

EFL University Students' Perception of Immediate Oral Corrective Feedback in Two Costa Rican Private Institutions

Percepción de los estudiantes universitarios de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la corrección oral inmediata en dos instituciones privadas costarricenses

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been extensive research focusing on oral corrective feedback (CF), an essential aspect of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning from the teachers' and the linguists' point of view, but very little on the students' perspective. Most higher education programs in Latin America make great efforts to reinforce their EFL programs because of the language's relevance to most professional development. Aiming to contribute to improving strategies for corrective feedback that foster better oral communication, this research gathers learners' insight about oral corrective feedback given by teachers in EFL courses at two private universities from San Jose, Costa Rica. This research is descriptive, transversal and quantitative in nature. The data collection required the implementation of an online questionnaire, which was answered voluntarily by 160 A1/A2 students of the EFL program from these universities. They were interrogated on their general attitude towards CF and the importance they give to it, the frequency with which they like to receive feedback, which type of errors they consider should be corrected and the preference for error correction from a selection of seven standard error correction types. The obtained results demonstrate positive perceptions regarding the feedback received from teachers on all types of errors. The participants expressed a desire to be permanently corrected when there is a deviance in grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. The preferred method of corrective feedback was explicit correction, followed by recast and clarification; metalinguistic correction and non-verbal cues were the least liked. The findings corroborate the necessity to include oral corrective feedback on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation as expected by the students.

Summary: Introduction, Research Design and Method, Results and Discussion and Conclusions and Implications.

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Keywords: corrective feedback, perception of feedback, frequency of feedback, type of corrective feedback.

Resumen

En los últimos años, ha habido una amplia investigación centrada en la realimentación correctiva oral (CF), un aspecto esencial en el aprendizaje del inglés como segunda lengua/lengua extranjera (ESL/EFL) desde el punto de vista de los profesores y los lingüistas, pero muy poco desde la perspectiva de los estudiantes. La mayoría de los programas de educación superior en América Latina hacen grandes esfuerzos para reforzar sus programas de EFL debido a la relevancia del idioma para la mayoría del desarrollo profesional. Con el objetivo de contribuir a mejorar las estrategias de realimentación correctiva que promueven una mejor comunicación oral, esta investigación recoge la percepción de los estudiantes sobre la realimentación correctiva oral dada por los profesores en los cursos de EFL en dos universidades privadas de San José, Costa Rica. Esta investigación es de carácter descriptivo, transversal y cuantitativo. La recolección de datos requirió la aplicación de un cuestionario en línea, el cual fue respondido voluntariamente por 160 estudiantes A1/A2 del programa EFL de estas universidades. Se interrogó sobre su actitud general hacia la CF y la importancia que le conceden, la frecuencia con la que les gusta recibir realimentación, qué tipo de errores consideran que deberían corregirse y la preferencia por la corrección de errores de entre una selección de siete tipos estándar. Los resultados obtenidos demuestran percepciones positivas respecto a la realimentación recibida de los profesores sobre todo tipo de errores. Los participantes expresaron su deseo de ser corregidos permanentemente cuando se produce una desviación en la gramática, el vocabulario o la pronunciación. El método preferido de realimentación correctiva fue la corrección explícita, seguida de *recast* y la clarificación; la corrección metalingüística y las señales no verbales fueron las que menos gustaron. Los resultados corroboran la necesidad de incluir comentarios correctivos orales sobre gramática, vocabulario y pronunciación, tal y como esperan los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Realimentación correctiva, percepción de corrección, frecuencia de realimentación, tipo de realimentación correctiva.

Introduction

The topic of feedback and error correction has been debated extensively by second language teachers and researchers for decades. While some schools of thought, like Behaviorism, saw errors as something negative and recommended immediate correction, other experts such as Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1999) have argued its limited contribution to language acquisition. With the emergence of communicative approaches, errors are seen as evidence of learners' linguistic development, not as an obstacle to avoid (Rezaei et al., 2011).

Whether or not to correct students' oral errors and how to do so is a constant concern for most EFL teachers. Even though errors in oral performance are expected in the classroom as part of the natural acquisition process (Edge, 1989, as cited by Eyengho & Fawole, 2017, p.46), there is also a general sense that teachers must promote good communication in their students.

Most of the literature about strategies for corrective feedback is based on teachers' and linguists' criteria. For example, extensive research has examined the values of corrective feedback, revealing that it has a positive role in L2 learners' language development (Russell & Spada, 2006; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Lyster et al., 2013; Nassaji, 2016 as mentioned by Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Tavacoli, & Nourollah, 2015).

Most investigations have explored facilitators' perspectives on oral correction and the correlation between their pedagogical practices and learners' learning preferences (Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Inci-Kavak, V., 2019; Tsuneyasu, 2016; Kahir, 2015; Tomczyk, 2013; Cathcart & Olsen, 1976; Hawkey, 2006; McCargar, 1993; Oladejo, 1993; Peacock, 2001; Schulz, 1996, 2001 all cited by Katayama 2007;). Most of them have revealed a mismatch. On the other hand, learners' opinions and preferences for error correction seem to be disregarded (Oladejo, 1993).

As error signaling could cause some anxiety in learners, thus increasing the affective filter, this research aims to examine students' perception toward immediate oral corrective feedback to contribute to developing their communicative skills. The main objective of this study is to describe the attitude of EFL students and their perception towards immediate oral corrective feedback employed by language teachers in private university classroom situations.

Literature review

Errors

In 1967, Corder introduced the distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors; he indicated that "errors of performance are considered as mistakes, reserving the term error to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we can reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date" (Corder, 1967, p. 167).

Addressing every single error made in the classroom would be useless and time-consuming. The purpose of correction is to make sure that incorrect structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation are not construed as appropriate by learners. Four major categories are described regarding the type of errors made in EFL classrooms.

- a) Grammatical (morpho-syntactic) errors, which, according to Nancy Lee (1991), are tackled by teachers who tend to emphasize grammatical accuracy and to provide immediate corrective treatment to morpho-syntactic errors.
- b) Discourse errors, especially in spoken discourse, are analyzed to promote accurate communication without undermining the learners' confidence. So, feedback is usually provided at the end of the speech.
- c) Phonologically induced errors are, as the term suggests, pronunciation and/or intonation errors. This type of error is a sensible area where fossilization tends to take place and where there is a risk of communication breakdown if the unattended error is severe enough to affect intelligibility.
- d) Lexical errors: Like morpho-syntactic errors, lexical errors are habitually corrected by teachers, as they are easily pointed out and usually are significant in the conveyance of meaning (Lee, 1991).

Only grammatical, lexical, and phonological errors were considered for this investigation since delayed feedback was not the primary concern.

Corrective feedback

There are several ways to approach corrective feedback. Yang and Lyster (2010, p. 237) defined corrective feedback as "a reactive type of form-focused instruction which is considered to be effective in promoting noticing and thus conducive to L2 learning" (as cited by Milla Melero 2011, p. 20).

Suzuki (2004) defined corrective feedback as a pedagogical technique teachers use to draw attention to students' erroneous utterances with the intention of modified output (cited by Lee, 2013).

Undeniably, this complex phenomenon serves several functions (Chaudron, 1988, cited by Tavacoli & Nourollah, 2016). The most evident one is showing the learners, who might need to be made aware of the situation, that there is a problem in their production. Corrective feedback helps the teachers provide scaffolding and improves the learners' use of the L2. Past research has shown that giving feedback effectively contributes to learners' grammatical, morphological, and phonological development (Carroll & Swain, 1993; DeKeyser, 1993; Havranek & Cesnik, 2003; Rosa & Leow, 2004 as cited by Tavakoli & Nourollah, 2016).

Types of corrective feedback

Lyster and Randa (1997) have distinguished six types of oral corrective feedback. The first is explicit correction, which refers to a clear indication that the word or utterance is incorrect and the provision of the correct form. The second form is recast, which involves the teacher reforming the part or all of the student's utterance minus the error. The third type is clarification request, when instructors indicate to learners either that the teacher has misunderstood their utterance or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way. Usually, this involves using a question for clarification, thus its name. The fourth type, elicitation, refers to three techniques that professors use to elicit the correct form from the student directly: 1) teachers elicit completion of their utterance by strategically pausing to allow students to "fill in the blank"; 2) teachers use questions to elicit correct forms (e.g., "how do you say...?"), and 3) teachers occasionally ask students to reformulate their utterances. The fifth type of error correction is repetition, which refers to the instructors' repetition of the erroneous utterance, usually adjusting their intonation to highlight the error. Finally, metalinguistic feedback contains either comments, information, or questions related to the correctness of the student's utterance without explicitly giving the correct form.

Metalinguistic information generally provides grammatical metalanguage that refers to the nature of the error (e.g., "An adjective is needed") or a word definition for lexical errors. In addition to the preceding six feedback types, the authors included a seventh category called multiple feedback, which referred to combinations of more than one type of feedback in one teacher's turn (Lyster & Randa, 1997).

For this investigation, the combination of types was not considered. A seventh option for corrective feedback was included in the survey: using non-verbal cues to indicate a problem with the utterance, the words used, or the pronunciation of a word. Professors often shake their heads, signal a no with their fingers, or frown their eyebrows as an indication of error, expecting the learners to react and self-correct the problem. Delayed feedback was not taken into consideration for this investigation.

Attitudes and perception

Attitude, according to Dr. Pickens (2020), "is a mindset or a tendency to act in a particular way due to both an individual's experience and temperament" (p.44). Generally, attitudes are described as positive or negative towards an issue. Attitude surveys are usually designed using 5-point Likert-type ("strongly agree–strongly disagree") or frequency ("never–very often") response formats (Pickens, 2020).

On the other hand, Pickens considered that perception is closely related to attitude, which, as explained by Lindsay and Norman (1977), is "a process by which organisms interpret and organize sensations to produce a meaningful experience of the world" (as cited by Pickens, 2020 p. 52).

Studies such as Schultz's (1996) done on foreign language students at a higher-education level and Anker's (2000), which expanded over four years (as cited by Gutierrez et al. 2020, pp. 12-13) have found that most of the learners have a positive attitude towards error correction.

Ryan's (2012) research revealed that survey respondents complained about the eventual absence of correction because that would deprive them of learning (cited by Gutierrez et al. 2020, p. 13).

Research Design and Method

This is descriptive research aiming at addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the general attitude toward oral corrective feedback among EFL students in two Costa Rican private universities?
2. To what extent do students prefer to be corrected?
3. Which errors do students consider should be prioritized in their correction (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar)?
4. What are the students' preferences for types of error correction methods?
5. Do students perceive corrective feedback as effective for the improvement of oral communication?

The data collection took place from August 2022 to February 2023 and the participants were 160 university EFL students ranging from 18 to over 40 years of age who were at the time taking one of the courses of the program offered by two private universities as part of the curricula for majors not related to education. All of the participants' native language is Spanish and their level of proficiency is A1/A2. The sample represents the students who were willing to participate in the on-line survey voluntarily.

Instrument

The instrument was applied to all the participants in their native language (Spanish) to avoid misunderstanding. Because classes were conducted mainly remotely, the instrument was digital (See appendix 1). The first section includes general information about the learners' background such as gender, age group, major and course level.

The second section addressed research questions 1, 2 and 5 about the students' general opinions on the correction of oral errors in the classroom and its effectiveness. The section contained five statements: whether or not learner errors should be corrected, how students feel when they are corrected, and when learner errors should be corrected (i.e., constantly or selectively). The participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement using a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

The third section addressed research question 3 and asked about students' preferences for classroom error correction of different aspects of the language, such as grammar, phonology, and vocabulary. Instead of the term phonology, the words "pronunciation, and intonation," were used in the questionnaire. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing never and 5 representing always with respect to frequency of correction.

The last section addressed research question 4 and asked learners to rate eight different methods of error correction frequently used by EFL teachers. The rating for students' opinions about each method was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 representing bad to 5 representing excellent.

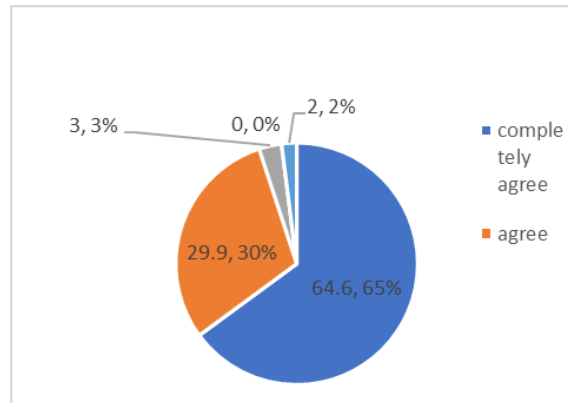
The instrument was validated through expert judgement (Escobar-Pérez & Cuervo-Martínez, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Most of the participants were young adults ranging from 18 to 25 years old; 56,9% were female, 44,5% male and 0.6% identified as non-binary, who were at the time A1 /A2 level (CEFR) at a private university in San Jose, Costa Rica.

Figure 1

Students' opinion about the importance of oral corrective feedback in the classroom



The overall attitude of the participants to corrective feedback, as seen in Figure 1, is that an overwhelming majority of 95% considered that receiving feedback from professors is essential or very important, matching the perception that feedback contributes to the improvement of their proficiency (Figure 2) which is consistent to the findings of Abarca (2008) in her research on college students in a Costa Rican public university where “it can be concluded that, in these students’ opinion, error correction by the teacher is an asset” (Abarca, 2008, p.24). The research conducted by Gutierrez et al. (2020) in a Chilean private college arrives at similar conclusions. Tomczyk (2013) also concluded, “The study makes it clear that corrective feedback is considered to be a crucial part in the language learning, and it is even expected by most students” (p.930).

Figure 2

Students' opinion about corrective feedback contributing to the improvement of their proficiency

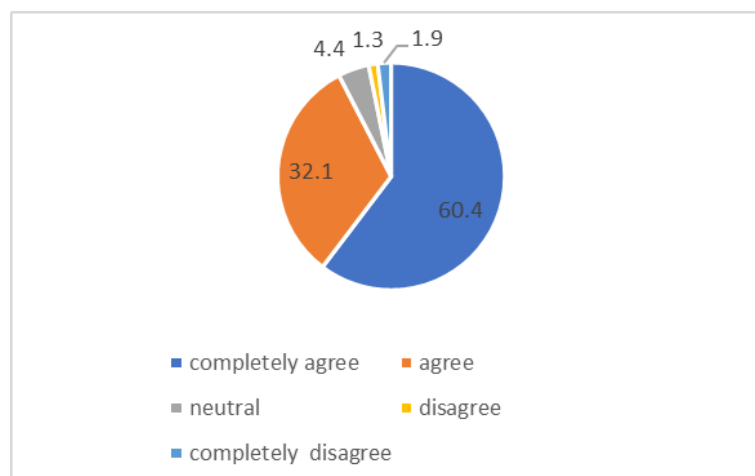
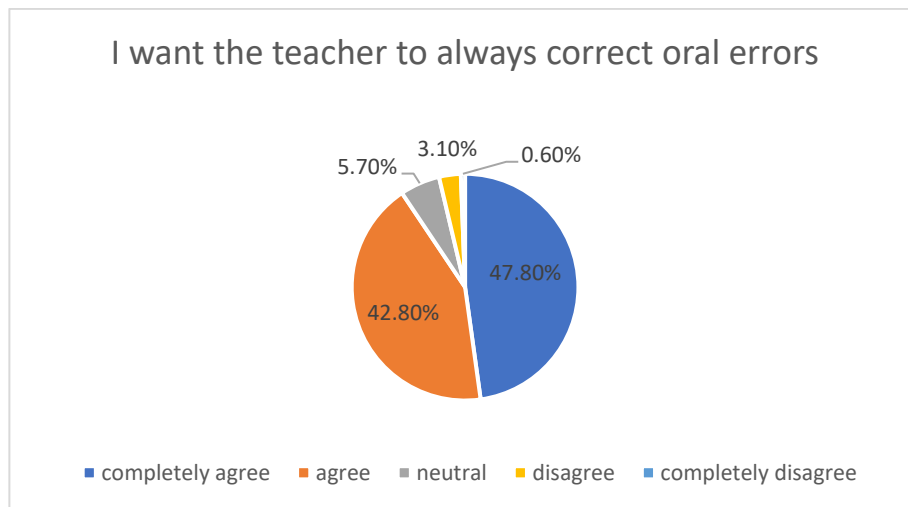
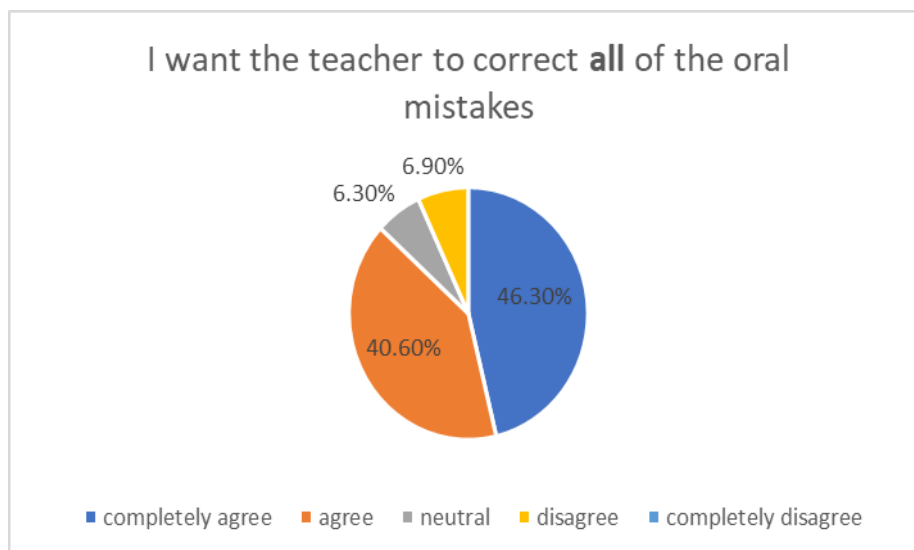


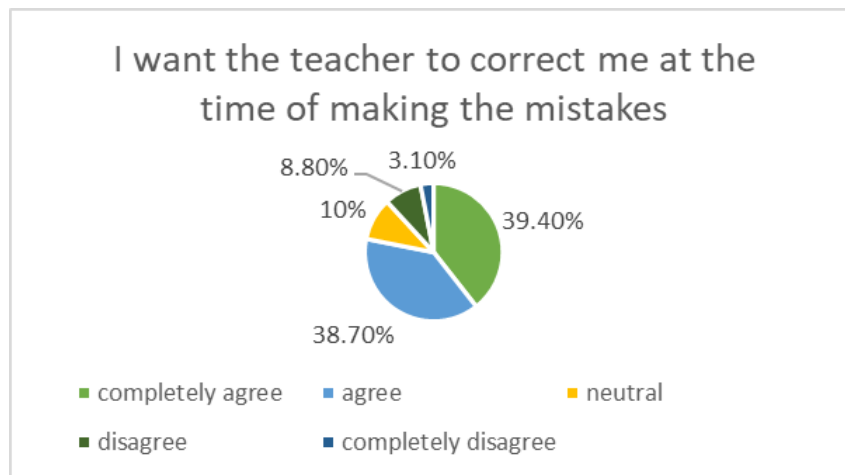
Figure 3*Students' opinion on the frequency of error correction*

Regarding the frequency of correction (Figure 3), 91% of the participants considered that teachers should always correct oral production. This seems to confirm the idea that learners are expecting some corrective feedback, and they perceive it as part of the learning process.

Figure 4*Students' opinion on the amount of correction*

As seen in Figure 4, 87% reported their desire to have all the mistakes corrected which is later confirmed in the following question about which type of errors should be corrected (figure 6).

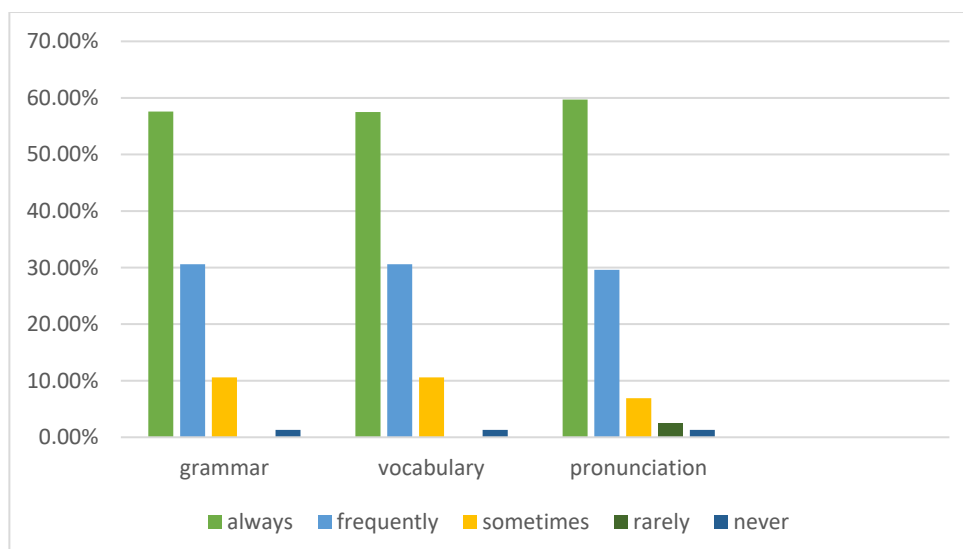
In terms of the moment of correction, displayed in Figure 5, 78% of the participants agreed that the correction should be immediate, 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 10% were neutral. This seems to be consistent with Alamri and Fauwzi's (2016) research in Saudi Arabia which pointed out that "the majority of students prefer immediate correction for all types of errors including fluency and accuracy errors." (p. 63). Ananda et.al (2017) also conclude that students' preference for oral error corrective feedback in the classroom is immediately when the error is committed.

Figure 5*Students' opinion on the time of correction*

On the other hand, Tomczyk's study (2013) done with secondary schools and technical colleges where English is taught as a foreign language in Poland revealed that 45,2% of the students preferred immediate correction (p.928). The discrepancy may be attributed to cultural aspects or maturity of the learners.

The questionnaire also gathered the opinion about which aspect requires more attention, grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. The results were very similar, as can be observed in Figure 6. Grammar and vocabulary have 57.6% and pronunciation has 59.7%. Tomczyk's study (2013) revealed that 64.4% of learners considered pronunciation errors to be more important; 57.6% grammatical errors and 39.6% lexical errors (p.927) which seems to be consistent with the present results.

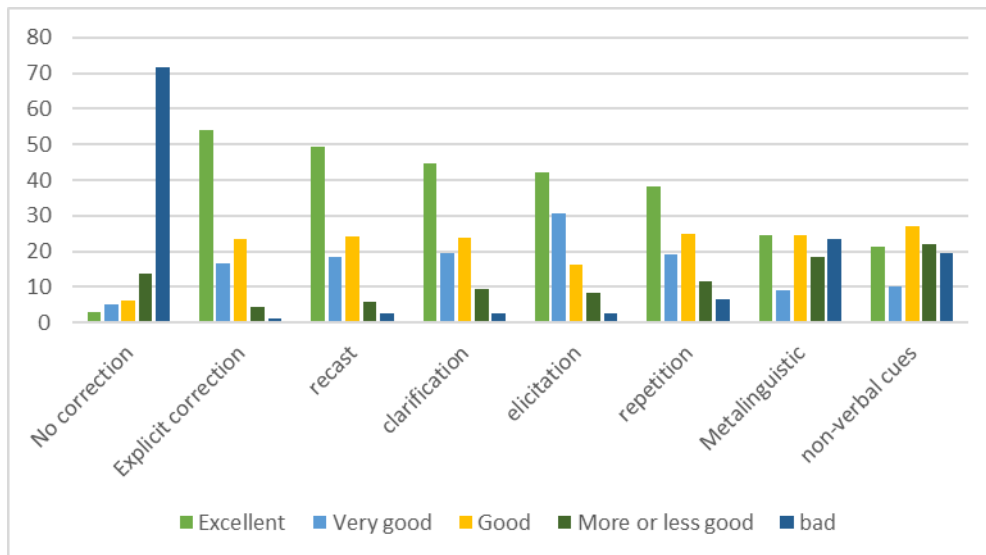
Most learners want correction in the three areas mentioned. Many teachers would be tempted to focus on global errors which hinder communication and be more lenient about local errors. But from the learners' perspective it appears that they consider grammar, lexicon, and phonology as equally important.

Figure 6*Student's opinion on which errors require more attention*

This result is consistent with Oladejo's research (1993) in Singapore and Katayama's (2007) study in Japan as well as Tomczyk's study (2013) conducted in Poland. Zhang and Rahimi (2014) looked at Iranian undergraduate students' beliefs and found that they valued the errors influencing communication the most, followed by frequent errors (cited in Lee, 2013 p. 2). Similar results were obtained by Espinoza Murillo and Rodríguez Chaves (2016) in a public university in Costa Rica.

Figure 7

Learners' opinion about types of error correction used by their professors



The participants of this study were asked to categorize seven types of error correction used by professors rating them from bad to excellent, the six defined by Lyster and Randa (1997) and non-verbal cues. As shown in Figure 7, the three most preferred were explicit correction (54.1% of participant considered it excellent), recast (49.4% excellent) and clarification (44.7% excellent) followed by elicitation (42.1% excellent). Metalinguistic feedback and non-verbal cues were considered bad methods of giving oral feedback, while no correction was the least preferred by the learners. This lack of interest in metalinguistic corrective feedback could be attributed to the level of the participants who were primarily at A1/A2. In beginner levels it seems natural that students feel more comfortable when they are directly indicated what is wrong with their utterances or given the correct form rather than having to figure it out by themselves. Non-verbal cues could be less obvious to the learners and therefore perceived not as effective as other methods.

This finding is similar to what Alamri and Fawzi (2016) reported: “recast and explicit correction were considered helpful by the majority of students. While approximately 60% of students reported that repetition of error and clarification request are helpful techniques. Elicitation and ignoring were the two least preferred techniques” (p. 64).

Gutierrez et al (2020), on the other hand, reported that the subjects of their study in Chile preferred metalinguistic corrective feedback in the first place, followed by recast and explicit correction.

Lwin & Yang (2021) found that Chinese EFL university learners in their study preferred elicitation the most and metalinguistic feedback the least.

Ananda et al. (2017) in their study conducted with university students indicated “that most of the students agree to prefer to Repetition (65%), Elicitation (56%), Clarification Request (52%), Explicit correction (46%), Metalinguistic Feedback (43%), and prefer for being neutral on Recast (36%)”.

Conclusions and Implications

As for the first research question, related to what the general attitude toward oral corrective feedback among EFL students in two Costa Rican private universities is, it can be concluded that learners in this context have a positive attitude to corrective feedback, which is consistent with Gutierrez et al. (2020), Tomczyk (2013) and Ananada et al. (2017). Students are aware of its relevance for improvement and consider it essential.

For the second research question, "To what extent do students prefer to be corrected?" it can be concluded that they expect constant feedback on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation from their instructors. The participants viewed all types of errors as requiring equal attention, consistent with the results reported by Katayama in Japan (2007) and Alamri and Fawzi (2016) in Iran.

Corrective feedback plays a vital role in the learning process, and most students want to be constantly corrected. This aligns with the conclusions of Alamri and Fawzi (2016) in Iran, Ha and Nguyen (2021) in Vietnam, Gutierrez et al (2020) in Chile, Tomczyk (2013) in Poland, Ananda et al. (2017) in Indonesia and Abarca (2008) in Costa Rica.

Regarding the best time for correction, most of the participants of this study indicated their desire to be given feedback when making a mistake. Similar results were reported by Abarca (2008): "However, it can be concluded from the results that these students feel confident if they are (1) informed about their errors and (2) allowed to correct them immediately" (p.26).

Regarding learners' preferences towards a specific approach or corrective feedback, explicit correction is the best evaluated, followed by recast and clarification. This finding indicates that beginner-level learners favor a more direct approach to feedback and are less responsive to more subtle forms of error indication.

Understandably, students will react more positively to clear indications of errors, which do not leave room for doubt or confusion. This reaction is aligned with Alamri and Fawzi's (2016) and Abarca's (2008) findings. Furthermore, Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2016) reported that explicit corrective feedback leads to lower anxiety in students.

Professors need to seriously consider the use of oral corrective feedback, considering the learners' needs and expectations, not just their professional criteria. As suggested by Espinoza and Rodriguez (2016), it would be advisable to inform the students about the corrective techniques to be applied.

Further research might explore more advanced students' perspectives on oral corrective feedback as they might have different preferences. The students' background and level of competence in the language can influence the preference for corrective methods.

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