

# The role of effort and self-correction in language learning: EFL teachers' oral corrective feedback practices and their beliefs.

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This paper

- explores the relationship between teachers' oral corrective feedback (OCF) practices in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom and their language learning beliefs;
- draws on data collected as part of a small-scale case study conducted in two colleges of higher vocational education in Lower Austria;
- provides supporting evidence for prior research on the OCF practices of EFL educators and offers new insights into their language learning beliefs;
- discusses potential reasons for inconsistencies between EFL teachers' classroom practices and their beliefs;
- underscores the importance of informing practising and student teachers about research outcomes of this kind.

## 1 Rationale

While teachers' beliefs about effort and ability may shape their "affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitude towards learners" (Chen et al., 2016, p. 3), there are often discrepancies between educators' stated beliefs and their actual practices. A study by Roothoof (2014), for example, revealed several differences between EFL teachers' classroom actions and their beliefs about OCF. Educators often consider prompts, which encourage students to self-correct their errors, as more beneficial to learners' language development (Roothoof, 2014). This is because self-correction demands students to engage in "self-critical analysis of their own performance" (Niesen, 2015, p. 27), requiring a cognitive effort that goes beyond simply receiving corrective feedback (CF) from a teacher. Nevertheless, it is recasts, which provide learners with the correct forms, that have been identified as the most frequently used type of OCF in many investigations (Bao, 2019; Havranek, 2002; Sheen, 2004). Given that

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discrepancies like this could potentially impact students' learning outcomes, it seems crucial to determine the extent to which teachers' approaches to providing OCF align with their beliefs about language learning. Although existing studies in education have primarily focused on whether errors should be corrected and the quantity or frequency of CF, thereby overlooking the specifics of *how* CF should be provided to learners (Roothoof, 2014), there has been a shift towards exploring the interaction between different aspects of CF, the conditions under which it is effective, and its integration with teaching. While earlier research has examined various types of CF (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013), there has been limited investigation into teachers' beliefs about different methods of error correction.

## 2 Research questions

Considering that educating teachers on the outcomes of CF research could motivate them to reflect on their error correction methods and enhance the effectiveness of their teaching, this study aims to investigate the relationship between teachers' OCF practices in the EFL classroom and their beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning. To achieve this objective, the following research questions have been devised:

RQ1

What are the OCF practices of EFL teachers in 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms at selected Austrian colleges of higher vocational education?

RQ2

What are EFL teachers' beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning?

RQ3

To what extent are EFL teachers' beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning congruent with their OCF practices in 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms at selected Austrian colleges of higher vocational education?

## 3 Empirical study

To address the research questions, a small-scale case study was conducted, incorporating a quantitative analysis of teachers' OCF practices based on classroom observations in an EFL context, alongside a survey designed to collect qualitative data on educators' language learning beliefs.

### 3.1 Sampling and participants

In the primary phase of the empirical investigation, three female EFL teachers from two different colleges for higher vocational education in Lower Austria – a Secondary School for Economic Professions and a Training Institute for Early Childhood Education – were invited to participate in the study. Table 1 below presents detailed information about the three educators,

including their age range, first language (L1), EFL teaching experience, type(s) of school they were teaching at during the survey administration, additional teaching subjects, and prior exposure to the research topic. The data were gathered through the demographic section of a teacher questionnaire, which will be further discussed later in this paper.

Table 1: Demographic information about Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C.

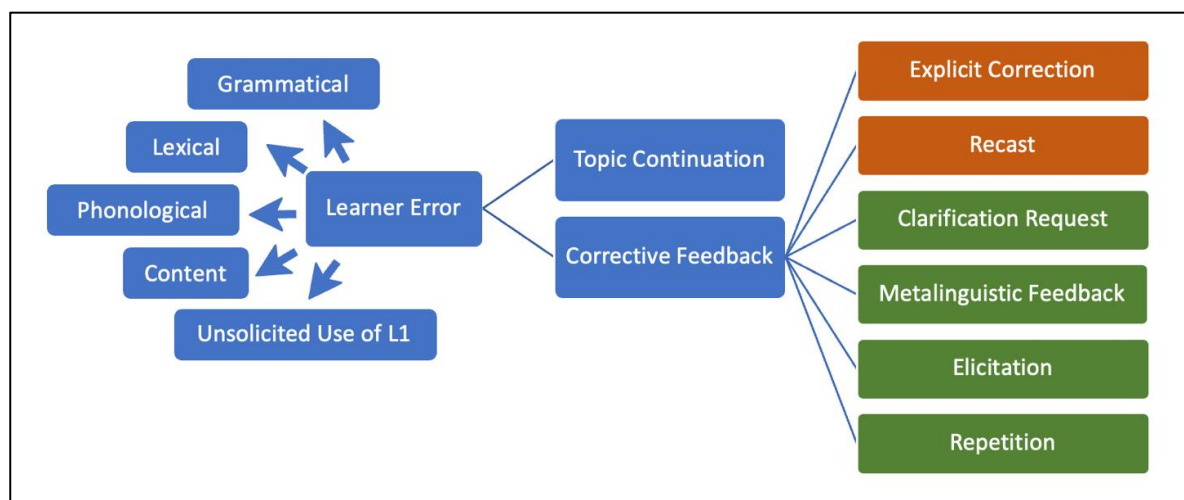
Teacher	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
<b>Age Range (years)</b>	30-39	40-49	30-39
<b>First Language</b>	German	Czech	German
<b>EFL Teaching Experience (years)</b>	5-10	11-20	5-10
<b>School Type(s)</b>	BHS <sup>†</sup>	BMS <sup>‡</sup> , BHS	BHS
<b>Second Subject</b>	Werkerziehung [craft education]	-	-
<b>Prior Contact with Topic</b>	Yes	No	Yes

To facilitate a meaningful comparison across the three teachers, three different 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes were selected as sample groups for the classroom observations.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

To answer RQ1, two EFL lessons per teacher were observed and audio- and video-recorded within an eight-day timeframe from late May to early June 2023. The classroom discourse of the six lessons was transcribed, and an adapted version of Lyster and Ranta’s (1997, p. 44) taxonomy, which is depicted in Figure 1 below, was used for the coding of the transcripts.

Figure 1: Coding model of the present study (adapted from Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 44).



<sup>†</sup> Berufsbildende höhere Schule [colleges of higher vocational education]

<sup>‡</sup> Berufsbildende mittlere Schule [schools of vocational education]

As the illustration shows, the first step in the coding process involved the identification of learner errors, which were defined as “(1) linguistic forms or content that differ from native speaker norms or facts, and (2) any other behavior which is indicated by the teacher as needing improvement” (Chaudron, 1986, p. 66). As outlined in Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) error treatment sequence, a student’s error can either be ignored, resulting in the teacher proceeding with the topic of the lesson, or it can prompt the provision of CF. The second stage of the data analysis entailed the identification and classification of instances where the teachers chose to address student errors. As the project’s major aim was to explore the relationship between teachers’ language learning beliefs and their OCF practices, the analysis of the classroom observations mainly focused on the occurrence, frequency, and distribution of reformulations and prompts in the data. Explicit corrections and recasts were defined as reformulations because they “supply learners with target reformulations of their non-target output” (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p. 152). Elicitations, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetitions were grouped into the category of prompts, since they provide “signals, other than alternative reformulations, that push learners to self-repair” (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p. 152). Therefore, in line with Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) analysis, in this paper, the term self-correction is understood as a “repair occurring only after prompting” (p. 49).

To gather information with respect to RQ2, a teacher questionnaire was designed, collecting data regarding the educators’ perspectives on language learning, their beliefs about OCF in an EFL context, and their considerations related to classroom practices. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, combining open-ended and closed-ended items. During the analysis phase, the researcher manually reviewed and condensed the responses and crafted a comprehensive profile for each of the three teachers. These profiles aimed to capture the central themes from the participants’ replies while maintaining their original meaning.

To address RQ3, the main themes that emerged from the teacher questionnaires were sequentially compared with the key findings from the transcription data. The comparative analysis began by contrasting the educators’ beliefs about the importance of CF in an EFL context with the error-to-CF ratio observed in their teaching. Next, the participants’ attitudes towards the six OCF types were assessed in relation to their classroom practices, and the teachers’ stated beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning were analysed with respect to the proportions of reformulations and prompts in the transcription data. Finally, additional results from both datasets were carefully selected to offer potential explanations for the observed congruences and incongruences.

## 4 Findings

The analysis with regard to RQ1 revealed that the participants’ CF practices closely mirrored that of educators in similar research projects. As in Leiter’s (2010) and Tsang’s (2004) studies, the observation data showed an error response rate of more than 70%, with frequent use of recasts and elicitations, similar to the findings of Leiter (2010), Lyster and Ranta (1997), Pedrazzini (2017), and Tsang (2004).

In the teacher questionnaires addressing RQ2, the participants collectively emphasised that success in learning English is influenced by a combination of innate abilities and individual effort. While all teachers stressed the importance of providing students with opportunities to self-correct their errors, variations emerged in their views on specific contexts in which promoting self-correction was considered suitable. Two educators disagreed with the notion

that CF strategies should depend on learners' language proficiency and that only high-proficiency students can self-correct, whereas one participant strongly agreed. Additionally, all three teachers indicated that self-correction is effective for grammar errors; however, their opinions diverged significantly regarding errors related to vocabulary, pronunciation, content, and students' unsolicited use of the L1. Furthermore, the study reinforced earlier findings concerning the two most common assumptions teachers hold about error correction. Consistent with Lyster and Ranta's (1997) observations, the educators were concerned about disrupting the flow of communication and expressed worries about students becoming frustrated by frequent corrections.

RQ3 aimed to determine the extent to which EFL teachers' beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning align with their OCF practices. When considering the results for the three teachers collectively, the congruence between the educators' stated beliefs and their observed CF practices was less evident than anticipated. Even though the participants collectively emphasised the importance of effort and self-correction for students' success in learning English, the proportion of prompts, which elicit learners' self-correction, was considerably low across all three sample groups, constituting on average less than 50% of the recorded CF moves.

Given the intricate nature of educators' beliefs, which can be shaped by numerous factors like experience, context, and professional development (Borg, 2003), it is impossible to pinpoint a singular reason for the observed inconsistencies. However, it is important to note that the degree of alignment between the teachers' beliefs and their practices varied among the participants. The most striking discovery in this respect was that the classroom practices of the most experienced teacher aligned more closely with her stated beliefs compared to those of the two less experienced participants.

Teacher B, who reported having between 11 and 20 years of experience as an EFL educator, not only demonstrated a strong awareness of her teaching practices but also employed CF techniques that promote self-correction more frequently than Teacher A and Teacher C. While several other factors could also account for this tendency, the slightly more pronounced use of CF types which encourage learners to self-correct their errors may partly be explained by the participant's additional years of experience as an EFL teacher. This explanation seems particularly plausible as earlier observations uncovered that educators with more teaching experience exhibit beliefs that are more consistently reflected in their classroom practices compared to their less experienced counterparts (Basturkmen, 2012; Feryok, 2004; Mitchell, 2005). This is due to the fact that over time, teachers cultivate a set of guiding principles that become increasingly embedded and applied in various teaching situations (Breen et al., 2001). Considering that Teacher A and Teacher C, who both had five to 10 years of experience as EFL teachers when the questionnaire was administered, had fewer opportunities to form beliefs that are based on insights emerging from the classroom, the limited experientially-derived knowledge of these participants may have contributed to the more pronounced disparities between their beliefs and actions. Additionally, it cannot be ruled out that Teacher A and Teacher C found it more difficult to articulate the reasons behind certain teaching approaches. Since it was found that educators with minimal teaching experience are still in the process of developing their own beliefs and only gradually become aware of them (Sinprajakpol, 2004), these educators often struggle to explain the reasoning behind specific classroom methods.

## 5 Implications

Despite being a small-scale research project, this study offers valuable insights into the way teachers navigate the provision of OCF and their underlying beliefs in this area of language instruction. Investigating educators' CF strategies and their beliefs can have a considerable influence on both the realms of EFL acquisition and pedagogy. It can present new pathways for comparable projects that are essential for foreign language (FL) teachers and, as pointed out by Roothoof (2014), "help bridge the gap between theory and practice" (p. 67). While the current study on educators' OCF practices in the EFL classroom and their beliefs "constitutes an area where theory and practice interface" (Ellis, 2010, p. 336), findings such as those obtained here are frequently not shared with FL teachers, thereby reinforcing the gap between theoretical research and practical application in the field. Since informing practicing and student teachers about the outcomes of the present investigation could potentially contribute to a reassessment of their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs, sharing the results of studies like this is highly recommended. The findings from this and similar investigations into educators' beliefs about CF can serve as an important starting point for teachers to reflect on their own approaches to error correction, thereby enhancing their CF practices through more deliberate decision-making with respect to student errors. Furthermore, there is no doubt that enabling teachers to participate in classroom-based studies might raise their awareness concerning the extent to which their beliefs manifest in their CF practices. As suggested by Pedrazzini (2017), this awareness-raising process can be encouraged by engaging teachers in examining and evaluating real CF interactions. Especially collaborative action research projects, where educators act as researchers within their own teaching environments, may be particularly fruitful.

The results of this study also underline the importance of examining the methods used to investigate educators' beliefs. As the lack of correspondence between teachers' practices and their beliefs may, in part, stem from the methodologies used to assess educators' beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012), the generalisability of the present findings is subject to certain limitations. Self-report measures alone may not adequately capture the intricate and varied nature of teachers' beliefs, which are susceptible to diverse contextual influences, and questionnaires are undoubtedly restricted in their ability to provide a deeper understanding of the investigated issue. Other weaknesses of this project are the small sample size of teachers and the limited number of observed lessons, both of which constrain the applicability and interpretability of the results.

To overcome these limitations and shed more light on the relationship between teachers' classroom practices and their beliefs, further studies on the current topic are certainly recommended. By employing both comprehensive and context-specific methodologies, researchers could obtain more definitive evidence concerning the extent to which EFL teachers' OCF practices align with their beliefs about the role of effort and self-correction in language learning, ultimately offering deeper insights into the dynamics influencing error correction and how they, in turn, affect outcomes in the language learning context. Moreover, there is abundant room for further progress in determining the effectiveness of different CF types and specific methods that could help educators enhance their CF techniques.

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