed recasts were only used 1% of the time (p. 85); Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, although not providing quantitative analysis of teacher usage, found students showed a strong preference for delayed over immediate and post-delayed feedback (p. 127). Whilst none of the five studies in question specifically researched source of feedback, Yoshida (p. 89), Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (p. 126) and Sung and Tsai (p. 46-47) showed students preferred being given enough time and enough explanation to self-correct. However, if unable to self-correct, Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (127), Lee (226) and Yoshida (91) found explicit correction to be generally accepted.

A distinct mismatch between learner preferences and teacher practice for OCF is clear. Several trends can be identified: recasts are frequently used by teachers yet often (but not always) disliked by students; explicit feedback is often preferred by students yet infrequently used by teachers; students would like to be able to self-correct if possible. However, the findings from each study reveal preferences and practice are by no means identical between the five groups of learners and teachers. Thus, the present study hopes to compare student preferences to teacher practice regarding OCF in a previously under-researched context, and gain insight into how teachers can adjust practice to better meet learner needs.

## **Methodology**

### ***Justification for the Present Study***

Noting the misalignment between teacher practice and student preferences for OCF in other contexts, this study aims to ‘identify and better understand ... the impact

that a certain type of instruction may have on FL/SL learning' (Lightbown, 2000: p. 438) to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are Chinese high school-age EFL learners' preferences for OCF with regards to type, timing and source of feedback?
- 2) To what extent do these preferences match with teacher practice?

### ***Research Methods***

Two data collection instruments were used: 1) audio-recordings and transcriptions of online classes and 2) online semi-structured interviews with Stimulated Recall (SR). The first method was chosen to provide data for quantitative analysis to begin answering research question two and provide material for the SR. Interviews were selected to gather qualitative data surrounding participants' opinions and answer more 'open-ended questions' (see research question one) (Cohen et al, 2017: p. 508). Semi-structured interviews can focus on a predetermined topic, whilst allowing the interviewer to ask further questions where appropriate (Seidman, 2013: p. 86), and for participants to elaborate on their responses (Rose et al, 2020: p. 177). SR was used to help 'yield insights into a learners' thought processes' during a specific classroom interaction and provide 'a finely detailed picture of the classroom' (Mackey and Gass, 2016: p. 253, 256).

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The speech of one teacher (the researcher) and five students (pseudonyms: Tim, Leo, Bob, Aaron, Rachael; four male, one female; three students who are familiar with the researcher, two who are new to the class; proficiency levels between pre-intermediate to intermediate) (Council of Europe, 2018) from two 40-minute classes was audio-recorded and each OCF act transcribed. The transcriptions were categorised according to type of OCF, timing and source, the total for each category calculated, and timestamps added for the SR.

Three students (Leo, Rachael and Bob) were selected for interviews, using maximum variation sampling (Rose et al, 2020: p. 178). However, Rachael could not participate due to ongoing health issues. Aaron, who was available during the scheduled interview times, volunteered to participate. This may have an effect on the study's findings (Morse, 2012: p. 199), as all three interviewees are of higher proficiency levels (in relation to the class) (Lee, 2013) and were all male (Geçkin, 2020).

During the interviews, participants were asked a series of closed- and open-ended questions adapted from Fukuda's Corrective Feedback Belief Scale (2004 cited in Zhang and Rahimi, 2014: p. 436). Then, participants were asked how useful they felt 9 different hypothetical examples of OCF were. Following this, during the SR, interviewees listened to 3-4 instances of OCF involving them and were asked:

- If they noticed the feedback
- To what extent they felt the feedback was useful
- How they felt when receiving the feedback

(Questions adapted from Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk, 2016: p. 117)

The interviews were transcribed and excerpts collated according to type, timing and source of OCF. Excerpts were then in-vivo coded according to preference and perceived usefulness OCF for content analysis (Morse, 2012: p. 197).

### ***Ethics Approval and Ethical Considerations***

Approval to conduct audio-recordings of online classes and semi-structured interviews was obtained from the University of Sheffield School of Education Ethics Committee on 09/02/2021 (ref. 038224), and was conducted in line with the University of Sheffield's Ethics Policy Regarding Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue (version 7.6) (UofS, year not given) and Good Research and Innovation Practices Policy (UofS, 2020). Prior to collecting data, permission from the

host institution and all participants was obtained, alongside parental permission for participants under the age of 18. All participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw consent before 26/02/2021. No identifiable data was shared with any non-participants. Participants were given pseudonyms- an English name was chosen to differentiate from participants' legal Chinese name to avoid these giving any subtle clues as to participants' identities (Ibphofen, 2009 cited in Wiles, 2013: p. 51).

The researcher is in a 'power position' (Kvale, 2006: p. 491) relative to participants, both in terms of being their teacher and as a native speaker of the language they are learning, and in which the interviews will mainly be conducted. Thus, the researcher gave participants the option to use their mother tongue during interviews, and tried to approach interviews as a narrative, where participants are involved in co-constructing dialogue, rather than being passive subjects (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012: p. 32).

## **Analysis**

### ***Student Preferences for OCF***

The three interviewees were quite positive towards metalinguistic explanation + explicit correction, elicitation and recasts (conversational), with mixed views towards metalinguistic clue/feedback, explicit correction, recasts (didactic) and more negative views towards repetition and translation. Participants preferred immediate and delayed over post-delayed feedback and teacher over peer-correction, although Bob felt self-correction would be better than teacher correction. However, participants noted OCF should clearly indicate the error and its' location, for later self-correction. When asked about recasts (didactic), Aaron said:

"Student[s] want to know where they made the mistake and I want to say correct [] next time, so I need to know what the correct answer is."

And for repetition:

“[students] don’t even know teacher wants to tell you made a mistake ... maybe they think teacher just say the second time of your words.”

Similarly, Leo thought that repetition gave: “No explanation for students [] there’s no chance to let them correct themselves.”

However, he later noted if the teacher stressed the error, this could lead to later self-correction.

Views towards explicit correction were mixed, with findings from the hypothetical examples and SR differing. Leo was not positive towards hypothetical examples; however, during SR he commented that whilst he might be too stubborn to accept explicit correction, this might make him “curious” to confirm the correct answer himself.

Bob found explicit correction + metalinguistic explanation might be more effective than metalinguistic clue/feedback at helping students remember their mistake, and was quite positive towards clarification requests:

“I think it’s the best way... just give him a remind[er]...[] pardon, it can help them remember [what they said] and they will think twice and say again...”

Conversely, Leo did not notice a clarification request. Aaron thought this type of OCF could be confusing, with students:

“Just think[ing] you are not listening very clearly and don’t know you want them to say the correct answers”.

Recasts (conversational), as with clarification requests, do not provide students with an explanation or a clear indication of where their error has been made. However, all three interviewees were quite positive towards these, as they can help clarify misunderstandings or communication problems. Leo and Bob thought recasts (didactic) could help focus on accuracy, as they correct errors that don't hinder understanding.

Aaron and Leo listened to examples of elicitation during the SR. Whilst Leo was positive to these both hypothetically and during the SR, Aaron's views differed between the two. He thought that the hypothetical example might not be helpful; however, during SR, he noted:

"I will remember it's not correct and... I will remember the correct answers the next time."

All three interviewees felt translation should be used sparingly, with Leo saying it could be "rude" to use Chinese with a non-Chinese teacher. When elicited to translate his own utterance, he found this correction clear. Leo and Aaron thought translation was more suitable for peer correction, with Bob feeling that this should only be used if a student couldn't say something in English at all, then they could ask the teacher for help or correction.

All three interviewees were unfavorable towards post-delayed feedback, describing it as "less efficient" (Leo), not helping students improve errors "at once" (Bob) and less desirable than being corrected after finishing one's utterance (Aaron). A misunderstanding from the first class was cleared up during SR; Bob said the correction would have been useful if given during class. However, if the errors were not serious, Bob thought these could be corrected after class. Aaron noted that if explanations were time-consuming and might "waste[] the other students' time", post-delayed OCF could be used.

Aaron and Bob commented that peer feedback was often immediate rather than

delayed (this was confirmed during SR), with Aaron preferring delayed feedback, as being interrupted could affect his confidence and coherence:

“When I’m talking I’m always very confident, and if you tell me I have the mistake I will maybe forgot what I say next.”

All three students showed a strong preference for teacher rather than peer feedback. Aaron and Bob both felt the teacher would be more likely to give a correct answer than their peers, although they would accept feedback from peers they deemed higher proficiency. Leo stated he preferred teacher feedback as the teacher “had more experience”. However, during the SR, reactions to peer OCF were mixed, with Aaron finding peer + teacher OCF helped him notice and correct his error, with Bob feeling being peer-corrected one time would not be sufficient (although he did not state where he would like further corrections to come from).

Participants did not listen to all types of OCF during SR; thus, much of the data is based upon hypothetical examples. The researcher had hoped interviews would take place no more than one week, following the audio-recorded classes, to aid participants’ recall (Gass and Mackey, 2016: p. 50). However, there was a gap of ten days between the first class and the interviews (two days between interviews and the second class), which may have made recordings from the first class less reliable. The researcher attempted to use open-ended, non-leading questions, although sometimes questions were posed in a way that may have skewed participants’ responses (Seidman, 2013: p. 95). For example, more than once, the researcher asked: “Did it help you to understand?” and “Did you find this useful?” rather than open questions such as “How much did this help you understand?” and “How useful did you find this?”. This was more of an issue for the SR (and some unplanned follow-up questions), which reduces the reliability of the findings for parts of the interview.

### ***Teacher Practice***

Tables 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 illustrate the use of OCF for the two classes. Two out of three of the instances of mixed feedback also included explicit feedback- if these had been categorised as separate acts, the total for this type of OCF would be higher. The total for table 1.3 is 46, as three of the OCF acts came from multiple sources simultaneously (teacher and peer).

**Table 1.2 Frequency of OCF Types**

OCF Type	Frequency	Rate
Explicit Correction	10	25.58%
Recast (didactic)	9	18.60%
Elicitation	7	16.28%
Mixed feedback	4	9.30%
Recast (conversational)	3	6.98%
Explicit Correction + Metalinguistic Explanation	2	4.65%
Clarification request	2	4.65%
Translation	2	4.65%
Self-correction	2	4.65%
Repetition	1	2.33%
Metalinguistic Clue/feedback	1	2.33%
TOTAL	43	100%

**Table 1.3 Timing of OCF**

Timing	Total	Rate
Immediate	20	46.51%
Delayed	23	53.49%

**Table 1.4 Source of OCF**

Post-delayed	0	0
TOTAL	43	100%

Source	Total	Rate
Teacher	34	73.91%
Peer	10	21.73%
Self	2	4.35%
TOTAL	46	100%

## Discussion

### ***Student Preferences vs. Teacher Practice: To What Extent do These Match?***

A mismatch between student preference and teacher practice is evident in this study. Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (2016), Lee (2013) and Huong (2020) found participants preferred more explicit types of feedback, although these were infrequently used by teachers. In this study, the researcher used certain types of explicit feedback (explicit correction and elicitation) quite often. However, participants preferred OCF methods that not only showed the location of their error, but also provided an explanation. This is similar to findings from Saeb (2017). Whilst teachers may prefer less time-consuming OCF types, students may feel that without the correct form or explanation, they will repeat their errors later.

Explicit correction may help students notice their error (Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk: p. 128), although could be confused with recasts (conversational and didactic), if insufficient emphasis is placed on the error (Sung and Tsai, 2014: p. 51). As found by Sung and Tsai, participants in this study were quite favourable towards recasts (conversational), despite these not providing a clear indication an error has been made or an explanation. This could be due to the focus of the class (oral English) where emphasis is placed on communication; thus, this method of OCF, specifically aiming to

clarify misunderstandings may be seen positively.

Neither repetition nor translation was preferred by participants in this study, nor frequently used by the teacher. Two students in Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (p. 128) found repetition with rising intonation on the error helped them notice it (as noted by Leo), although this may be less useful if students do not understand how to correct the error, which could be the case for newly introduced forms. Students in Park (2010: p. 39) thought that repetition could be confused with teachers acknowledging the content of what has been said, rather indicating an error. Relatively few studies on OCF (Panova and Lyster, 2002, Roothoof, 2014, Sung and Tsai, 2015) investigate translation; of these, none investigated student preferences. However, Panova and Lyster found that translation led to low rates of learner repair, and was often not perceived as OCF (p. 599). Students in this study thought translation may be used for peer-, but not teacher-OCF; this is likely due to the students and teacher not sharing a first language.

Participants in this study found both immediate and delayed feedback useful in different circumstances, but did not feel post-delayed feedback was useful; this did not match with teacher practice. Whilst there may be some advantages to immediate feedback (Li et al, 2016), interrupting a student when speaking could affect confidence and cause anxiety, as found by Aaron in this study and participants in Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (2016: p. 124). However, both low- and high-anxiety groups in Zhang and Rahimi (2014: p. 433) preferred immediate feedback. As noted by Bob, if an error is serious, it may be best to provide a correction immediately; this could prevent embarrassment if a student is unable to respond correctly (Yoshida, 2008: p. 90) and to assist the listener's understanding (Zhang and Rahimi, 2014: p. 433). Participants in this study found post-delayed feedback could be used in some circumstances, but agreed with students in Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (2016: p. 124), who felt they would not remember a correction with such a delay.

This study found participants preferred teacher over peer OCF, as did Lee (2013), Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (2016), Park (2010), Saeb (2017), and Zhang and Rahimi

(2014). Whilst OCF may be seen as the main responsibility of the teacher (Saeb: 40), participants in this study valued teacher OCF as a means to lead to later self-correction. Higher levels of teacher-led OCF may be preferred by this class group due to their previous educational background, where teachers may be considered the “primary source of knowledge”, as found by Zhang and Rahimi (2014: p. 434).

A misalignment between the researcher’s OCF practice and student preferences was found in this study. Some similarities can be drawn with research conducted in other contexts; however, it seems that educators need to consider the particular OCF needs of each class group, and each student when adjusting their practice.

## **Conclusions**

This study aimed to investigate Chinese high school-age EFL learners’ preferences for OCF and to what extent these match with teacher practice. Results show there is a great deal of individual variation with regards to preferences; thus, this question has been answered to a certain degree, although it may be difficult to generalise results to other learners within this age group due to the small-scale nature of the study. Further studies could include proficiency levels (Lee, 2013), individual learning styles (Tasedemir and Arslan, 2018), personality factors (such as levels of anxiety) (Zhang and Rahimi, 2014), gender (Geçkin, 2020) and cultural background (Schulz, 2001) in their line of questioning to investigate individual differences, alongside including a larger number of participants. Data collection should be enhanced by combining quantitative methods such as Fukuda’s Corrective Feedback Belief Scale (2004) as a questionnaire survey to triangulate data (Block, 1996 cited in Nunan, 2005: p. 237) that should be collected by at least two other researchers (investigator triangulation- see Leavy, 2017: p. 153). Although including a wider range of OCF types brought some useful detail to the analysis, this made it difficult to gather detail on participants’ views on each particular method. It may be wise for future research to focus on a more select number of methods.

Since conducting this study, the researcher has been attempting to use recasts (didactic) less frequently, and provide more explanations, though is avoiding using too much terminological language or making explanations excessively lengthy. There may also be some benefit to using learner training to help participants provide more effective peer-OCF (Sato, 2013), as the researcher cannot feasibly be the sole OCF-provider, despite this being participants' preferred source.

The study provides the following suggestions for other foreign language teachers: individual differences should be taken into account and OCF practice varied accordingly. Errors should be corrected clearly, using the L2 as much as possible, ideally in a way that can help students remember their error(s) for later self-correction.

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