



# *Dealing with Students' Errors: Oral Corrective Feedback in the Italian EFL Classroom*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is an error in language learning? Typical definitions of error include some reference to the “production of a linguistic form that deviates from the correct form” (Allwright and Bailey 1991: 84). The correct form is often identified with the form typically produced by native speakers. However, taking the native speaker norm as a benchmark may be problematic as “the language the learners are taught in classrooms may itself actually deviate from the native speaker norm”. As Ellis (2008: 47) argues, the definition of ‘error’ is also problematic because of issues of ‘grammaticality’ or ‘acceptability’: what is grammatically correct may not be acceptable for a particular context of use. Another problem is that when “a learner produces a form that is grammatical [...], this may not be the form preferred by native speakers of the code” (Ellis 2008: 49).

Corder (1967: 167) distinguished between ‘errors’ and ‘mistakes’. Errors are deviations in learner language that take place as a result of lack of knowledge. They are systematic and reveal the actual learners’ knowledge at a specific stage. Mistakes, instead, arise as a result of processing failures (memory limitations, slips of the tongue, physical or psychological conditions) so they are unsystematic and, according to Corder, “of no significance to the process of language learning”. Although this distinction is often highlighted in most teacher guides, Ellis and Shintani (2014: 253) contend that it is “nothing like as clear-cut as Corder made out, while the gravity of an



error is largely a matter of personal opinion". In effect, not only does the distinction raise problems of identification (What is an error? What is a mistake?), but, according to Ellis (2008: 48), it also underrates the problem of variability in learner language (Ellis 2008: 48), which is an additional factor teachers, somehow, need to take into account when they correct their students' errors.

The interest in error correction has been very intense both in second language teaching and research (Ellis 2010). On the one end, teachers constantly find themselves under the pressure of dealing with learners' errors, to which they may respond in a more or less consistent way and without, in some cases, being fully aware of the possible effects of their corrective intervention. On the other end, research has investigated the role of errors and error correction with the aim to provide evidence of what types of corrective strategies best support second language acquisition. In most second language teaching handbooks, the term 'error correction' is sometimes used interchangeably with those of 'corrective feedback' and 'feedback'. Harmer (2001: 99), for example, argues that the term 'feedback', in its broader sense, "encompasses not only correcting students, but also offering them an assessment of how well they have done, whether during a drill or after a longer language production exercise". In second language acquisition research, the terms 'corrective (or negative) feedback' or 'feedback' are preferred to 'error correction'. Larsen-Freeman (2003: 123) uses the term 'feedback' to refer to "evaluative information available to learners concerning their linguistic performance". She argues that "compared to the traditional term 'error correction', (negative) feedback is broader in scope" and has "a less punitive connotation". According to Ellis (2006: 28), corrective feedback can be defined as "responses to learners' utterances containing an error" or "are perceived as containing an error". Learners can use this information to revise their interlanguage.

On account of the different approaches to error correction, in the sections that follow I will first consider how corrective feedback has generally been handled in EFL teaching and then offer a brief overview of the way it has been investigated in second language research. I will then present an observational study on the use of oral corrective feedback that I conducted in four Italian EFL classrooms. The study aimed to investigate the teachers' use of corrective feedback strategies in their interaction with the learners. Selected data from classroom observation will be analysed and compared to the teachers' beliefs about their corrective practices. Finally, implications of corrective feedback research for teacher education will be discussed.

## 2. ERROR CORRECTION IN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Error correction in foreign language teaching has taken different functions on account of different pedagogical methods. As pointed out in Hendrickson (1978: 389)'s seminal article, there has been "a shift in pedagogical focus from preventing errors to learning from errors". In the heyday of audiolingualism in the 1950s and 1960s, teachers were supposed to correct all errors immediately and ask learners to repeat the correct pattern in order to prevent any possible form of bad language behaviour. In the late



1960s, the studies in transformational-generative grammar, first language acquisition and cognitive psychology shifted the attention to the role of the students' cognitive skills. This new orientation led to the implementation of learner-centred humanistic methods aimed at encouraging students to use the language to communicate. With the advent of the communicative language teaching, less emphasis was placed on formal accuracy and more importance was given to communicative effectiveness. This also changed the teachers' perspective towards learners' errors, which began to be considered 'natural' and, as such, part of the learning process and somehow 'tolerated'. This latest perspective has led teachers to prefer supportive to obtrusive or direct corrective feedback strategies.

A number of issues concerning error correction in foreign language teaching continue to be central in the pedagogic literature: a) should learner errors be corrected? b) If so, when should learner errors be corrected? c) Which errors should be corrected? d) How should errors be corrected? and e) Who should correct them? (Hendrickson 1978: 389). These questions have been the focus of a recent review of popular teacher guides published between 1980s and 2000s (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 250-257). Despite their diverse perspectives on error correction, most handbooks seem to agree on the following issues:

- the use of obtrusive correction should be limited, especially when students are engaged in oral activities;
- corrective intervention should be carried out paying attention to students' sensitivity not to arouse possible negative reactions or feelings;
- overcorrection should be avoided and students should be given opportunities for self- or peer-correction.

Most suggestions seem then to place more emphasis on the affective rather than the cognitive aspects of error correction. Moreover, missing from most teacher guides is "any consideration of the research that has investigated whether corrective feedback assists learning" (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 257).

Error correction is undoubtedly a multifaceted phenomenon involving a number of factors that may impact on teachers' choices. As Pawlak (2014: 102) highlights,

the potential of corrective feedback hinges to a large extent on the teacher's ability to adjust it to more general curricular goals, the aims of a particular lesson and the objectives of a specific instructional activity, whether it is a communicative task or an exercise.

Factors may therefore range from those related to the broader educational context (national curriculum guidelines and school policies) to the teacher's characteristics (for example, command of the target language, teaching style and methodology). For example, as the Italian national school guidelines are not mandatory on issues concerning error correction, the emphasis placed on the development of spoken interaction skills, especially at a lower level of schooling, will require second language teachers to take decisions on the way oral corrective feedback is handled. It is then no surprise to find significant differences in the way



errors are actually treated in classroom interaction or in specific spoken tasks, as will be shown in the study reported later. Teachers' decisions may also be influenced by additional factors due to learners' individual differences such as their "ability in the target language, age, behaviour, anxiety, self-esteem, motivation, learning style or interest in a class" (Pawlak 2014: 112). Transcripts of classroom discourse have also shown that learners' responses are sometimes 'rejected' by teachers, not because they are wrong but simply because they are unexpected (Allwright and Bailey 1991: 85). The interplay between these different factors makes error correction one of the most challenging tasks for many language teachers. Crichton (1990: 59) argues that "inadequacy of either teacher or student strategies for coping with the treatment of student error" may lead to a "crisis point", that is, "a breakdown of communication between student(s) and teacher".

Teachers' beliefs may also have some influence on the way errors are treated. Research has shown that teachers tend to show two types of beliefs: first, they believe that corrective feedback can interrupt the communicative flow and have a negative effect on the ability to communicate; second, they think that corrective feedback can cause language anxiety because learners feel embarrassed by being corrected in front of their peers (Lyster et al. 2013: 8). Teachers may also have their own beliefs about the gravity of errors as regards a particular task or a specific language feature. Moreover, their corrective strategies may be influenced by their own beliefs about the nature of the learning process and the potential of error correction for acquisition. In effect, from a more general perspective, beliefs are not only intrinsically bound with other constructs such as knowledge and assumptions (Woods 1996), but they also account for different types of teacher's responses: cognitive, affective, or an interaction of both (Andrews 2007: 74). Beliefs are also shaped by prior language learning experiences which establish cognitions about learning and language learning and form the basis of teachers' initial conceptualizations of L2 teaching (Borg 2006: 54). However, teachers' stated beliefs may be inconsistent with teachers' practices (Phipps & Borg 2009) and may change as a consequence of actual or new teaching experiences. In the case of corrective feedback practices, teachers may not be fully aware of the amount of feedback they tend to provide or of the different types of correction they use (Roothoof 2014). It is therefore not sufficient to investigate teachers' stated beliefs but "the practices themselves need to be investigated to provide evidence of teachers' procedural beliefs" (Ellis 2012: 146).

Finally, teachers' beliefs about error correction may diverge from students' beliefs and preferences. The view that favours self and peer correction supported in most teacher guides has often been found in contrast with students' preference for being corrected. For example, Ur's replication studies (2012: 91), which involved about 500 primary and secondary school students studying English in Israel, have provided consistent results in terms of student preferences for receiving corrective feedback over having their errors ignored. Studies on oral corrective feedback carried out in different instructional contexts revealed similar findings, although this tendency may vary across different learners' cultural background, language learning experiences or proficiency levels (Griffiths and Chunhong 2008; Yoshida 2008).



### 3. CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

After considering error correction from a pedagogic perspective, I will now turn the attention to the way corrective feedback has been addressed by second language acquisition research. The main concern has been to investigate whether corrective feedback assists learning and what type of corrective feedback strategies work best for this process. I will first consider two theories – the cognitive-interactionist theories and the sociocultural theory, which from different perspectives view corrective feedback as a key factor in facilitating second language acquisition. I will then examine the different types of oral feedback strategies investigated by research and their effectiveness on learners' interlanguage development.

#### *3.1 Theoretical positions*

According to the cognitive-interactionist perspective, internal (cognitive) and external (environmental) factors combine to make language learning occur: "the job of the researcher is characterized as identifying how input, viewed as external phenomena, interacts with mental knowledge and capacities, viewed as internal phenomena" (Ellis 2008: 275). Three theoretical hypotheses have proved particularly influential for the cognitive-interactionist perspective: the Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1983, 1996), the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain 1985, 1995) and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990, 1994, 2001). As Sheen and Ellis (2011: 595) underline, these hypotheses "come together in what Long [...] termed 'focus on form' of which corrective feedback is one manifestation". The Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes the role of negotiation in facilitating learners' attention to linguistic forms when they are focused primarily on meaning in the context of producing and understanding messages in communication. Negotiation can then assist language learning through the provision of 'negative evidence' or corrective feedback, which is direct or indirect evidence of what is ungrammatical. Swain's Output Hypothesis is motivated by the assumption that learners can also learn from their own output: through corrective feedback, they can then be prompted to produce output that is more comprehensible and/or more linguistically accurate. Finally, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, on which both Long and Swain have drawn, posits that attention to input is a conscious process and views 'noticing' (the registration of formal features in the input) and 'noticing the gap' (identifying the difference between the input and the learner's own output) as essential processes in second language acquisition. Corrective feedback works by making learners notice their errors and affording them with opportunities to compare their own production with the input provided.

While in the cognitive-interactionist paradigm the interaction between internal and external factors is considered responsible for acquisition, sociocultural theory (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006) views interaction "not as a source of data but



as a site where learning occurs” (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 202). Mediation by others in interaction is seen as central and learning occurs ‘in’ rather than ‘as a result of’ dialogic interaction. Participation in interaction provides affordances for learning that are tailored to individual learners’ actual level of development: the aim of interaction, including corrective feedback, is to help learners move to ‘self-regulation’ in order to be able to access and use language without assistance. Thus, corrective feedback needs to be ‘graduated’ and to supply the minimal level of assistance required to achieve self-correction (Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994). The sociocultural approach rejects the cognitive-interactionist view that it is possible to identify specific corrective strategies that are effective in promoting learning. Instead, it emphasizes that strategies need to be varied to suit the learner’s developmental language level.

### *3.2 Types of oral corrective feedback*

Second language acquisition research has investigated types and features of corrective feedback strategies to correct learner errors, and their effectiveness on learners’ interlanguage development. One of the main problems with these classifications, though, is their “definitional fuzziness” (Lyster and Saito 2010: 267). This has caused some disparity between the way different feedback strategies are described and compared with each other, and the way they are often combined in their actual classroom use (Sarandi 2016). Much of early research (Allwright 1975, Chaudron 1977, Long 1977) aimed to identify all the options available to the teacher for providing feedback: these typologies tended to be very detailed (Chaudron’s classification includes 31 features and types of corrective reactions) and complex; for example, Long’s model sought to capture the decision-making prior to the teacher feedback move. What emerged from these early studies is the “inconsistency, ambiguity, and ineffectiveness of teachers’ correction”, thus the need for teachers to refer to such inventories of feedback moves (Chaudron 1988: 145).

Later studies identified a smaller set of corrective strategies that provided the basis for both experimental and classroom-based research. Lyster and Ranta (1997)’s seminal study investigated teacher-student interaction in French immersion classrooms in Canada and was motivated by the fact that language used to convey subject matter needs to be highlighted in ways that make certain features more salient for L2 learners. Through the use of corrective feedback, teachers can draw students’ attention to relevant language forms during meaningful interaction. The researchers identified six different types of teacher corrective feedback strategies (Lyster and Ranta 1997: 46-49):

- a. explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form; it clearly indicates that what the student had said was incorrect and also provides the correct form (e.g. *Oh, you mean .../ You should say ...*);
- b. recasts involve the reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance, replacing the error with the correct language form;



c. clarification requests indicate to students either that their utterance has been misunderstood or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way (*What do you mean by ...?*);

d. metalinguistic feedback includes either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form (*Can you find your error?/ It's plural.*);

e. elicitation refers to at least three techniques aimed at eliciting the correct form from the student: the completion of the teacher's own utterance (*It's a...*); the use of questions to elicit correct forms (*How do we say... in English?*); the reformulation of the students' utterance;

f. repetition refers to the repetition, in isolation, of the student's erroneous utterance with or without emphasis on the erroneous part.

These types were further classified into two broad categories: reformulations and prompts (Ranta and Lyster 2007). The first category comprises recasts and explicit correction and provides learners with correct reformulations of their erroneous utterance; the second includes elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests and repetition, and they push learners to self-repair. As Ellis (2012: 139) underlines, this taxonomy can be applied to both feedback that is "didactic" (directed purely at linguistic correctness) and communicative (i.e. directed at resolving a communication problem). Corrective feedback can thus involve both a 'negotiation of form' and a 'negotiation of meaning'.

Sheen and Ellis (2011: 593) classified Lyster and Ranta's teachers' oral corrective strategies according to different dimensions: input-providing (the correct form is provided to the learner), output-prompting (the correction of the form is elicited from the learner), implicit (clarification is requested in response to the learner's erroneous utterance), or explicit (the error is corrected and/or some kind of metalinguistic explanation of the error is provided). For example, according to this classification, recasts are considered implicit and input-providing while repetition and clarification requests are implicit and output-prompting; on the other hand, explicit correction is explicit and input-providing while metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and paralinguistic signals are explicit and output-prompting. Different strategies can also be combined, for example explicit correction can be followed by a metalinguistic comment or elicitation. This distinction is not always clear-cut though: recasts can be conversational and implicit (*Oh, so you were sick, were you?*) but also didactic and more explicit when the correction takes the form of a reformulation of the learner's utterance (Sheen and Ellis 2011: 594). In this respect, Ellis (2012: 139) points out that,

while the distinction between input-providing and output-prompting strategies is relatively clear-cut, the difference between implicit and explicit strategies is not. Implicit and explicit corrective feedback constitute poles on a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

Sarangi (2016: 236) therefore argues that researchers will need to "specify the location of some corrective feedback strategies along the implicit or explicit



continuum". As a matter of fact 'explicitness' is not only a matter of teachers' intentions and should be investigated from a learners' perspective as well in order to understand the extent to which a corrective move is perceived as 'salient'.

Moreover, as research has shown, the same corrective feedback strategy may be 'operationalized' in a way that will affect its corrective force. For example, while Long (2007) sees recasts as an implicit type of feedback, other researchers have investigated other characteristics of recasts and their effects on learner response (short recasts compared to long recasts, recasts with stress on the erroneous part compared to unstressed recasts, recasts focused on a single error compared to recasts focused on several errors, declarative recasts compared to interrogative recasts (Ellis and Sheen 2006; Lowen and Philp 2006; Sheen 2006; Egi 2007; Kim and Han 2007). Finally, contextual factors such as task types, teaching method, learner's previous knowledge and readiness may affect the perception and the effectiveness of the corrective strategy (Li 2014).

### *3.3 Effectiveness of oral corrective feedback*

There are now a very large number of studies that have looked into the effectiveness of different types of oral corrective feedback strategies on second language acquisition. The first response to teacher corrective feedback can be observed through learner uptake, which was defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997: 49) as:

a student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance (this overall intention is clear to the student although the teacher's specific linguistic focus may not be).

Lyster and Ranta distinguished two types of student uptake: (a) utterances with 'repair' of the error on which the feedback focused and (b) utterances that still 'need repair'. Learner repair can be either a repetition or self-repair or may include simple acknowledgement, the repetition of the initial error, a different error, hesitation or a partial repair. Repair can be followed by teacher's 'reinforcement' through short statements of approval or by repeating students' corrected utterance. Researchers have investigated the relationship between different types of feedback and learner repair, and the effects of corrective feedback on acquisition. However, as Ellis argues (2010: 344), the term acquisition can have different senses: it may imply the acquisition of a new linguistic feature, denote an increase in the accuracy with which partially acquired features are used, or refer to the progress that characterizes the acquisition of grammatical features. Research into oral corrective feedback has typically addressed the effects on acquisition in terms of accuracy.

Considering the interest of this paper in oral corrective feedback, I will focus on the main findings of Lyster and Saito (2010)'s meta-analysis of the pedagogical effectiveness of oral corrective feedback in classroom settings. The analysis included





15 studies published between 1993 and 2010. The effectiveness of corrective feedback was analysed according to types (recasts, explicit correction, and prompts), timing, outcome measures, instructional settings, treatment length and students' age. The analysis revealed three patterns in terms of overall effectiveness of corrective feedback types: recasts, prompts and explicit correction all are significantly effective; prompts proved significantly more effective than recasts; effects of explicit correction were not significantly different from those of recasts or prompts (Lyster and Saito 2010: 282-283). The analysis of outcome measures has shown that effects of oral corrective feedback are larger when students' improvement is gauged through tasks in which they produce free-constructed responses. With regard to age, young learners appear particularly sensitive to prompts but not so receptive when recasts are used. This may be due to young learners' difficulty in noticing linguistic features in the input without guided support, while "older learners with substantial analytical abilities might be able to make the most of different corrective feedback types" (Lyster et al. 2013: 27). In conclusion, Lyster & Saito (2010: 290)'s meta-analysis has shown that "corrective feedback in classroom settings may be more effective when its delivery is more pedagogically oriented (i.e. prompts) than conversationally oriented (i.e. recasts)". Other reviews of studies (for example Ellis 2012) report similar conclusions, although "[...] these strategies are not as 'pure' as they are sometimes presented in the literature. Recasts, in particular, occur in many different forms. Prompts are a mixture of implicit and explicit strategies" (Ellis 2012: 263).

Finally, research has also shown that teachers tend to provide more corrective feedback on morphosyntactic than on other types of errors. For example, Brown's (2016) comprehensive synthesis of classroom-based research has revealed that grammar errors received the greatest proportion of corrective feedback (43%). The effects of feedback may also vary according to the target grammatical feature. For example, in Ellis's study (2007), metalinguistic explanations were found more effective than recasts in improving learners' use of the comparative *-er*. Although morphosyntactic errors seem to be the most targeted, learners end up noticing and/or repairing lexical and phonological errors more successfully. For example, Egi (2007) reports that noticing the target-like form in recasts led to substantially greater improvement in vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, studies on the acquisition of phonological features (for example Saito and Lyster 2012) suggest that recasts with a focus on pronunciation provide students with opportunities "to notice the negative evidence directed at the intelligibility of their output [...] and to practise the correct form in response to their teachers' model of pronunciation" (Lyster et al. 2013: 24).

#### 4. ORAL CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN ITALIAN EFL CLASSROOMS

As seen in the previous sections, corrective feedback is both of practical concern to language teachers and second language researchers. In the Italian scenario, research on oral corrective feedback seems to have prioritized two types of learning contexts: the CLIL classroom, in which a school subject is learnt through a foreign language



(Mariotti 2007), and the Italian L2 classroom (Grassi, 2010; Grassi and Mangiarini 2010, Dota 2013). Given the paucity of studies on the use of oral feedback in the Italian EFL classroom to date, this section aims to report on an observational study that aimed to investigate the role of teachers' corrective practices in four Italian EFL classes. Three main questions were addressed: a) what types of teacher corrective feedback strategies are employed in EFL classroom interaction? b) to what extent are teachers aware of the corrective feedback strategies they employ? c) to what extent do specific corrective feedback types facilitate learners' uptake? Given the broader scope of this paper, findings will be analyzed in relation to the first two questions only.

#### *4.1 Method*

The study was conducted in two different schools in the North of Italy: a comprehensive school (primary and lower secondary schools)<sup>1</sup> and an upper-secondary school. Two EFL classes in each school were observed. The language level of the students involved in the study ranged from beginner to intermediate. In each school context, the same teacher taught the two classes observed. The teachers were both non-native but differed as regards their age and teaching experience: the comprehensive school teacher was still at the onset of his teaching career while the upper-secondary school teacher was more experienced. The lessons observed varied according to teaching style (more communicative-oriented in the comprehensive school classes; more traditional and grammar-focused in the upper secondary school classes), classroom activities, topics and materials. More detailed contextual information is provided in Table 1.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the Italian school context, a comprehensive school (Istituto comprensivo) includes classes of two levels of schooling: primary (from Year 1 to 5) and lower secondary (from Year 1 to 3).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to my graduates Pablo Guinea and Giulia Ramoni for their help with the collection and preliminary analysis of data. My thanks to the teachers Salvatore D'Enrico and Eleonora Carbonati, their students and the headmasters of their schools, who accepted to take part in the study.



	Comprehensive school		Upper secondary school	
Classes	Primary Year 3	Lower secondary-Year 2	Year 1	Year 4
Age of students	8	12	14	17
Number of students	20	21	28	25
Language level	Beginner	Elementary	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate
Classroom activities	Video watching activity, spelling, and role play	Video watching activity, role play, vocabulary exercises	Teacher-led correction of grammar and vocabulary exercises	Teacher-led analysis of literary texts
Topics	Familiar topics (food, pets, family, school, etc.)	Familiar topics (family, school, daily routine, etc.)	General topics (people, experiences, etc.)	Literary topics
Materials	Video, pictures, handouts	Videos, handouts, textbook	Textbook, grammar book	Literature textbook

Table 1. Context and participants

The study employed an observational research design. Each class in the comprehensive school was observed for 5 hours while each class of the upper secondary school was observed for 10 hours. All lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data collection also involved extra note-taking by the observer. Episodes of interactional feedback were identified in the transcriptions and observation notes and coded according to Lyster and Ranta's taxonomy (1997). Only the feedback moves that had a corrective intent and were focused on form were analysed. Examples of teacher feedback types are provided in Table 2.



	Primary Year 3	Upper secondary Year 1
Explicit correction	T: <i>Can you spell SOUP?</i> S: <i>S-U</i> T: <i>No. S-O</i>	S: <i>They're their.</i> T: <i><u>Theirs. Theirs.</u></i>
Recasts	S: <i>Bread and milk.</i> T: <i><u>Sandwiches and milk.</u></i>	S: <i>Because he needs some warms clothes.</i> T: <i><u>Because he needs some warm clothes.</u></i>
Clarification requests	T: <i><u>Was is it last year or this year?</u></i> S: <i>Last.</i>	S: <i>Did you ever been to London?</i> T: <i><u>Sorry, can you repeat please?</u></i>
Metalinguistic feedback	T: <i>Can I say fishes?</i> S: <i>No.</i> T: <i><u>No. There is no plural. All right?</u></i>	S: <i>While I was there we went at the Yellowstone National Park.</i> T: <i>While I was there we went, <u>pay attention to the preposition.</u></i>
Elicitation	T: <i><u>Nice in Italian is ...?</u></i> S: <i>Buono.</i>	S: <i>How much are...no...how much</i> T: <i><u>How much...?</u></i>
Repetition	T: <i>Matteo, what's your favourite food?</i> S: <i>Kitchen.</i> T: <i><u>Kitchen?</u></i>	S: <i>She always study English.</i> T: <i><u>She always study?</u></i>

Table 2. Examples of teacher corrective feedback types

The two teachers who participated in the study were interviewed before and after class observation. The interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed, were aimed at exploring their beliefs about oral corrective feedback and the way they actually deal with it in terms of amount and kinds of feedback provided and students' response.

#### 4.2 Selected findings

The first question addressed by the study aimed to investigate what types of oral corrective feedback strategies the teachers employed. Table 3 reports quantitative data on the frequency of teacher corrective feedback types across the four EFL classes. Differences can be observed between classes within each level of schooling.



	Comprehensive school				Upper secondary school			
	Primary Year 3		Lower secondary Year 2		Year 1		Year 4	
	CF moves	%	CF moves	%	CF moves	%	CF moves	%
Explicit correction	31	29.2%	22	27%	38	34%	38	38%
Recasts	33	31.1%	22	27%	23	20.5%	24	24%
Clarification requests	6	5%	3	3.7%	3	2.6%	2	2%
Metalinguistic feedback	3	2.8%	7	8.6%	26	23.2%	11	11%
Elicitation	29	27.3%	24	29%	20	17.8%	16	16%
Repetition	3	2.8%	2	3.4%	2	1.7%	9	9%
Other	1	0.9%	1	1.2%	/	/	/	/
Total of CF moves	106	100%	81	100%	112	100%	100	100%

Table 3. Frequency of teacher corrective feedback types

In the comprehensive school classes, recasts, explicit correction and elicitation account for the most frequent types of teacher corrective feedback, with a slight preference for recasts in the primary class and elicitation in the lower secondary school class. In effect, in the primary class the teacher seems to rely more on input-providing corrective strategies by affording learners correct reformulations of their erroneous utterance while in the lower secondary class he prefers exploiting elicitation strategies in order to challenge learners and push them to self-repair. In both classes implicit strategies such as recasts, which have the advantage of preserving the flow of the conversation, are 'counterbalanced' by explicit strategies such as explicit correction and elicitation. Moreover, a closer look at qualitative data shows that, especially in the primary class, recasts are given explicit force through other types of corrective feedback in the same interactional move. This enhances the effect of the whole corrective strategy making the linguistic focus more salient, as in the example below:

T: *And... John, does Vlada like fish and salad?*  
 S: *No.*  
 T: *No, she doesn't. (RECAST) What is salad in Italian? (ELICITATION)*  
 S: *Pesce.*  
 T: *No. (EXPLICIT CORRECTION) What is salad in Italian? (ELICITATION)*  
 S: *Insalata.*

Data collected in the upper secondary school classes show different patterns of the way corrective feedback is supplied. In both classes, the teacher mostly relies on the use of explicit correction. In year 1, she heavily exploits another explicit and input-



providing strategy such metalinguistic feedback, which is often combined with more implicit and out-prompting strategies such as recasts and elicitation. The frequent use of both explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback seems to fit in with her traditional and mainly grammar-oriented teaching style allowing her to hold greater control of the interaction and draw the learners' attention to specific language features. The resulting effect, however, seems a bit disrupting in terms of interaction flow because both teacher and students tend to switch to Italian like in the example below:

T: *Rob know it? Rob know it?*

S: *Erm cioè devo dire Rob sa di questa cosa?* [Do I have to say that Rob knows this thing?]

T: *Si, cosa manca? Rob è una terza persona.* [Yes, what's missing? Rob is a third person] (ELICITATION+ METALINGUISTIC FEEDBACK)

S: *Con la -s.* [with the -s]

Although in year 4 the teacher's use of explicit correction is also very intensive, metalinguistic feedback appears to be strongly reduced in favour of recasts and repetition. This may be due to the type of activity in which students have to check their analysis of literary texts. The teacher provided her feedback mostly on pronunciation and lexical errors.

Another question addressed by the study was whether the teachers involved are aware of the type of corrective feedback strategies they normally employ in their classes and the way specific strategies are actually used to suit specific students' needs or classroom activities. The interviews aimed to underpin the teachers' beliefs and perceptions about these issues. The primary and lower secondary school teacher seemed to underestimate the amount of feedback he tends to supply. Nor was he fully aware of the wide variety of corrective strategies he actually employs in the two classes. Although he considers corrective feedback important in his teaching, he expressed some concern about interrupting students because this may have negative effects on their motivation and self-esteem. He thinks that "in some cases it is worthwhile or even useful to let some mistakes go unnoticed". During the interview, he only focused on the role of explicit correction and did not seem to be aware of his use of less intrusive strategies such as recasts, which turned out to be as much as frequent. He believes that explicit correction is particularly effective in providing students both negative and positive evidence and works well with large classes, especially in terms of classroom management. He also acknowledged his moderate use of metalinguistic feedback in the lower secondary class, which he considers appropriate on account of students' higher language level.

The upper secondary school teacher expressed quite strong beliefs about the way she provides corrective feedback in her classes. In particular, she emphasized the role of explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback in helping students focus on specific lexical and grammatical features. By comparing what she said in the interview



to classroom data, she seemed to have a fairly clear perception of the way she employs these strategies:

I first ask explicit questions to draw the students' attention on what they just said, then I ask them to correct a specific form, finally I tend to supply additional metalinguistic information to reinforce their knowledge.

She also explained that her use of Italian, especially in the first year class, is aimed at making her metalinguistic feedback more comprehensible. By contrast, she seemed to underestimate the corrective force of recasts that she mainly exploits for interactional purposes, as she explained, "I simply repeat what a student just tried to say using a correct form but then I move on".

In conclusion, classroom data have provided a composite picture of the way oral teacher corrective feedback is used in the two different school contexts investigated. While in the primary and lower secondary school classes, explicit correction, recasts and elicitation are used almost to the same degree, in the upper secondary school classes explicit correction is prioritized and particularly in the first year class is enhanced by additional metalinguistic feedback. On the other hand, interview data have shown that the teachers observed seemed only partly aware of the way they deploy feedback strategies in their classes and tended to perceive the advantages of explicit corrective strategies over other types of strategies.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The first part of this paper aimed to explore the role of teacher corrective feedback in second language learning and teaching from the perspectives of language pedagogy and second language acquisition research. On the one hand, teacher guides tend to underscore the affective and evaluative aspects of corrective feedback rather than the cognitive aspects, and suggest a number of standard strategies without any attempt to provide a classification or examples of these strategies from actual classroom interaction (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 254). On the other hand, second language acquisition research has investigated the effects of the different types of corrective feedback on acquisition. As Lyster and Saito (2010: 294) point out, research has shown that the use of corrective feedback "contributes to target language development over time" and the effects of prompts such as elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests and repetition "are larger than those of recasts in classroom settings" (Lyster and Saito 2010: 294). However, as they argue, "given the wide range of corrective feedback types that constitute both explicit correction and prompts, further research is also warranted to identify the components of these types that might contribute to their effectiveness".

In the second part, I reported on an observational study that was aimed at exploring how oral corrective feedback is used at different levels of schooling in the Italian context. Four EFL classes and two English teachers were observed during the



study and teachers' corrective practices were compared to their perceptions and beliefs. The analysis has underlined limited teachers' awareness of the amount and type of feedback they actually provide, thus confirming what emerged in similar type of research (Roothoof 2014). Teachers also expressed a staunch belief in the effectiveness of explicit correction while the learning potential of other feedback strategies was not considered.

Although the study of corrective feedback "constitutes an area where theory and practice interface" (Ellis 2010: 336), what has been investigated by researchers has not often been made available for second language teachers thus creating a gap between these two fields (Pawlak 2014: ix). Informing teachers and student teachers of the results of corrective feedback research and involving them in classroom-based studies may indeed contribute to a re-examination of their ideas, thoughts, or beliefs (Vásquez and Harvey 2010). Ellis and Shintani (2014: 280) propose a set of research-based guidelines on the role of corrective feedback that teacher educators and teachers can use as a base for reflection and debate. A selection of these guidelines is provided below:

- corrective feedback is one of the major ways in which teachers can focus on form so teachers should not be afraid to correct students' errors;
- intensive focused corrective feedback is more likely to be effective than extensive unfocused corrective feedback;
- corrective feedback yields positive effects in both accuracy-based activities targeting particular language features and fluency-based communication tasks;
- learners need to perceive that they are being corrected. However, "while the corrective force needs to be explicit, it is not always necessary to use direct, explicit correction". Even recast can be made explicit.

That said, Ellis (2012: 263) warns us that, "it may be fundamentally mistaken to look for the most effective type of strategy". In the same vein, Lyster et al. (2013: 30) argue that

the most effective teachers are likely to be those who are willing and able to orchestrate, in accordance with their students' language abilities and content familiarity, a wide range of corrective feedback types that fit the instructional context.

Raising teachers' awareness about the various options available to them can encourage them to reconsider their conceptions of corrective feedback and to reflect on their actual practice. This awareness-raising process can be fostered by presenting teachers with research evidence from classroom-based studies and by getting them involved in the analysis and assessment of transcriptions of actual classroom feedback episodes. However, as Ellis (2012: 345) argues, this may not be enough: "teachers need opportunities to become researchers in their own classroom" through collaborative action research projects in which they will investigate aspects of corrective feedback in their own classroom settings.





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