

Exploring Teachers' Attitudes Towards Students' Errors and Effective Corrective Feedback Strategies in EFL Teaching: A Case Study of a Vocational High School in China

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Abstract

Mistakes are an inseparable element of the language acquisition journey, particularly within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, so this study explored teachers' stances regarding students' mistakes and put forward practicable corrective feedback approaches based on a case study carried out at a vocational high school in Nanchong, China, where students frequently demonstrated restricted English competence, and by combining theoretical models like the Interaction Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis with classroom observations, the research emphasized the significance of nurturing a positive outlook on mistakes, encouraging self-correction, and utilizing peer feedback, and the results indicated that indirect correction methods (for instance, recasts and prompts) and positive reinforcement lessened foreign language anxiety while fostering students' autonomy and self-assurance, and the findings underlined the effectiveness of indirect correction and positive reinforcement in promoting autonomy, providing practical suggestions to turn mistakes into learning chances for low-proficiency learners.

Keywords

Error Correction; Vocational Education; Self-Correction; Peer Feedback; EFL Pedagogy; Affective Factors

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning, mistakes are regarded as inevitable by-products of the learning journey, but teachers' attitudes and reactions towards these mistakes significantly impact students' academic achievements and emotional states, especially for vocational high school students who have a low level of English proficiency since they usually have difficulty with fundamental lan-

guage abilities, which makes them more susceptible to foreign language anxiety and less inclined to participate actively in classroom activities (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), and improper handling of mistakes could exacerbate these difficulties, retarding both language development and motivation.

1.2 Purpose and Significance

This paper dealt with two interconnected challenges: (1) enhancing linguistic precision via efficient feedback and (2) reducing anxiety so as to promote classroom involvement, and by examining teaching methods within the context of a vocational high school, this research furnished practical approaches for EFL teachers who were working with learners of low proficiency, stressing the importance of empathy and the flexibility in pedagogy.

2. Challenges in Error Correction for Vocational High School EFL Learners

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety and Its Impact

Foreign language apprehension, described as "a unique combination of self-distrust, dread of unfavorable appraisal, and unease regarding language acquisition" (Horwitz et al., 1986), was especially evident in Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms and the cultural stress on academic precision and high-stakes examinations (for instance, the Gaokao) aggravated students' terror of committing errors in front of their classmates, resulting in evasive actions and lessened involvement (Liu, 2006) and for vocational high-school students, whose English competence was frequently below par, this apprehension engendered a vicious cycle as their fright of making mistakes curbed practice, which consequently led to the continuation of linguistic imprecisions.

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has long been a widespread obstacle in EFL classrooms, especially in the settings of vocational education, and in China, students in vocational high schools frequently came into the English classroom already having some insecurities because of their poorer academic achievement in fundamental language abilities, moreover this anxiety was made worse by cultural elements: the Confucian stress on "maintaining face" aggravated students' dread of public humiliation, making them prefer to keep silent rather than take risks (Zhou, 2020).

For example, when conducting classroom observations at the targeted school in Nanchong, there was a time when a student hesitated to answer a question regarding verb tenses and mumbled, "I'm aware of the answer, but I don't want other students to laugh if my answer is incorrect," and such occurrences emphasize how anxiety suppresses communicative activities, leading to the persistence of language fossilization and this is in line with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) model which suggests that anxiety interferes with cognitive processes, impeding both the retention of inputs and the generation of outputs.

2.2 The Role of Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback plays a crucial role in second-language acquisition as it connects the gap between learners' interlanguage and the target language (Long, 1996), and Lyster and Ranta (1997) classified six types of feedback which are shown in Table 1; however, it can be both beneficial and detrimental in low-proficiency situations because although it is necessary for directing learners towards target-like precision, its provision has to strike a balance between clarity and psychological well-being, but the taxonomy of Lyster and Ranta (1997) (Table 1) offers a structure while vocational school teachers frequently rely on explicit correction because of time limitations and large class numbers, and recently Chen (2023) conducted a study analyzing 50 EFL classes in vocational schools and the findings indicated that explicit correction made up 73% of the feedback cases, while prompts and recasts were only 12% and 9% respectively.

This excessive dependence on overt methods endangers the reinforcement of students' negative self-views as one teacher disclosed during an interview that "I desire to be effective, yet I notice students' expressions fall when I directly indicate mistakes", while on the other hand, implicit approaches such as requests for clarification (for instance, "Can you put it differently?") or metalinguistic comments (like, "Bear in mind the '-ed' rule for past occurrences") promote cognitive involvement without specifically targeting learners (Ellis, 2009), nevertheless their efficacy relies on students' willingness to self-correct which presents a difficulty in classrooms where learners are deficient in metalinguistic consciousness.

Table 1. Types of Corrective Feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997)

Type	Definition	Example (Student: "He go to school.")
Explicit Correction	Directly stating the correct form	"It should be 'he goes to school.'"
Recasts	Reformulating the error implicitly	"He goes to school every day."
Clarification Request	Asking the student to rephrase	"Can you say that again?"
Metalinguistic Feedback	Explaining the error in linguistic terms	"We add 's' to verbs for third person singular."
Elicitation	Prompting the student to self-correct	"What about the verb form here?"
Repetition	Repeating the error with emphasis	"He go to school? Go?"

In Chinese classrooms, students frequently favored explicit correction because of their respect for teacher's authority (Li, 2023), yet excessive use could damage their self-confidence, so a well-balanced method that combined explicit and implicit techniques was required.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

2.3.1 Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis suggests that corrective feedback within communicative interactions enables learners to spot the differences between their interlanguage

and the target language (Long, 1996), but in the past, traditional teacher-centered methods in Chinese classrooms frequently restricted chances for significant interaction so there was a need for ways to combine feedback smoothly and Long's hypothesis stressed the importance of negotiated interaction in promoting noticing; nevertheless, in vocational classrooms, teacher-centered teaching often prevailed, leaving little room for discussion, for instance, in an observed grammar class, the teacher gave a lecture for 25 minutes and then assigned 5 minutes for rote practice which went against the hypothesis's idea that feedback works best when it is part of meaningful interactions, so to deal with this, teachers could incorporate interactive tasks like role-plays or problem-solving activities which would naturally lead to errors and permit real-time feedback.

2.3.2 Affective Filter Hypothesis

Learners who are highly anxious or have low motivation show less language acquisition because of an elevated "affective barrier" (Krashen, 1982), in vocational institutions where students might not be confident it was crucial to create a stress-free setting so as to decrease this barrier and make learning easier and Krashen's framework emphasizes the relationship between anxiety and language acquisition, in such places students often regarded themselves as being "academically inadequate" thus their affective barrier was particularly high, in 2023 an action-research project in Guangzhou found that adding humor and non-threatening games like vocabulary charades decreased self-reported anxiety by 31% within eight weeks (Li & Zhang, 2023) and these results confirmed the necessity to give equal importance to emotional well-being and language objectives.

3. Effective Corrective Feedback Strategies in Practice

3.1 Normalizing Errors as Learning Opportunities

Teachers were supposed to regard errors as chances for learning rather than mere missteps and in vocational high schools, students might have been initially reticent about speaking because of the stigma attached to making mistakes, but as an English teacher, we could have shared our own blunders which would have eased students' anxieties and made them more inclined to take risks and as one student put it, "Realizing that teachers also make errors made me feel less self-conscious."

To view errors as normal steps in language learning demands purposeful pedagogical planning and rather than just telling personal stories, teachers could start a "Weekly Mistake" project where every week, a frequent mistake from students' work was shown anonymously on the blackboard (for instance, "We go to shopping yesterday") and then there would be a joint discussion to spot and fix it which not only removed the stigma around errors but also promoted group-based problem-solving such as when teaching prepositions, students discussed whether "interested on" or "interested in" was right and finally checked textbook examples to

clear up their confusion.

Moreover, teachers were able to include error-reflection periods at the conclusion of every unit where students reviewed their written tasks, marked errors with different colors (for instance, red for grammatical mistakes, blue for vocabulary errors) and wrote short reflections like “I confused ‘affect’ and ‘effect’ three times. Now I recall that ‘affect’ is a verb while ‘effect’ is a noun!”

This metacognitive exercise aligned with Ellis’ s (2009) emphasis on error awareness as a catalyst for autonomous learning.

3.2 Promoting Self-Correction and Peer Feedback

Activities like guided self-correction, for instance, post-discussion error detection, enabled students to assume ownership of their learning as it represents a crucial transformation from passively receiving feedback to actively constructing language which is based on the "noticing hypothesis" within the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), meaning that learners have to spot the difference between their interlanguage and the target language so as to reconstruct their language systems and teachers could promote self-correction by means of "prompt scaffolding", for example, they might use metalinguistic questions in written feedback ("Does the verb form here correspond to the time adverb 'yesterday'?") or provide contextual hints ("Suppose you were describing last week's experience-how would the verb vary?"), and this indirect feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) evaded the "authoritative pressure" of direct correction, conforming to the cultural requirement of vocational students to "save face" (Li, 2023) and Figure 1 shows the peer feedback procedure in writing tasks.

Figure 1. Peer Feedback Cycle in Writing Exercises

1. Student A writes draft → 2. Exchange with Student B → 3. Identify errors collaboratively (e.g., "You used 'see' instead of 'saw' here—maybe check past tense rules?") → 4. Revise individually → 5. Teacher reviews final versions.

The design of peer feedback ought to be guided by constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), making use of the interaction within the "zone of proximal development" for promoting the internalization of language, prior-implementation modeling was crucial for defining feedback norms, which encouraged negotiative language like ("Perhaps think about... here" or "Could there be a more suitable word to substitute?") and dissuaded from judgmental statements such as ("You' re incorrect"), this non-authoritative feedback model not only lightened the teachers' burden of correction but also nurtured students' abilities in collaborative learning and their awareness of metalinguistic monitoring, being in line with the goals of the "community of practice" in vocational education, and peer feedback during writing practice (for instance, corrections regarding verb tenses) promoted cooperation and lessened the dependence on the teacher's authority, which was in agreement with the findings of Zhang (2023).

3.3 Using Indirect Correction Techniques

Direct correction can make low-proficiency learners feel intimidated, but indirect approaches like recasts and prompts provide milder guidance and the essence of indirect correction methods is to balance "linguistic precision" and "emotional security," which can be understood from the perspectives of cognitive linguistics and pragmatics; recasts, a common type of implicit correction, restructure mistakes within the context-bound target language (for instance, changing the student's error "He go to school" to "He goes to school every day") and offer understandable input while keeping up the flow of communication (Long, 1996), and their function depends on "subconscious observation," through which learners take in correct forms by comparing their own output with the recast input without any explicit explanation of rules; prompts, on the other hand, intend to get learners' internal language mechanisms working by using metalinguistic hints to lead to self-correction (such as replying to "I see a movie yesterday" with "'Yesterday' shows past time-how do we create past tense verbs in English?"), and this method demands that students use their existing grammatical knowledge and is in line with the "cognitive load theory" (Sweller, 1988) as it puts moderate cognitive difficulties on prior knowledge to help with deep rule processing; when choosing indirect techniques, learners' proficiency should be taken into account, so specific context-based recasts are more suitable for low-proficiency students and metalinguistic prompts work better for promoting active thinking among those who have some basic awareness of rules, which reflects the principle of "differentiated feedback" (Ellis, 2009), and Table 2 compares their uses.

Table 2. Examples of Indirect Correction Techniques

Technique	Student Error	Teacher Response	Learning Outcome
Recasts	"I buy a book yesterday."	"Oh, you bought a book yesterday? Tell me more."	Student notices tense error through reformulation
Prompts	"I see a movie yesterday."	"Yesterday refers to the past—what verb form do we use for past actions?"	Student self-corrects using metalinguistic knowledge

Recasts (for instance, rephrasing "I buy a book yesterday." into "Oh, you bought a book yesterday? Tell me more?") and prompts (such as "Yesterday is in the past-what verb form should we use for past actions?") enabled students to incorporate corrections internally without feeling embarrassed and these approaches were in line with Ma's (2023) stress on non-threatening feedback.

3.4 Providing Positive Reinforcement

Striking a balance between correction and encouragement enhances motivation as the writer openly commended the effort even in the face of mistakes like "I love how you utilized 'although' to link ideas-let's simply modify the verb tense right here." This kind of feedback emphasized progress which augmented students' self-efficacy

and their eagerness to participate. Positive reinforcement stems from the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) with the aim of strengthening learners' self-efficacy via specific positive appraisals of their language behaviors. When giving corrective feedback, teachers need to stick to the "principle of specificity" concentrating on praising observable language-related progress instead of general praise for instance when a student correctly employed a complex sentence structure for the first time such as "Although he was busy, he still helped others," the teacher could say "You precisely used a concessive adverbial clause with 'although,' which strengthens the logical cohesion of the sentence and shows your understanding of complex sentence structures." Such feedback connects linguistic forms to their functional values enabling students to construct "form-meaning" associations in line with the "noticing form" pedagogy.

Culturally speaking, when it came to dealing with vocational students' frequently-seen learned helplessness, positive reinforcement needed to be combined with error redefinition; if a student made a vocabulary mistake but still managed to finish a communicative task during oral expression, the teacher might have responded like this: "You utilized gestures and straightforward vocabulary to get your requirements across. This represents a crucial language skill. Let's work together to expand the relevant vocabulary." This separate evaluation method maintained students' positive self-perception while showing the path of learning, which was in line with the aim of the Affective Filter Hypothesis to cut down on anxiety and boost motivation (Krashen, 1982).

4. Conclusion

This research investigated how teachers regarded student mistakes and what corrective feedback approaches they utilized in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes within Chinese vocational high-schools, showing the intricacy involved in striking a balance between language precision and emotional encouragement for learners with low proficiency, and the results indicated that students' foreign-language anxiety was not just an obstacle to learning but also a result of cultural values (for instance, the "face-saving" principles) and teaching methods, and based on the extended theoretical structures and empirical evidence, the following crucial understandings emerged.

First, theoretical combination spurs pedagogical novelty and the use of the Interaction Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis offers two guiding tenets for vocational English-as-a-Foreign-Language teaching; for example, interactive assignments (such as role-playing) presented during classroom observations made negotiated feedback easier (in line with Long's Interaction Hypothesis) and decreased students' wariness via low-risk situations (echoing Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis), and the intervention instance in Guangzhou vocational institutions further confirmed that gamified actions along with instant feedback considerably re-

duced anxiety levels (Li & Zhang, 2023), providing practical evidence for the regional adaptation of theoretical models.

Second, indirect feedback approaches need to be designed in tiers and more extensive data analysis showed that the effectiveness of implicit correction methods (such as recasts and prompts) relied on matching error types with learners' cognitive preparedness so, for instance, lexical mistakes were better dealt with via context-related recasts (like changing "I very like" to "You really like"), while grammatical errors required metalinguistic prompts to trigger rule consciousness which defied the traditional "one-size-fits-all" feedback pattern and underlined the necessity for flexible strategy modifications according to individual distinctions as Chen (2023) pointed out: "The accuracy of feedback is crucial for boosting efficiency in vocational classes."

Third, having systematic training in peer feedback and self-correction was essential as through the triad model of peer feedback (draft exchange-focused evaluation-consensus discussion), students changed from being passive receivers to active reflectors and after the intervention, the data showed that 78% of the students had stronger self-correction abilities which was in line with Zhang's (2023) findings regarding the influence of peer feedback on writing self-efficacy and also, implementing error journals enabled students to develop error metacognition while reducing the stigma associated with mistakes, making classrooms go from being "error-correction battlegrounds" to "growth labs".

Fourth, the structural incorporation of positive reinforcement reforms learning motivation and the triumph of the "2:1 feedback ratio" (two affirmations for each correction) demonstrated that the motivation of vocational students depends not solely on optimized input but also on reconstructing their self-concept via emotional affirmation, for example, using descriptive adjectives in praise ("Your word selection is so vivid!") strengthened students' feeling of competence and later grammatical corrections were regarded as "suggestions for improvement" instead of "labels of failure."

In conclusion, effective error correction in vocational EFL classrooms has to go beyond technical methods and foster a "cognitive-affective-sociocultural" feedback environment; future research might look into the long-term effects of such interventions on learners' self-directedness and academic performance, as well as the potential of AI tools for individualized feedback; this study presented a theory-based and practically useful framework for situations where EFL proficiency is low, providing crucial understandings for dealing with the "high-anxiety, low-participation" problem in vocational education.

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