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Does Learners' Proficiency Level Affect Oral Corrective Feedback Preferences?

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Abstract

For decades now, there has been a good deal of research on factors affecting students' oral corrective feedback preferences. Although it has been proven that learners' characteristics such as their verbal intelligence and attitude toward error correction are highly effective in students' preferred type of oral corrective feedback, the claims regarding the impact of learners' proficiency level on their choice of oral corrective feedback have yet to be fully substantiated. In order to take this line of research one step forward, it is important to examine the potential effect of students' level of proficiency in error correction literature. To this end, this paper aims to shed light on lower and higher level learners' opinion about corrective feedback issues in an EFL context.

Keywords: EFL learners, Oral corrective feedback practices, Errors, Level of proficiency

1. Introduction

In educational context, negative feedback, error correction or corrective feedback (CF) has always gained the attention of researchers and educators. Whereas researchers have constantly been experimenting on various issues of error correction, in the context of second language acquisition (SLA), error correction still tends to spark off controversy about what, when or how to correct errors (F. Hyland &K. Hyland , 2006).Numerous studies have been carried out on the effect of CF on SLA (Lyster& Ranta, 1997;Mackey& Goo, 2007; Norris& Ortega, 2000).These studies generally agree that: 1) CF enables the learners to differentiate between their own interlanguage and the L2 (Long,1996) , 2) for SLA the use of CF is more powerful and practical than language input alone(Swain ,1988) 3) explicit feedback is more helpful than implicit feedback (Ellis , Loewen & Erlam ,2005).

According to Ellis (1994) learner's characteristics are also influential in the success of learning a second or foreign language. Due to the fact that teachers always stress taking learner's characteristics into consideration, it seems obvious to ask whether each individual's characteristics such as attitude toward error correction, verbal intelligence and proficiency level can affect CF related issues.

2. Different Theories on Corrective Feedback

For decades, TEFL practitioners have been dealing with the question of whether to expose learners to negative feedback as well as positive evidence. Based on nativist advocates the use of negative feedback hardly has any impact on the process of learning a language, since it is an innate ability called Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1975) which makes language acquisition possible and this Universal Grammar cannot be changed by any negative evidence. Also, Krashen's Input Hypothesis argues that comprehensible input, which is one step beyond learners' current level, is the only effective force in SLA (Krashen, 1982). He asserts that explicit instruction, including negative evidence cannot have any effect on the process of L2 acquisition. Accordingly Schwartz (1993) claims that negative feedback may affect learners' performance but not their underlying competence.

However, Krashen's and nativists' views have been challenged by the scholars as they believe that "noticing" is necessary for language acquisition (Ellis, 1991; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Schmidt, 1990). Schmidt (1990), in his Noticing Hypothesis claims that in order for learning to take place some degree of attention must be given. From this point of view, corrective feedback stimulates the learners to notice the gap between their own interlanguage and the accepted forms. In addition, Gass (1991) opines that the only input that can be changed into intake is the one which is noticed by the learners. Thus, this awareness is essential in enhancing the effect of corrective feedback. Similarly, in Interactional Hypothesis Long (1996) suggests that corrective feedback is highly beneficial since it provides not only some information on well-formed utterances and but also positive evidence which is absent in input.

In addition, in the cognitive account, language acquisition is viewed as a process which is largely input-driven (Morris, 2010).Accordingly, Ellis (2009) opines that in this model of language acquisition feedback is vital.

3. Different Types of Corrective Feedback

Recast is considered to be the most commonly used strategy of corrective feedback. Lyster and Ranta (1997) have identified six other types of corrective feedback which were subsequently classified into two categories: reformulations and prompts. (Lyster & Ranta 2007). All of these strategies are elaborated in the following sections:

3.1 Recast

Initially, the term recast was used to refer to the responses adults give to children in the process of L1 acquisition (Nicholas et al, 2001). Afterwards, it was merged into second language acquisition domain. Whereas different classifications have been utilized for recast such as corrective/non-corrective recasts (Farrar,1992) , full/partial recasts , single/extended utterance recasts, simple/complex recasts (Ellis & Sheen , 2006), Lyster and Ranta (1997) generally define recasts as the reformulation of all or part of a student's incorrect utterance without the error by the teacher. In recast the teacher does not mention the error by salient phrases; therefore it is seen as an implicit type of corrective feedback. The effectiveness of recasts has aroused controversy among researchers. While some (Long, 2007; Long & Doughty, 2003) hold the view that recast is a highly efficient type of corrective feedback, others (Lyster, 1998; Panova & Lyster, 2002) claim that recast is usually unnoticed by learners and ineffective for interlanguage development.

3.2 Explicit Feedback

This kind of corrective feedback is defined as the clear and overt provision of the correct form and it can take the form of explicit correction or metalinguistic feedback (Ellis,Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). In explicit correction the teacher gives positive and negative evidence by explicitly saying that the learner's utterance is erroneous, while in metalinguistic feedback according to Lyster and Ranta (1997) some comments or information on the correctness of the utterance are provided.

3.3 Clarification Request

In clarification request the teacher indicates that the learner's output is ill-formed and cannot be comprehended. Therefore a repetition or reformulation is required (Bacon,Spada & Frolihch 1997). It is also accompanied with a phrase. This phrase can be as simple as "excuse me?"

3.4 Metalinguistic Clue

It is much similar to explicit error correction, since the focus is on the accepted rules of the target language. In Lyster and Ranta's definition (1997) this technique provides some information, comments or questions on the well-formedness of learner's output and has three subcategories: metalinguistic information, comment or question.

3.5 Elicitation

In this technique, students are encouraged to self-correct (Panova & Lyster, 2002).In 1997, Lyster and Ranta proposed that elicitation can take three forms: the first is requesting the

reformulation of an incorrect utterance, the second is asking open-question and the third is using pauses to ask students to complete their utterance.

3.6 Prompt

Negotiation of form Lyster & Ranta, 1997), form-focused negotiation (Lyster, 2002) and prompt are used to refer to the same concept in the related literature. In 2006, Lyster and Mori opine that prompt is considered as a range of corrective feedback which consists of four moves: elicitation of correct form, the use of metalinguistic cue, clarification request and repetition.

3.7 Repetition

Another implicit approach to corrective feedback is repetition in which the teacher or interlocutor repeats the erroneous part of the learner's utterance with a change in intonation (Panova & Lyster, 2002).

3.8 Translation

Initially this type of corrective feedback was considered a subcategory of recast (Lyster & Ranta, 1997), but the difference between the two is that recast is in response to a learner's correct utterance, whereas translation is provided in response to an incorrect utterance. What these two have in common is that they both lack an explicit indicator and can be considered as implicit kind of corrective feedback.

4. Review of Studies

Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of different strategies of corrective feedback. Accordingly, recast as the most frequently used type of corrective feedback has always been studied (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002). These studies revealed that comparing to elicitation, clarification request; metalinguistic cues and repetition recast led to lower rate of uptake. However, according to Mackey and Philip (1998) in order for recast to be effective students must have reached a level of mental readiness.

In 2008, Yoshida carried out a study to explore the preferences of teachers and learners regarding the type of CF. The result showed that teachers were selective in the type of CF for each individual student and depending on the learner's style and each learner's level of development they chose a specific type of CF. In addition, learners preferred clarification and elicitation, as these types of CF provided them an opportunity to find the answers themselves. The results of this study were in line with Rydahl's (2006) who indicated that teachers adapted an appropriate type of oral CF for each learner based on their needs.

Ammar and Spada (2006) did a quasi-experimental study to investigate the efficiency of recast and prompt on students' oral and written ability across various proficiency levels. They found that higher- proficiency students received an advantage from both types of corrective feedback; however prompts provided more benefits to lower-proficiency learners.

More recently, Kennedy (2010) carried out a study to investigate young learners' type of

error in two different levels of proficiency and also their teachers' preferred CF practices. The findings revealed that low- proficiency learners made more content errors, whereas the high-proficiency students made more form errors. Moreover, the teacher provided the first group more CF with the corrected form since the learners were believed not to have sufficient knowledge to self-correct. On the other hand for the high proficiency group the teacher gave less CF with the corrected form as the learners were believed to be capable of self-correction.

Furthermore, Ahangari and Amirzadeh's (2011) findings are in line with Kennedy's (2010).Specifically, they explored teachers' provided CF to learners at different proficiency levels. Whereas the most frequent type of CF in all three levels was recast, the frequency of using it reduced as the learners became more proficient. Accordingly, the teacher encouraged more self-repair as the learners reached a higher level of proficiency by using various kinds of CF such as elicitation, clarification and metalinguistic feedback. In contrast, Mackey and Philip's (1998) study revealed that using recasts is more beneficial for advanced students and not for the low-proficiency learners.

Although many of the above mentioned investigations have focused on individual learners' differences and teachers' CF types regarding the learners' proficiency level, there has been no study to look into the learners' preferred CF strategies in different levels of proficiency. So, the purposes of this study were:

1- To determine elementary and upper-intermediate learners' preferred oral corrective feedback.
2- To determine the probable relationship between learners' proficiency level and their preferred oral correction practices.

And the research questions were as follows:

1-What are EFL elementary leaners vs. upper-intermediate learners' preferred oral correction practices in Iranian context?

2-Is there a relationship between students' level and preferred oral corrective feedback practices?

And the only research hypothesis was suggested:

H0 There is no relationship between students' level and preferred oral corrective feedback practices.

5. Research method

5.1 Research Design

It was a quantitative study with survey design. The variable of this study included levels of learners (upper-intermediate and elementary) and the students' ranking of Fukuda's (2004) questionnaire on preferences for error correction. Besides, gender was the control variable since all the participants were females.

5.2 Participants

The research population was 100 Iranian EFL learners from one institute in Rasht (Guilan province).In this institute Oxford Placement Test (OPT) is used to place students in the right class from elementary to advance. The sample included 50 elementary and 50 upper-intermediate Gilak EFL learners who were selected through convenience sampling.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the participants' age

Statistics			
Age			
Elementary	N	Valid	50
		Missing	0
	Mean		22.4200
	Std. Deviation		5.05517
Upper-intermediate	N	Valid	50
		Missing	0
	Mean		26.0200
	Std. Deviation		4.27375

5.3 Research Instrument

Fukuda's (2004) questionnaire on preferences for error correction was employed to gather the required data. The questionnaire consisted of six sections .The first section had 3 items on demographic information and the other five sections had 22 items which explored students' opinion on opinion on the necessity of oral corrective feedback, frequency of oral corrective feedback, timing of oral corrective feedback, different types of oral corrective feedback and sources for giving oral corrective feedback. Each item was scored according to a 5-point Likert scale with the rankings 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' or 'always' to 'never' or 'very effective' to 'very ineffective'.

The questionnaire was translated into Persian for both levels of learners in order to prevent confusion or misunderstanding. Two experts were also asked to validate the translated version of the questionnaire. After the pilot study, the Cronbach Alpha co-efficient was calculated 0.87, indicating a perfectly satisfactory level of reliability.

5.4 Research Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the participants by the researcher personally during the class time. Before the distribution of questionnaires, the participants were informed that the survey was voluntary and anonymous. They were also reassured that they were free to withdraw at any time for any reason. Also, it was distributed during the first thirty minutes of the class time.

As to avoid discomfort and pressure the teachers were asked to leave the classroom while the learners were answering the questions.

6. Results

6.1 Results on the First Research Question

RQ1-What are the elementary and upper-intermediate EFL learners' preferences for oral correction practices in Iranian context?

To supply answer for the first research question, descriptive statistics including (means and standard deviations) were run to the data collected from the corrective feedback questionnaire administered to both elementary and upper-intermediate learners. The results of the item analyses are displayed in the subsequent sections:

Descriptive statistics for the items of the corrective feedback questionnaire

Table 2. Item Statistics for the Necessity of Oral Corrective Feedback

levels		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	1.When I make mistakes, my spoken errors should be corrected	3.9600	.75485	50
	2. How often do you want to receive corrective feedback on your spoken errors?	4.5400	.88548	50
Upper-intermediate	1.When I make mistakes, my spoken errors should be corrected	3.9400	.89008	50
	2. How often do you want to receive corrective feedback on your spoken errors?	4.1800	.89648	50

Two items of the corrective feedback questionnaire evaluated the participants' perceptions towards the "Necessity *of Oral Corrective Feedback*." The participants who were at elementary level rated *"the necessity of oral corrective feedback"* nearly the same as the participants who were at upper- intermediate level. With respect to the correction of their spoken errors, the mean rank of the participants who were at elementary level came to (X= 3.96).

In contrast, the mean rank of spoken error correction for the participants who were at upper-intermediate level equaled (X= 3.94). Moreover, the participants who were at elementary level reflected higher positive attitude towards "*receiving corrective feedback on their spoken errors*" (X= 4.54) than the participants who were at upper- intermediate level (X= 4.18).

Table 3. Item Statistics for the Frequency of Oral Corrective Feedback

levels		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	3.My spoken errors should be treated As soon as errors are made even if it interrupts my speaking	3.3200	1.15069	50
	4.My spoken errors should be treated after I finish speaking	3.6400	.96384	50

	5.My spoken errors should be treated after the activities	3.2200	1.09339	50
	6.My spoken errors should be treated at the end of class	2.9200	1.12195	50
Upper-intermediate	3.My spoken errors should be treated As soon as errors are made even if it interrupts my speaking	2.9800	1.18649	50
	4.My spoken errors should be treated after I finish speaking	3.9200	.82906	50
	5.My spoken errors should be treated after the activities	3.3800	.96658	50
	6.My spoken errors should be treated at the end of class	3.0000	1.03016	50

The second category of the questionnaire examined the participants' view with respect to the With respect to the "*frequency of oral corrective feedback*." Elementary level students preferred "*treating their spoken errors after they finish their speaki*ng." (X= 3.64). From the other point of view, "*treating their spoken errors at the end of class*" (X= 2.92) was their least preferred rating for the correction of their spoken errors. Nevertheless, for the upper-intermediate level participants "*treating their spoken errors after they finish speaking*" (X= 3.92) was more favored than other time. Furthermore, providing error correction feedback "*the time errors were made even if it interrupted their speaking*"(X= 2.98) was the least favorite corrective feedback for the upper- intermediate level participants.

Table 4. Item Statistics for Timing of Oral Corrective Feedback

levels		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	7. Serious spoken errors that cause a listener to have difficulty understanding the meaning of what is being said.	4.3200	1.01900	50
	8. Less serious spoken errors that do not cause a listener to have difficulty understanding the meaning of what is being said.	3.5400	1.14660	50
	9. Frequent spoken errors.	4.2200	1.03589	50
	10. Infrequent spoken errors	3.7600	1.11685	50
	11. Individual errors made by myself.	4.1600	1.07590	50
Upper-intermediate	7. Serious spoken errors that cause a listener to have difficulty understanding the meaning of what is being said.	4.3400	1.00224	50
	8. Less serious spoken errors that do not cause a listener to have difficulty understanding the meaning of what is being said.	3.5600	1.05289	50
	9. Frequent spoken errors.	4.0200	.97917	50

10. Infrequent spoken errors	3.3600	1.25779	50
11. Individual errors made by myself.	4.0400	.94675	50

The third category of the corrective feedback questionnaire asked about the "*timing of oral corrective feedback.* Both elementary and upper- intermediate participants held relatively similar views towards treating "*Serious spoken errors that cause a listener to have difficulty"(*$X_{\text{elementary participants}}$ = 4.32*;* $X_{\text{upper- intermediate participants}}$ = 4.34*).* However, elementary participants marked their least rating for treating "*Less serious spoken errors that did not cause a listener to have difficulty understanding the meaning of what was being said*" (X= 3.54). Nevertheless, for the upper-intermediate participants treating "*Infrequent spoken errors* (X=3.36)" was their least favored timings of oral corrective feedback.

Table 5. Item Statistics for Different Types of Oral Corrective Feedback

levels		Mean	SD	N
Elementary	12. Could you say that again?	3.90	.93	50
	13. I go? (Repetition: The teacher emphasizes the student's grammatical error by changing his/her tone of voice.)	3.78	.93	50
	14. You went to the park yesterday? (Implicit feedback: The teacher does not directly point out the student's error but indirectly corrects it.)	3.38	1.06	50
	15. "Go" is in the present tense. You need to use the past tense "went" here. (Explicit feedback: The teacher gives the correct form to the student with a grammatical explanation.	4.08	.72	50
	16. Yesterday, I…(Elicitation: The teacher asks the student to correct and complete the sentence.)	4.06	.81	50
	17. Really? What did you do there? (No corrective feedback: The teacher does not give corrective feedback on the student's errors.)	2.40	1.16	50
	18. How does the verb change when we talk about the past? (Metalinguistic feedback: The teacher gives a hint or a clue without specifically pointing out the mistake.)	3.58	.85	50
	19. I went to the park. (Recast: The teacher repeats the student's utterance in the correct form without pointing out the student's error.)	2.88	1.08	50
Upper-intermediate	12. Could you say that again?	3.98	.74	50
	13. I go? (Repetition: The teacher emphasizes the student's grammatical error by changing his/her tone of voice.)	4.10	.67	50

14. You went to the park yesterday? (Implicit feedback: The teacher does not directly point out the error but indirectly corrects it.)	3.72	.90	50
15. "Go" is in the present tense. You need to use the past tense "went" here. (Explicit feedback: The teacher gives the correct form to the student with a grammatical explanation.	3.80	.94	50
16. Elicitation: The teacher asks them to correct and complete the sentence.	4.02	.74	50
17. Really? What did you do there? (No corrective feedback: The teacher does not give corrective feedback on the student's errors.)	2.36	.92	50
18. How does the verb change when we talk about the past? (Metalinguistic feedback: The teacher gives a hint or a clue without specifically pointing out the mistake.)	3.68	.76	50
19. I went to the park. (Recast: The teacher repeats the student's utterance in the correct form without pointing out the student's error.)	2.98	.99	50

The fourth category of the corrective feedback questionnaire included eight items that inquired the participants' attitudes with respect to "*different types of oral corrective feedback*." For the elementary participants, the type of oral corrective feedback that they hold in high regard was "*Elicitation and explicit feedback*" ($X_{elicitation}$=4.06; $X_{explicit\ feedback}$= 4.08). In contrast, they expressed their lowest rating for "*no corrective feedback and recast*"($X_{no\ corrective\ feedback}$= 2.40; X_{recast}= 2.88). In addition, for the participants who were at upper-intermediate level, the preferred type of corrective feedback was "*asking for repetition and elicitation"*($X_{repetition}$ = 4.10; $X_{elicitation}$ = 4.02). Besides, their lowest rating was made for "*No corrective feedback*" as well as "*recast*" ($X_{No\ corrective\ feedback}$ = 2.36; X_{recast} = 2.98).

Table 6.Item Statistics for Sources for Giving Oral Corrective Feedback

levels		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	20. Classmates should treat students' errors.	2.7800	.99571	50
	21. Teachers should treat students' errors.	4.1800	.98333	50
	22. Students themselves should treat their errors.	3.6600	.98167	50
Upper-intermediate	20. Classmates should treat students' errors.	2.8800	1.00285	50
	21. Teachers should treat students' errors.	4.4000	.57143	50
	22. Students themselves should treat their errors.	4.1400	.72871	50

The last section of the corrective feedback questionnaire looked into the participants' perceptions of "*sources for giving oral corrective feedback."* The participants who were at elementary level preferred *"teachers"* for correcting their errors (*X*= 4.18). However, they rated their lowest rating for the "*classmates*" as source of giving oral corrective feedback (*X*= 2.78). In a similar manner, for the participants who were at upper- intermediate level, the preferred source of providing oral corrective feedback was "*teachers*" (*X*= 4.40) and in the second place " *the students themselves*" (*X*= 4.14). Moreover, they disapproved "*classmates*" as being the source of giving oral corrective feedback (*X*=2.88).

6.2 Results on the Second Research Question

RQ2- Is there any significant relationship between EFL students' level of language proficiency and their preferred oral corrective feedback practices?

The following null hypothesis was suggested:

H0**:** there is no significant relationship between EFL students' level of foreign language proficiency and their preferred oral corrective feedback practices.

In order to scrutinize the possible relationship between level of foreign language proficiency and preference for error correction, a Chi- Square followed by Eta test was run to the data collected from the two questionnaires. The results are available in the subsequent section. In the following cross tabulation table, the relationship between level of foreign language proficiency and types of corrective feedback preferred by the participants was investigated using

Chi- Square Test followed by Eta test.

Table 7. Chi-Square Tests for the relationship between preferred types of corrective feedback and EFL learners' language proficiency

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square for (Necessity of oral corrective feedback * level of foreign language proficiency)	6.18	7	.518
Pearson Chi-Square for (frequency of oral corrective feedback * level of foreign language proficiency)	12.67	10	.242
Pearson Chi-Square for (timing of oral corrective feedback * level of foreign language proficiency)	15.89	16	.461

Pearson Chi-Square for (different types of oral corrective feedback * level of foreign language proficiency)	15.88	15	.390
Pearson Chi-Square for (sources for giving oral corrective feedback * level of foreign language proficiency)	7.39	8	.495
N of Valid Cases	100		

The two-sided asymptotic significance of the Chi-Square Statistics were higher than (.05), for all of the five categories of corrective feedback and level of foreign language proficiency. It could be inferred from the findings that the relationship between "*Necessity of oral corrective feedback*," "*frequency of oral corrective feedback*", "*timing of oral corrective feedback*", "*different types of oral corrective feedback*" , "*sources for giving oral corrective feedback*" and level of foreign language proficiency was simply due to chance variation ($p \geq .05$).

This implied that the elementary and upper intermediate EFL learners did not differ significantly with respect to their preference for receiving corrective feedback.

Thus, the research null hypothesis was supported implying that there was not a statistically significant association between Iranian EFL learners' level of foreign language proficiency and the types of corrective feedback they prefer in EFL classes. The following figure illustrates the preferred types of corrective feedback with respect to their level of language proficiency.

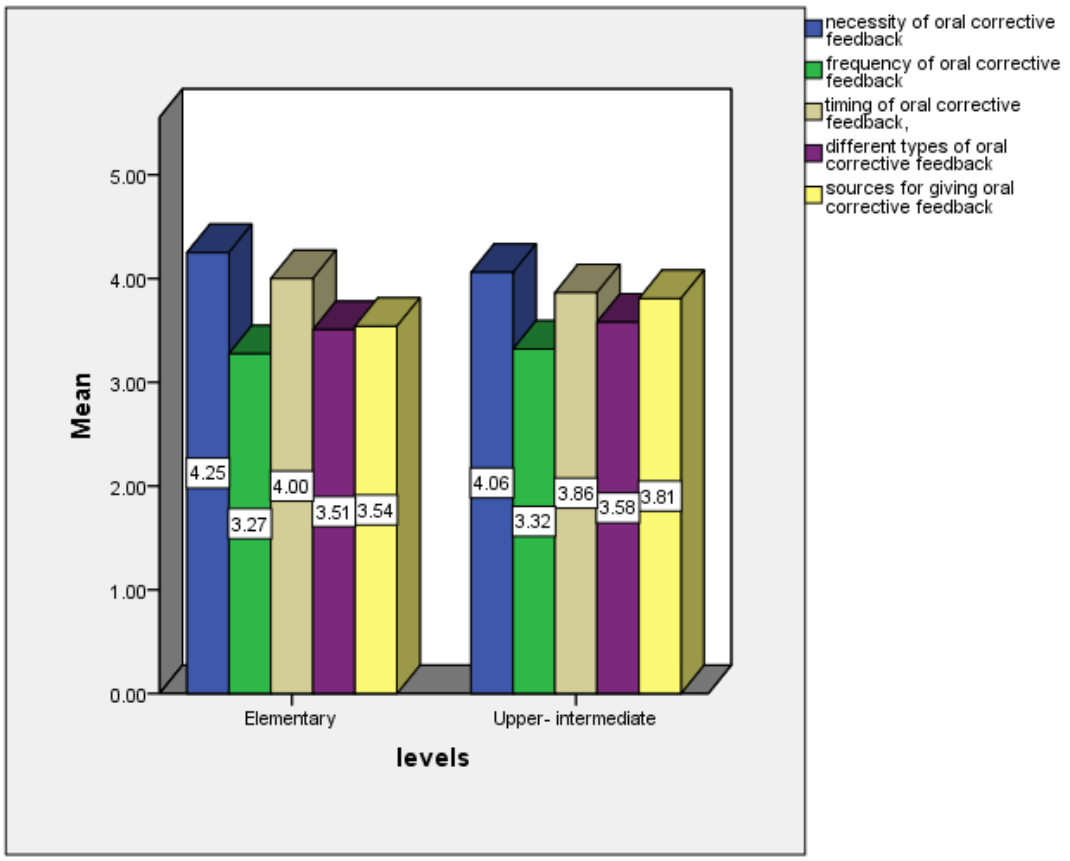

Figure 1. The Relationship between EFL Learners' Level Language Proficiency and their Preferred Error Correction Feedback

7. Conclusion

This study, which examined Iranian EFL learners' opinion on the issues related to oral corrective feedback practices, had several findings. First, along with previous findings most language learners find oral corrective feedback practices necessary and they prefer to receive error correction after they finish speaking to have their serious spoken errors corrected. Also, elicitation has been found out to be the most favorite type of error correction. A teaching implication of these findings is that language teachers should be aware of students' preferences in order to avoid a mismatch between their students' expectation and their action in classroom.

Second, contrary to a previous study (Sung & Tsai, 2014) on English Learners, whose favorite type of error correction was recast in beginners and various types in advanced, this study found no difference between students' preferred type of feedback regarding their level of proficiency. An implication of this finding is that when teaching a language it is essential to know students' learning styles and needs which are unique to each context.

This study is limited by the number of participants. Nevertheless, the findings have shed light on some new issues in oral corrective feedback research. Besides, it has provided future directions for research. For example, teachers' preferred oral corrective feedback can be compared to those of students for each level to see the potential difference between these two.

In addition, future studies can be done in order to investigate the same questions in another context. By addressing the effect of a particular language , language teachers will gain insight into how to provide more effective oral correction.

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