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**Research Paper**

**Learners' Proficiency Level and Teachers' Preferences for Oral Corrective Feedback: Orientation versus Implementation**

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**Abstract**

The question of whether oral corrective feedback (CF) produces a positive impact on linguistic development has been the focus of recent interaction research. Despite the large body of knowledge in this regard, few studies have investigated the factors teachers take into account in correction particularly learners' proficiency level. Accordingly, observations and interviews were used to examine Iranian EFL teachers' attitude to oral CF and the role of proficiency level in their correction. Teachers' preferences were compared with their actual practice to find the areas of mismatch and the possible reasons behind these mismatches. The participants included four observed and 26 non-observed teachers and their learners who were from two proficiency groups, lower-intermediate and advanced. The results confirmed the role of proficiency level in teachers' corrective behavior in different ways. Certain mismatches were also found between their beliefs and practice. The issues of concern and importance to teachers were found to be different from those of researchers being more emotional in nature. The results pointed to the need for making teachers aware of the cognitive aspects of learning from error correction in teacher education programs.

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## 1. Introduction

A large number of studies have investigated the effect oral corrective feedback (CF) has on interlanguage development. The studies have been both laboratory-based and classroom-based. Classroom-based studies, the main concern of the present study, are also of two types: experimental or quasi-experimental (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ammar, 2008; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Yang & Lyster, 2010; Nassaji, 2009; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Nakatsukasa, 2021; Fu & Li, 2022, etc.) and observational (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998; Sheen, 2004; 2006; Yoshida, 2008). The results of all these studies, as pointed out by Lyster, Saito and Sato (2013), suggest that "oral CF is significantly more effective than no CF" (p. 20). The results of both experimental and observational studies further show that explicit types of CF are less frequent but more effective than implicit correction, i.e., recast. Some (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Kartchava & Ammar, 2014; Lin & Hedgcok, 1996; Mackey & Philp, 1998) confirm the role of learners' proficiency level in the extent to which they can benefit from CF specially recast; high proficiency level is associated with more successful use of CF.

Although numerous studies have examined the effect of oral CF on learning, few (Lee, 2013; Yoshida, 2008; Polio, Gass & Chapin, 2006; Mackey, Polio and McDonough, 2004; Zyzik & Polio, 2008) have examined teachers' preferences for oral CF and particularly the factors teachers take into consideration in correction of spoken errors. The results of these studies show that teachers' and learners' preferences are inconsistent. Learners want

all their errors to be corrected while teachers prefer to be selective in correction (Jean & Simard, 2011; Kamiya, 2014; Lee, 2013; Mori, 2011; Schulz, 2001). Learners prefer immediate and explicit correction, but teachers prefer recast and delayed feedback (Lee, 2013; Zyzik & Polio, 2008). The results of these studies further show that teachers take into consideration learner characteristics such as age (Yoshida, 2008), proficiency level (Kennedy, 2010), and even culture (Mori, 2011) when providing CF.

Furthermore, few studies (e.g., Kennedy, 2010) have examined how learners' proficiency level affects teachers' correction although it has been found to be a determining factor in learners' ability to benefit from correction. Kennedy investigated how proficiency level determines teachers' corrective practice using classroom data from the CHILDES database. She analyzed the data based on the error type, type of correction received, and learner uptake and repair rate in each group of proficiency. The participant in this study was a native speaker ESL teacher with 15 grade 1 learners. Her findings revealed that the low-proficiency group was corrected mainly using recast and the Mid/High proficiency group received elicitive forms of correction that require self-correction by the learners. Kennedy's study has major shortcomings including limited sample population; her data was related to one single teacher. Therefore, the results of her study lack generalizability. She did not also compare the teacher's beliefs with his practice to find the possible mismatches and the reasons behind these mismatches. Accordingly, the present study attempted to examine language teachers' priorities and practical concerns and the role of learners' proficiency level in how they prefer to correct them. Considering the effect of proficiency level has been confirmed in experimental studies, the results of the present study could reveal whether teachers reflect the recent research findings in their practice.

## 2. Research Questions

Based on the mentioned gaps, the following research questions were addressed in the current study:

1. Does learners' proficiency level determine the amount of CF teachers provide?
2. Does learners' proficiency level determine the types of CF they provide?
3. Is there any consistency between the teachers' beliefs and their real-life practice inside the classroom?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Introduction

With a general understanding of the key concepts and the relevant issues covered in the previous studies, this section explains the methodology used for addressing the research questions discussed in the previous section. Accordingly, the information related to the participants, the instruments used for data collection, data collection and data coding procedures, data analysis, and the overall design and procedures taken in the study are provided.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants were Iranian EFL teachers and learners, who were recruited from two private language institutes in Tehran. The teachers included both observed ( $n=4$ ) and non-observed ( $n=26$ ). The learner participants included 80 male and female learners of English as a Foreign Language ranging in age from 15 to 30. The learners were from two proficiency groups, i.e., lower-intermediate and advanced. Language institutes' classification was followed for assigning the participants to lower-intermediate and advanced groups as the target population included language learners who were taking part in speaking-based language classes

and the selected institutes used similar classification procedures and textbooks.

### **3.3 Instrumentation**

The following instruments were applied in this study:

#### **3.3.1 Observation**

In the 3.3study, four EFL teachers were observed in their classes. The observations were aimed at examining teachers' corrective behavior in their classes and examining the differences in their way of correcting lower-intermediate and advanced learners in terms of the amount and the types of feedback used by the observed teachers for each proficiency group. Audio recordings were also used for a more detailed analysis of the teachers' practice.

#### **3.3.2 Interview**

Semi-structured interviews with the observed teachers and 26 more teachers were carried out to obtain more detailed information about the teachers' beliefs in relation to oral CF and the role of proficiency level in their way of correcting the students in order to compare their beliefs with their practice. Each interview session lasted 20-30 minutes. The observed teachers were interviewed later (i.e., two weeks from the observations) to make sure that they do not become aware of the goal of the study and their corrective behavior is not affected by this awareness. The two-week interval between the observations and the interviews would also ascertain that teachers could not remember what they had specifically done in the particular classes in which they were observed so their answers would not be influenced by their practice.

### **3.4 Procedure**

As the first step, two private language institutes were randomly selected for the purpose of the study. Then four teachers were selected from these

institutes based on their consent to be observed in their classes and based on whether they were teaching in low- and high-proficiency classes at the time our study was being conducted. The classes had to be conversation-based. Following that, an observation checklist was prepared before observing the classes. The researcher then attended and observed the classes during four sessions (two sessions for each proficiency group) for each teacher. The classes lasted about one and a half hour(s) and were held twice a week. The classes were audio-recorded for more detailed analysis of the teachers' practice. Subsequently, the transcriptions of the audio-recordings were analyzed to examine the teachers' corrective behavior and the possible differences in teachers' way of correcting the learners of the two different proficiency groups. Finally, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the teachers who had been observed after two weeks from the observations and with non-observed teachers to shed more light on how proficiency level determines the teachers' way of correction. The results of interview were compared with the results of observation to see if there is any consistency between what the teachers stated on the interviews and their real-life practice.

### **3.5 Design of the Study**

The design of this study is descriptive and comparative. The researcher examined teachers' corrective behavior in two (lower-intermediate and advanced) classes. The role of proficiency level was examined, first, in terms of its impact on the amount of CF the teachers provided and, second, the types of oral CF and other corrective techniques preferred and used by them. The results from the interview and the observations were compared.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Observations**

#### *4.1.1 The amount of correction across proficiency groups*

To find out whether proficiency level influences the amount of feedback teachers prefer to use, the overall number of errors and the corrections made

by the four observed teachers for the two proficiency groups was calculated (see Table 1). As presented in Table 1, a larger number of errors were made by the advanced groups (299 vs. 267). This might be because highly proficient learners make more contributions to the conversations in the class due to their higher ability to speak and probably their higher self-confidence. Accordingly, they might make more errors than the lower-proficiency learners. Based on Table 1, less than half of the errors were corrected by the teachers in both proficiency groups. However, although the advanced group made more errors, the teachers made more corrections for the less proficient learners; lower-intermediates received a relatively higher percentage of corrections compared to the advanced group.

Table 1.  
*Number of Errors and Feedback Turns for Each Proficiency Group*

Advanced		Lower intermediate	
Number of errors	Number and percentage of corrections	Number of errors	Number of corrections
299	116 38.8%	267	143 46.4%

To gain more detailed information about the behavior of individual teachers in terms of the amount of CF they used for the two groups, the number of errors and the corrections used by every teacher were presented in another table (Table 2). With regard to the amount of feedback, as shown in Table 2, all of the observed teachers except for Teacher3 made a larger number of corrections for the lower-intermediates. In other words, they ignored more errors in their advanced classes. Teacher3, in contrast, used more corrections for the advanced group.

Overall, majority of the teachers did not correct more than half of the errors. This implies that teachers prefer to be selective in correction. This result is in line with the previous findings (e.g., Jean & Simard, 2011; Lee, 2013); teachers prefer to correct the learners only when there is a miscommunication.

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**Table 2.**

*Number of Errors and Corrections by Each Teacher for the Proficiency Groups*

Teachers	Advanced		Lower intermediate	
	Number of errors	Number of corrections	Number of errors	Number of corrections
Teacher1	49	n=30 61.2%	72	n=49 68%
Teacher2	96	n=38 39.6%	93	n=48 51.6%
Teacher3	78	n=44 56.41	40	n=18 45%
Teacher4	92	n=20 21.73%	62	n=28 45.1%

Based on the results, the amount of correction was higher for the lower-intermediates. Teachers provided more CF for the lower-proficiency groups. This might be because of the fact that at higher levels, most of the non-target-like utterances made by the learners are mistakes rather than errors. In other words, they are not due to the lack of knowledge. The other reason might be that at higher levels the learners talk more fluently and make fewer pauses while they are speaking. Based on the findings, therefore, the teachers showed a differential attitude to correction of learners from two different proficiency groups in terms of the amount of correction they preferred to provide.

*4.1.2 The preferred types of feedback across proficiency groups*

With regard to the types of CF used by each teacher, as Table 3 clearly shows, recast was the most frequently used type of CF; teacher 1, 2, 3 and 4



used recasts in 72.1%, 82.5%, 78% and 79% of the corrections, respectively. Other feedback types were rarely used. However, the next preferred feedback type for the teachers except for Teacher 1 was explicit correction. For Teacher 1, metalinguistic feedback was the next frequently used feedback type. In fact, metalinguistic feedback comes next in terms of frequency of usage for the teachers except for Teacher 4 who did not use this type of feedback at all. Elicitation and clarification were the least frequently used feedback types. Finally, repetition was never used by any of the teachers.

The overall frequency of each type of feedback the teachers used for each proficiency group was also calculated to find out teachers' overall preferences for different types of CF for advanced and lower intermediate groups (Table 4). Based on the results, recast was the most highly preferred CF type used for both proficiency groups. However, the lower intermediate group received a larger number of recasts than the advanced learners. Explicit correction was also used much more frequently for the lower intermediate group (76% vs. 24%). This might be because of the fact that this type of feedback is explicit, salient and, therefore, more noticeable and because it is input-providing in the sense that it provides the correct form rather than ask learners to self-correct, which might be challenging to less proficient language learners. Accordingly, considering the fact that at lower levels, learners might not be able to self-correct their errors, this feedback type is a good choice. Clarification request was only used for the advanced learners. However, the number of elicitations and metalinguistic feedbacks was equal for both proficiency groups.

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Table 3.  
*Distribution of Feedback Types Used by Each Teacher*

Teacher	Type of feedback				
	Recast	Elicitation	Metalinguistic feedback	Explicit correction	Clarification request
Teacher1	<i>n</i> =57 72.1 %	<i>n</i> =9 11.4 %	<i>n</i> =10 12.7 %	<i>n</i> =3 3.8 %	<i>n</i> =0 0%
Teacher2	<i>n</i> =71 82.5%	<i>n</i> =3 3.5%	<i>n</i> =4 4.7%	<i>n</i> =6 7%	<i>n</i> =2 2.3%
Teacher3	<i>n</i> =36 78.2%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =4 8.8%	<i>n</i> =6 13%	<i>n</i> =0 0%
Teacher4	<i>n</i> =38 79.1%	<i>n</i> =2 4.2%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =6 12.5%	<i>n</i> =2 4.2%

Table 4.  
*Frequency of Feedback Types used for Advanced and Lower Intermediate Learners*

Group	Feedback type				
	Recast	Elicitation	Metalinguistic feedback	Explicit correction	Clarification request
Advanced	<i>n</i> =91 45%	<i>n</i> =7 50%	<i>n</i> =9 50%	<i>n</i> =5 24%	<i>n</i> =4 100%
Lower intermediate	<i>n</i> =111 55%	<i>n</i> =7 50%	<i>n</i> =9 50%	<i>n</i> =16 76%	<i>n</i> =0 0%

This result is matched with the previous findings (Lee, 2013; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Sheen, 2004; 2006; Yoshida, 2008); recast was found to be the most prevalent feedback type. The higher frequency of recast in comparison to other types of correction might be because of its non-obtrusive nature; it does not interrupt the learners. In other words, due to its non-obtrusive and implicit nature, it does not break the flow

of interaction. The results of interviews confirm this claim; the teachers stated that they do not like to interrupt the learners in the middle of conversation particularly because learners might become distracted and forget what they wanted to say. Another reason for the dominance of recasts might be that it does not challenge the learners or put the under pressure to self-correct, which might cause anxiety. In contrast with prompts, which require self-correction, recasts implicitly provide the correct form and are not anxiety-provoking.

Table 5.

*Distribution of Feedback Types for Each Proficiency Group*

Teacher	Proficiency group	Feedback type				
		Recast	Elicitation	Metalinguistic feedback	Explicit correction	Clarification request
Teacher1	Advanced	<i>n</i> =17 29.8%	<i>n</i> =5 55.5%	<i>n</i> =7 70%	<i>n</i> =1 33.3%	<i>n</i> =0 %
	Lower-intermediate	<i>n</i> =40 70.2%	<i>n</i> =4 44.5%	<i>n</i> =3 30%	<i>n</i> =2 66.7%	<i>n</i> =0 0%
Teacher2	Advanced	<i>n</i> =36 50.7%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =2 100%
	Lower-intermediate	<i>n</i> =35 49.3%	<i>n</i> =3 100%	<i>n</i> =4 100%	<i>n</i> =6 100%	<i>n</i> =0 0%
Teacher3	Advanced	<i>n</i> =22 61.1%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =2 50%	<i>n</i> =4 66.7%	<i>n</i> =0 0%
	Lower-intermediate	<i>n</i> =14 38.9	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =2 50%	<i>n</i> =2 33.3%	<i>n</i> =0 0%
Teacher4	Advanced	<i>n</i> =16 42.1%	<i>n</i> =2 100%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =2 100%
	Lower-intermediate	<i>n</i> =22 57.9%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =0 0%	<i>n</i> =6 100%	<i>n</i> =0 0%

To find out whether each teacher differentiated between the proficiency groups in terms of the types of CF they preferred to use for advanced and lower-intermediate learners, the number and percentage of each feedback type used for the two groups was presented in a separate table (i.e., Table 5). In this way, we could find out whether each teacher had a differential attitude towards learners of different levels of proficiency in the types of CF they

prefer for each proficiency group and the extent to which they use each feedback type for each group.

Generally, the results confirm the differential corrective behavior of the observed teachers towards learners of different proficiency groups. As presented in Table 5, Teacher1 and Teacher4 used more recasts for the lower intermediate class, 70.2% and 57.9% respectively. Teacher3, however, used more recasts for the advanced group. Finally, Teacher2 did not differentiate between the advanced and the lower intermediate groups. With regard to the use of elicitation, two of the teachers used it differently for the two groups; Teacher2 used it for the lower-intermediate learners while Teacher4 used it exclusively for the advanced group. Teacher1 used almost the same number of elicitations for both groups, i.e., four for the lower-intermediates and five for the advanced group). Metalinguistic feedback was also used differentially by Teacher1 and Teacher2. Teacher2 used it exclusively for the lower proficiency group while Teacher1 used it more (70%) for the advanced learners. Furthermore, except for Teacher3, all the teachers used explicit correction mainly for the lower-intermediate group. Finally, clarification request was used exclusively for the advanced learners by Teacher2 and Teacher4. Overall, it seems that there are no homogenous patterns for the teachers' use of different types of CF in the two proficiency groups. In other words, except for clarification request, which was used only for advanced learners, and explicit correction, which was mainly used for the lower intermediate group, other feedback types have been used heterogeneously.

Based on the results, there was almost no fixed pattern in using different feedback types by the four teachers except that they all used recast very frequently for both groups particularly the lower intermediate group and that explicit correction was mainly used for the lower intermediate group. This result is not matched with Kennedy's (2010) findings. The teacher in her

study used prompts mainly for the higher proficiency learners but recast for the lower group. The findings of the present study suggest that each teacher may decide to follow a specific corrective procedure depending on such contextual factors as the classroom environment, learner characteristics such as age and proficiency level.

#### **4.2 Interviews**

On the interviews, the teachers stated that their corrective decisions depend on the contextual conditions and their understanding of the classroom environment and learner characteristics. Generally, teachers, either observed or non-observed, believed correction of errors is effective in learning and, therefore, necessary because it makes learners aware of their errors and the gaps in their interlanguage. However, they all believed that correction should be selective. In other words, overcorrection, according to the teachers, might create a sense of inhibition in the learners, damage their self-confidence and discourage them from talking freely and participating in the classroom discussions. Accordingly, they will not have the chance to benefit from feedback. As Teacher3 stated, “if I correct all their errors, they cannot keep them in their mind”. Considering the fact that the classes were conversation-based, interrupting the learners might also naturally create a feeling of anxiety or embarrassment which might make them less willing to make a contribution to the classroom discussions. This might be more serious at lower levels. According to one of the teachers, as mentioned in the results section, because learners have just begun to learn the language, overcorrection might make them feel disappointed. In the case of advanced learners, most of the non-target-like utterances used by advanced learners are mistakes rather than errors. As one of the teachers noted, “If the mistake is pointed out to the advanced learners, they can self-correct it”. And considering the teachers’ unwillingness to interrupt their learners in the

middle of conversation, they prefer to ignore the errors or mistakes unless the error causes miscommunication, based on the results of the interviews.

Due to their unwillingness to interrupt the learners in the middle of conversation, all the teachers who were observed asserted that they preferred to use recast rather than prompts and explicit correction. Therefore, because of its implicit and non-obtrusive nature and because it does not break the flow of interaction, recast is an ideal choice for correcting learners during interaction. Another advantage for recast, according to one of the observed teachers, is that “it does not challenge the learners”. It means that it does not force them to self-correct, which might be challenging to them. The non-observed teachers also had a high preference for recast. Eighteen out of the 26 non-observed teachers clearly stated that they used recast for correcting their students particularly during conversational activities such as free discussions. Two of the teachers who stated that they did not use this type of CF believed that it is not effective because learners repeat the same error again and again.

Overall, according to the teachers, correction should never cause negative feelings; based on the interviews, all of the teachers pointed out the importance of attending to learners' emotional reaction when providing feedback. In other words, the teachers stated that one of the most important priorities for them during correction is not to hurt students' feelings. “I provide individual correction for the students who are sensitive to correction”, one of the teachers stated. Another said that “I practice caution when correcting learners in front of the whole class and when they are exposed to the whole class but not during pair work”. The results of some experimental studies (e.g., Sheen, 2008; Rassaei, 2013) as mentioned in the review section, also confirm the damaging impact of negative feelings on the learners' ability to implement CF. Sheen (2008), for example, discovered that

high-anxiety learners are not able to notice CF and implement changes to their erroneous utterances.

Therefore, it seems that teachers pay attention to individual differences when making a correction. Four of the non-observed teachers pointed to the role of age in how they prefer to provide correction. They clearly stated that adults have a higher sense of inhibition and might become less willing to talk if they are corrected explicitly. Therefore, more indirect and fewer corrections are to be done for adult learners. According to one of the teachers: "I show leniency towards those older students who make up a very small portion of the class". Sometimes I notice that these students feel a lot more embarrassed when they make a mistake than their younger counterparts". The teachers' concern about students' emotions made them avoid using explicit forms of CF including explicit correction, which according to one of the teachers, is "face-threatening". Yoshida (2008) had a similar finding. He discovered that the teachers in his study used implicit correction (i.e., recast) for their adult learners because they did not want to embarrass them in front of their classmates.

With regard to the role of proficiency level, three of the observed teachers held that the proficiency groups are different in their level of emotional sensitivity. In other words, they believed a distinction should be made between learners of different proficiency levels. Teacher1 stated that "emotional reactions should be taken more seriously in lower levels". Teacher3 had a similar belief. According to her, learners at lower levels are more sensitive to correction. Because learners at lower levels are just starting to speak, correcting them might be inhibitive and decrease their motivation and willingness to talk during the classroom activities. Teacher2, however, had a different belief in this respect; he believed because learners at higher levels have higher expectations of themselves, they might be more likely to

develop anxiety as the result of correction. Correcting them particularly in front of their classmates might embarrass them. The non-observed teachers were also divided in terms of their belief about students' emotional sensitivity at the two proficiency levels. Some believed advanced learners have high expectations of themselves and have a higher feeling of self-confidence. Therefore, if they are corrected in front of their classmates particularly using explicit forms of correction, they will become embarrassed. Accordingly, indirect CF types such as recast are recommended for them. On the other hand, those who believed lower-proficiency learners are more sensitive to correction stated that because beginners usually talk less and their utterances are normally full of errors due to their low background knowledge, correction might totally make them silent. In other words, on fear of being corrected they might not be inclined to participate in classroom discussions. One of the teachers explicitly stated that "at lower levels, I try to build more intimacy with my students so that they will become more receptive to correction". Based on the interviews, some of the teachers mentioned that they used different feedback types for the two proficiency groups. Some (six out of 26) believed that elicitation is more effective for advanced learners because they can self-correct their errors. Two of the teachers said they used it at lower levels because learners can more easily notice it. Recast was a good feedback type for advanced learners, according to five of the non-observed teachers because they make more contributions to the classroom discussions and talk more fluently and should not be interrupted when they are involved in a conversation. Only one of the 26 teachers stated that he used explicit correction for advanced learners because they are less expected to commit an error. The remaining 12 teachers asserted that they do not make a difference between the two proficiency groups in terms of the type of feedback they prefer to provide.



Concerning the effectiveness of different CF types, out of the four observed teachers, two (Teacher1 and Teacher2) strongly believed that advanced learners are more capable of using correction to improve their linguistic knowledge. Teacher1 noted that he felt more comfortable when correcting advanced students. In other words, since learners at advanced levels have enough background knowledge of the English grammar, they can better understand their errors and are able to find the gap in their interlanguage. Teacher1 particularly pointed out that recast is not helpful to learners from lower levels of proficiency and even if the teachers correct them, they will not notice their error and why they are being corrected and continue talking. Teacher2 believed that, overall, advanced learners make better use of correction and can more easily notice their error. At lower levels, however, “because the learner is trying to express his/her opinion, if I interrupt and correct them, they will forget what they were trying to say”. This is particularly the case during free discussion activities. The non-observed interviewed teachers had similar beliefs. Eleven out of the 26 non-observed teachers believed that elicitation is more effective because it makes sure that the learners understand their error and it creates more involvement. With regard to other types of feedback, few of the teachers believed explicit correction (only four teachers) and repetition (only one teacher) are effective in learning. However, they stated that metalinguistic feedback in the case of errors that are common among all the learners or are repeated by one learner can be quite helpful. Clarification request was not mentioned by any of the non-observed teachers at all.

#### **4.3 Orientation versus Implementation**

The results of interviews were primarily compared with the observation results to find the areas of consistency or mismatch between their beliefs and practice. The results were indicative of the existence of certain mismatches

between the teachers' practice and views. Teacher1, for instance, stated that she preferred to use recast more for the advanced learners while in practice, as shown in Table 5, she used 70.2% of her recasts for the less proficient learners. She believed that this feedback type is ambiguous to learners of lower proficiency. As another instance, she asserted that she prefers to use metalinguistic feedback for low-proficiency learners; however, 70% of the metalinguistic feedback was used for advanced learners. Furthermore, although Teacher 1 believed that elicitation should be used for advanced levels, the results of observation showed that she had used this type of feedback for both levels (see Table 5). Finally, because learners at lower levels are just beginning to learn the language and might be inhibited by correction, she preferred to use more corrections for advanced learners; nonetheless, she seems to have made more corrections for the lower-intermediates (see Table 2); she corrected 61.2% of the errors made by the advanced learners and 68% of the errors committed by lower-intermediate learners.

Teacher2 declared that his decisions on the types and amount of CF to use are based upon the learners' willingness to be corrected and learn rather than their level of proficiency. Overall, he preferred to correct most of the learners' errors particularly at lower levels, but he did not like to correct minor errors or mistakes made by the advanced learners even though they talk more and, naturally, make more errors. The results of observation also show that this teacher used more corrections in the lower-intermediate level (51.6% vs. 39.6%). In addition, he preferred to use recast and metalinguistic feedback. As shown in Table 4, 82. % of the corrections he has used is in the form of recast. Metalinguistic correction was, however, very rare, which is indicative of a mismatch between his belief and practice in the use of this type of feedback. He further stated that he does not like to interrupt the

learners when they are involved in discussions; as confirmed by the observations, during the observations he used mainly implicit correction (i.e., recast) to correct his learners during communication, which might be because of his unwillingness to interrupt the learners in the middle of conversation. Finally, he favored the use of elicitive types of feedback (i.e., prompts) that encourage self-correction, but he used them quite rarely. (Table 3 and Table 4.)

Teacher 3 believed that corrections should be made more at higher levels. The type of feedback she preferred was recast. According to her, recast should be primarily used for more proficient language learners because they can benefit from CF better considering their higher level of linguistic development and knowledge. She further believed that explicit correction is also more suitable for high-proficiency groups. These beliefs are consistent with her practice. She provided rather more CF to her advanced learners and 61.1% of the recasts used by her were for the advanced learners. The majority of the explicit corrections she had used was for the advanced learners (66.7%). There was one inconsistency between her beliefs and practice; she preferred to use elicitation only for low proficiency learners. However, in practice, she used no elicitation either for the advanced or lower-intermediate learners. Overall, she believed explicit feedback forms might hurt student's self-esteem and self-confidence particularly when they are corrected in front of their classmates.

Teacher 4 stated that she corrects the learners more frequently at the lower proficiency levels. The results of observation, as shown in Table 2, confirm her claim; she corrected only 21.7% of the errors at the advanced level while at her lower-intermediate class she made more corrections (i.e., 45.1%). The most highly preferred types of feedback for Teacher4 were recast, elicitation and repetition. Based on the observations, majority of the

corrections by her were in the form of recast. Elicitation was used only two times during the six hours of observation, which shows she rarely uses this type of feedback. Like other teachers, she never used repetition for correcting learners. Teacher4 further stated that she prefers not to correct learners' errors using direct correction forms such as explicit correction because they might cause the students to feel inhibited and unwilling to talk in the classroom. However, in practice, she seems to use this feedback type though rarely. Concerning the role of proficiency level, Teacher4 asserted that she does not treat the two proficiency groups differently in how she corrects them and what types of correction she prefers to provide. In contrast with her belief, the results of classroom observation clearly show that she used elicitation only for the advanced group and explicit correction only for the lower-intermediates. She also provided more recasts (57% of the recasts) for the lower intermediate group.

Therefore, these findings are indicative of the existence of certain mismatches between the observed teachers' beliefs and practice. For example, one of the teachers had used a larger number of recasts for the lower-intermediates, but on the interview, the feedback she mentioned she preferred for the advanced learners was recasts. As another instance, as previously mentioned, one of the teachers who were observed favored the use of elicitation only for low proficiency learners, but in practice she used none either for the advanced or lower-intermediate learners. Besides, teachers had a positive attitude towards elicitive feedback types (i.e., prompts) but they used them quite scarcely. Lee (2009) come up with a similar finding; he found that although teachers believed learners should take more responsibility for correcting their errors, they usually provided the correct forms to the learners without asking them to self-correct their errors. There might be certain reasons for the existing mismatches between practice and

beliefs. One of the reasons, as also implied by Lee (2009), might be that teachers' practice is dependent on contextual factors such as the learners' characteristics and level of proficiency. In Lee's study, teachers believed they should attend both to accuracy and fluency aspects of learners' output, but they focused exclusively on the formal and grammatical aspects of their learners' performance. The reason for this mismatch between beliefs and practice was that the number of learners' errors was too many and prevented learners from attending to the content and fluency aspects. In our study, the teachers might have been also constrained by the contextual factors. For instance, in the case of Teacher1 who used more recasts for the lower intermediate despite her belief, the analysis of observations showed that the learners in her advanced class talked faster and had a higher level of fluency which did not allow the teacher to interrupt them when they are having a conversation. However, in her lower-intermediate class the learners made more pauses and talk at a lower rate, which allowed more corrections to be made using recast.

An interesting finding in the present study was that two of the teachers believed correction is not helpful to less proficient language learners because they do not have the background knowledge to understand the point of correction. In other words, they do not know that they have made an error because they do not have enough knowledge of the targeted structure. Consequently, they will not understand when the teacher is correcting their error. The results of experimental studies confirm this belief. As pointed out in the review section, the results of studies show that correction is more beneficial to high-proficiency language learners. Advanced learners can more successfully notice recast and use it to improve their interlanguage. They were also found to benefit more from prompts (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Philp, 2003; Trofimovich et al., 2007). However,

despite this belief, the two teachers still used correction for lower-intermediate learners even more frequently than for the advanced learners. Lee (2009) also found that teachers provide correction although they know that errors will recur and “although they think their effort does not pay off”. This might be because teachers, as the results of the interviews revealed, are expected to provide correction. To put it differently, the learners consider the teacher as a source of knowledge that knows more than the learners and can point out their error and help them improve. As one of the teachers stated, “Teachers *should* provide CF; they are expected to”.

## 5. Conclusion

The study attempted to investigate the role of proficiency level in how teachers provide correction on learners’ errors. It was important in three aspects. First, it examined the role of proficiency level in how teachers prefer to correct their learners. Second, it examined and compared teachers’ practice with their beliefs. Finally, the present study attempted to relate teachers’ practice and beliefs with researchers’ findings. Overall, it can be concluded that teachers rely mainly on their own experience, understanding of the contextual factors and value system. In addition, the need to take these contextual factors into account led to different corrective practices by the teachers. The results further showed that the teachers’ most important concern was their students’ feelings and the likely negative influence of their correction on the learners. The concern for learners’ affective well-being influenced the types of correction they preferred to use; they used mainly indirect or implicit correction, i.e., recast which does not challenge the learners for self-correction and does not hurt their feelings in contrast with the explicit forms of correction such as prompts, which require self-correction, and explicit correction. The concern for students’ feelings led to mismatches between teachers’ beliefs and their practice. The need to take a humanistic approach to teaching and

correction made them behave in ways that does not hurt the feelings of their human targets (i.e., their students). There was also a lack of consistency between teachers' practice and research findings. In other words, there was a mismatch between what teachers do and what researchers recommend; the teachers were not found to reflect the research findings related to the effectiveness of CF in their classrooms. For instance, although the results of experimental studies show that in lower levels of proficiency CF particularly recast is not beneficial to learners, the teachers, based on the findings, majority of the teachers used more recasts for the lower-intermediate rather than the advanced learners. This finding points to the conclusion that there is a clear need to make teachers aware of the research findings concerning the factors influencing the effectiveness of CF. In this way, the teachers can integrate experience with knowledge about the research findings and have a more refined corrective performance in their classes. Finally, the results were indicative of the fact that teachers' priorities and concerns are different in nature from those investigated and examined by the experimental researchers. Teachers need to have a humanistic approach to teaching and particularly correction because they are dealing with human beings in a real-life classroom context. Researchers, however, have been pre-occupied with the cognitive aspects of linguistic development following correction and the factors that affect learners' noticing and use of CF. Accordingly, the results point to the conclusion that researchers need to reconsider their approach to examining the effectiveness of CF and pay more attention to the emotional aspects of error correction that might affect learners' noticing and, consequently, use of CF, as also confirmed in some, though few, studies (e.g., Rassaei, 2013; Sheen, 2008). In this way, the results of these studies can be more applicable to real-life classroom contexts.

The study added more knowledge about the factors involved in teachers' decisions on how to correct their students particularly proficiency level of the learners. Further hope is that this study might ignite an interest in investigating the role of other factors in language teachers' preferences and attitude not only to feedback but other dimensions involved in creating an appropriate learning atmosphere inside the classroom. For instance, the role of experience can be a good area for investigation. In the present study, as it was already mentioned, two of the highly experienced teachers believed that correction does not benefit the low-proficiency learners while the other two with less experience did not have such a belief. Researchers could also examine the effect of emotional factors such as anxiety and sense of inhibition on learners' noticing and use of CF particularly at real-life classroom contexts. Considering the fact that studies on oral CF have been mainly conducted in laboratory contexts, their results might not be applicable to real-life classroom contexts. Finally, the results of some studies (e.g., Busch, 2010) point to the role of cultural background in teachers' corrective practice. Therefore, there is a need for further investigations to investigate the roots of culture in teachers' beliefs about and practice in correction.

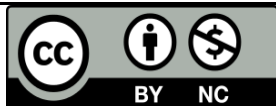
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