Feedback in the Very Young Learner EFL Classroom: A Review Study

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Abstract

This review article contributes to addressing an urgent issue in today's globalised world. English has become the world lingua franca and many countries are seeking to equip their workforce with English competence so as to engage fully in international social, economic and academic fora. This often entails lowering the age at which children start to learn English in school, which places a heavy responsibility on the educational system in countries, such as Saudi Arabia, where English is a foreign language, i.e., not widely used in day-to-day life in the country outside the English classroom. Yet many aspects of teaching young learners a foreign language at age six onwards have not been extensively investigated. One of these is the key issue of how the teacher should best give feedback to children of that age. Feedback is widely regarded as the key to learning, but not all its types are necessarily effective. Furthermore, most research has been on older children and adults. The present study therefore uses the method of qualitative systematic literature review to assemble and analyse existing research and theory with the aim to extract guidelines for feedback by teachers in foreign language classrooms with very young learners. It is found that attention should be given not only to negative, corrective feedback on the language used, which is often the focus of teacher attention. A case is made for the place and value of positive feedback and feedback of communicative and emotional types. Even in corrective feedback it is often better to use partial rather than total correction, so as to give the child space to self-correct.

Keywords: feedback, correction, English as a foreign language, emotion, communication, teaching, teaching young learners

1. Introduction

All over the world, numerous countries are seeking to improve the English language ability of their adult population (Macaro et al., 2018). In particular, in countries where English is not widely used in day-to-day life, English is perceived as the hallmark of globalisation and a necessary skill for the workforce of a country (Wanphet and Tantawy, 2018). As embodied in the Vision 2030 program set out by the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia, English ability is seen as a key part of the repertoire of skills that top workers need in order to promote the country to its proper place in the international economic and political scene, and to end reliance on skilled foreign workers in key positions (Al-Seghayer, 2014, p.89).

In many countries, a variety of educational strategies is therefore being used to promote the learning of English. A common favourite is that of starting children learning English as a foreign language at an ever earlier age (Nikolov, 2009). In Saudi Arabia this has now decreased from grade 6 to grade 1 in the state educational system, despite objections by some conservatives that the learning of Arabic would suffer. Indeed, this move does mean that children will now be learning English very closely behind learning Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is their main second language or dialect after their first home language/dialect, Saudi colloquial Arabic. In other countries, such as Malaysia, where English has more the status of a second rather than foreign language, English starts even earlier, in kindergarten aged 4 (Salleh et al., 2020).

The motivation behind this kind of policy is not just the argument that learners will surely leave school or university more proficient in English if they have spent a longer time learning it (Hu, 2007). Rather, it often implicitly or explicitly relies on the argument that time spent on language learning is somehow more valuable or effective in the early years (e.g., below puberty, age 11/12) than later. This has been extensively researched under the label of the 'critical period hypothesis' (Birdsong, 1999). In fact, the research shows that while in some areas, such as pronunciation, learners of foreign languages who start very early are indeed likely to achieve a more nativelike level, in others, such as vocabulary size, that is not necessarily the case (Singleton, 2005).

In countries like Saudi Arabia, therefore, the issues associated with how to teach English to 'very young learners', of age 5/6, have suddenly become much more pertinent than before (Garton et. al., 2011). The term 'young learners' is now well established as a label for a particular important kind of foreign language learner. However, it is variously used by some to refer to learners under 18, and by others to learners under 12/13 (Dalle & Kleckova, 2018; Nunan, 2016). Indeed, there has been less focus on the EFL teaching of those who we will term very young learners (VYL), around age 5/6 or grade 1, than on older learners within the scope of the term 'young learner'. VYL are also more often studied in ESL and bilingual settings, e.g., learning English in the home alongside a heritage language in the USA (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016).

In the EFL contexts, such as that of Saudi Arabia, clearly teaching English to VYL needs to be understood, if teachers are to be prepared to teach in the best way possible, and so make the most of the early start (Garton et al., 2011). In order to assist in this endeavour, the present review is presented. Given the space limitations, however, it is confined to one aspect widely regarded as a key to teaching EFL, although there is controversy over exactly what types of it are most effective: teacher feedback to learners (Loewen, 2012).

2. Method

The method used was Systematic Literature Review with reference to PRISMA guidelines (2020). Search of education and applied linguistics literature was undertaken using 'feedback' and 'correction' as the primary search terms. Although initially the search was restricted to YL sources concerning EFL teaching, due to the limited material that yielded, the range was judiciously extended to include other levels and subjects. Qualitative analysis (thematic) yielded the topic areas that are used to articulate the account that follows.

3. Sources of Information on Feedback in Teaching YL

On the issue of feedback to YL, three main sources of guidance present themselves: theory, empirical research, and the pedagogical wisdom of experienced teachers. Though what is available for VYL in EFL contexts is mostly of the last sort, it is often only the first two types, typically based on secondary school or university learners, that are recognised and valued in academic discussion of educational issues. There is widespread feeling around the world these days that teaching should be 'evidence based' (EBT) (Petty, 2009). That means, teaching should be based on proper, relevant, research, typically assumed to be generalised quantitative studies. This however tends to disregard the evidential value of individual teacher intuition, or 'local knowledge' or reflection on long experience. The present study will rather adopt the stance that teaching needs to be 'evidence informed' rather than 'evidence based'. That approach allows for multiple types of sources to be considered (Coldwell et al., 2017). Therefore, we attempt to bring all sources together to see what they suggest for VYL.

In any case, far more applied linguistic research around the world has been done on feedback in relation to older YL, i.e. intermediate and secondary in many school systems, or adults (Nunan, 2016; Clark, 2005). Speaking of what feedback is appropriate for VYL we must therefore rely more on our own experience of VYL, if we have any, and on adapting the older age feedback research findings using what we know from general research about the development of VYL. This means that what is said here is necessarily provisional, since we have to rely considerably on what seems reasonable rather than what has been proven specifically for VYL. Ideally, however, we seek answers to questions such as: What exactly do we mean by teacher feedback? What are the dimensions of its description? What different feedback practices actually prevail in VYL classrooms? How effective are different types of feedback in assisting learning English?

4. Background on 6-year-olds

In the present account, due to a paucity of work directly on VYL feedback, in fact material on older learners will also be exploited. In doing this, we need to be aware of what VYL are like at their stage of general development (around age 6).

Cognitively, they begin to understand cause and effect (RCN, 2022). However, they are not ready for abstract concepts. For example, they do not yet fully understand conservation. If water from a bowl is poured into a tall thin glass, the surface of the water will of course be at a higher level in the latter. At this age children will still tend to follow what they see, and say that there is more water in the glass than there was in the bowl, even though they saw that it was the same amount of water that was poured from one to the other (Gagne, 1968). Using abstract concepts with terms such as *adjective* or *genitive* therefore might not be appropriate in feedback.

Their attention span is 12 to 18 minutes on one activity, while that of a 10-year-old is 20-30 minutes (BBC, 2022). Emotionally they can be extreme - enthusiastic, demanding, upset. They are not fully academicised into what is appropriate in a classroom. They can be perfectionists, and get upset when they cannot draw a perfect picture, or make mistakes (CPE, 2022). All this prompts the need for attention to emotion in feedback and non-negative ways of delivering feedback, even if it is fundamentally corrective.

Socially, they are beginning to make friends in school rather than relate only to family members, but can feel insecure (CDC, 2022). They are <u>using</u> language for instrumental and social functions (but are not yet thinking <u>about</u> language - low awareness). In their colloquial L1 they talk a lot with almost perfect grammar. They are beginning to read and write. This then prompts the need for feedback that renders the teacher ideally a friend as well as a teacher. That requires genuine communication.

5. What is Feedback in the EFL Class?

A problem arises straight away with the definition of feedback. As Scott says (2014, p. 49) 'there is no widely accepted definition of feedback'. Scott adds (albeit referring to a far higher level of education) that there may be a conflict of beliefs. What the students think of as feedback may not match what the teacher or educational expert thinks it is. In the case of VYL it may be parents rather than the children themselves who have a conflicting belief. They may criticise a teacher who does not supply what they expect as feedback, such as extensive correction of spoken errors.

In the realm of teaching, however, there does exist a core of widely agreed features of feedback. First, it is widely defined as a form of information, e.g., "Information about reactions to .... a person's performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement." (Oxford Languages, 2022) or "any information given to the learner about the learner's performance relative to learning goals. It should aim towards (and be capable of producing) improvement in students' learning." (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). Second, those quotes make clear that feedback is seen as information that is aimed towards learner improvement/learning, not just information for its own sake. More strongly, Sadler (1989) emphasised that without measuring how performance information actually impacts on the learner,

such feedback may be regarded as not true feedback at all, but ‘dangling data’(p. 121). Third, feedback differs from the teacher simply presenting pedagogical material which has the purpose of benefiting the learner, in that both definitions indicate that feedback is crucially a response to what learners have said/done. That implies a difference from much teacher-initiated information which is often not such a response, although it must be said that good presentation of material by a teacher does actually require the teacher to know what the students already know and so is, to that extent, also broadly a response to them (York, 2014). Finally, it is also significant that these definitions do not mention assessment, with which feedback is often confused (Didau & Rose, 2016). Feedback may or may not be part of assessment: often it is just part of everyday class teaching, loosely 'practice' (Mory, 2001). Indeed, formal assessments such as exams (especially summative assessments) are often conducted without the student receiving any feedback beyond the mark or grade awarded (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2002).

It is also noteworthy that these definitions fall short of simply identifying feedback with indicating correctness: giving information is broader than that since it may include adding new information such as a comparison or connection, or indicating the importance of whatever is at issue, etc. (Sales, 1993). For instance, a VYL may correctly answer a teacher who then adds to the correctness-oriented feedback response:

Teacher: .... *so is John a girl's name?*

VYL: *No.*

Teacher: *Quite right, it is a boy's name like James and George. Let's remember that.*

However, there exist also definitions that do limit feedback to correction, such as: "any communication or procedure given to inform a learner of the accuracy of a response, usually to an instructional question" (Mory 2001 p. 919). This corrective feedback (CF) is often the meaning of feedback silently assumed by teachers, students etc. in the classroom (Meunier & Muñoz, 2022). It is not a useful limitation in the context of VYL: Mackey and Oliver (2002) suggested that feedback on errors was only successful with children over seven.

In the context of language teaching, then, feedback is often understood as correction (including confirmation of correctness as well as indication of mistakes), and indeed as correction of language (e.g., of pronunciation, grammar, vocab, spelling). In second language acquisition (SLA) research, the term 'focus on forms' applies to instruction, including feedback, of this type (Uysal, 2010). Correction can however also extend to the meaning or content (Lundgren, 2022) of whatever is said or written: e.g., a YL is asked about a story heard the previous week, and says *The boy lost his pen* when actually the boy lost his schoolbook. The teacher CF is *No, he didn't*. An example paraphrased from Tedick and Young (2016), however, shows that it can sometimes be less clear as to whether the issue is a matter of correction of content or of language.

Teacher: *What did he do?*

Student: *Microwave*

Teacher: *What did he do? I need a verb because I asked you, ‘What did he do?’ and you answered, ‘Microwave’. But I need a verb. What did the, the man do?*

Student: *The man invented*. (p. 796)

More widely, however, we can find evidence of a broader range of types of clearly non-corrective feedback discussed in the literature, especially of social and affective types, which may also less directly serve the purpose of promoting learning. Those may be particularly relevant with VYL and are taken up below (Figure 1).

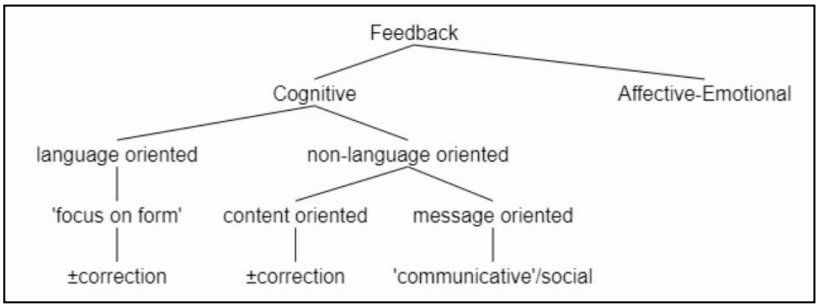

Figure 1. Types of feedback

6. Who Gives Feedback?

Due to reasons of space, this paper is limited to feedback given by teachers to VYL. However, we may note at this point that feedback to the teacher from the learners is also important, as it helps the teacher adjust her performance to what is needed (Greenwich, 2023). Furthermore, the teacher is not the only source of feedback to learners. The types in Figure 1 may be delivered by other adults, such as teaching assistants or parents, maybe present especially in pre-school classes, or at home (El Nokali et al., 2010). We must not forget peers – i.e., other children in the class (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). VYL may respond better to peer feedback than to that of the teacher. Computers and other technology

increasingly also can give feedback, including non-verbally as sounds or visuals, as a proxy for the teacher (Nagata, 1993), and the quality of this has recently improved with the arrival of artificially intelligent applications like ChatGPT.

Finally, there is an argument that the best feedback at an early age is the unconscious self-feedback that the child gives to herself. It is claimed that YL have innate abilities to do this when learning L1 and can use those in an L2 also at an early age (Ramscar & Yarlett, 2007). Indeed, Boud and Molloy (2013) and Carless (2020) argue that the teacher needs to be repositioned as an orchestrater of all the above sources of feedback combined, rather than being the main source of feedback him/herself. This suggestion, however, is mostly advanced in the context of conscious feedback in tertiary education. It remains uncertain how far it would work in the EFL VYL context.

7. Types of Teacher Feedback in More Detail

7.1 Corrective feedback - positive and negative

Often feedback in teaching contexts has been identified with CF that is negative evaluation / correction of students' language errors by the teacher (Schachter, 1991).

Teacher: *Say* men *not* mans

Both teachers and researchers, and indeed students, often take this view. That however tends to make a great deal of classroom activity feel like a form of assessment, like tests/exams, rather than a chance for blame-free exploration and practice. It blurs the important distinction between testing and teaching/learning**.** For VYL surely the former should be limited, although it can have motivational value when done occasionally (Devine, 2018). All experts agree that for VYL the class must be above all positive and fun, not test focussed (Garton et al., 2011).

CF however need not be only negative and correcting. It can be positive evaluation, confirming correctness, which, coincidentally, is more close than error correction to matching the behaviorist reinforcement paradigm (Lipnevich & Panadero, 2021).

That's correct!

rather than only negative correction

She like *is wrong*

For VYL clearly a great proportion of the CF needs to be of this type, especially given their sensitivity at that age. It is common to support this with rewards such as stars and stickers (Primary Practice, 2017) (see further on emotional feedback below). Furthermore, practices like using the 'feedback sandwich' can be employed, where negative comments are routinely given between two pieces of positive feedback (Molloy, 2010).

Even correction, which seems inherently negative, can be presented positively as a 'learning step' (Edge, 1989) rather than as a deficiency

Good, but next time say She likes….

She likes… *sounds better*

Furthermore, CF can be treated as incidental to other activities rather than explicitly foregrounded all the time. As Edge points out, often in the EFL classroom, feedback on the language used appears to be the main feature, rather than that on the content or message of what is being said, read or looked at etc. (see communicative feedback below). The modern favouring of 'focus on form' rather than 'focus on forms' essentially captures this distinction (Uysal, 2010).

7.1.1 Types of Negative Corrective Feedback

The effectiveness of negative corrective feedback on language, which especially includes error correction, has long been a main focus of attention by teachers and researchers. Indeed, the impact which such feedback may have on learning / acquisition is hotly debated in theories of SLA/foreign language learning. Some see language-oriented feedback or some degree of 'focus on form(s)' as it is often termed, as irrelevant, others as crucial. Krashen (1985) for example sees comprehensible input, in high quantity, as the main key to learning, not teacher feedback. For him, the acquisition is largely unconsciously done by the learner herself, through exposure to this input, ultimately self-correcting. Thus, it is rather like the way a child learns L1, where there is little explicit correction feedback that could account for the amount of language acquisition that occurs. For him, teacher feedback on performance, which is necessarily processed consciously, has little impact.

One can cite examples like;

Child: *I buyed an icecream*

Teacher: *I bought it*

Child: *I bought it*

Teacher: *So what did you do?*

Child: *I buyed an icecream….*

For Krashen, this child is simply not yet ready for the correct form. She can, momentarily, repeat the correct form after the teacher, relying on short term memory. But when relying on her own interlanguage competence she produces the wrong form: learning has not occurred. She

is following her own natural order of acquisition which explicit correction by the teacher has no impact on. So corrective language feedback is useless if it is not in synch with the natural order of acquisition. If teachers of VYL were to follow this, they would not worry about giving CF and rather spend more time on making sure plenty of the target language is heard or read.

In mainline SLA research, however, 'noticing' features of language is widely regarded as crucial for learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), and noticing is prompted by explicit language-oriented feedback. Besides Krashen's input hypothesis therefore we have the output hypothesis of Swain and Lapkin (1995). This states that we also learn by speaking/writing and getting corrected. So, this view regards language-oriented feedback, exhibiting 'focus on form', as essential for learning. Commonly however the piecemeal attention to correctness of small chunks of language, termed 'focus on forms' is less endorsed (Uysal, 2010).

Indeed, we have to admit that Krashen's approach is based on first language acquisition where children receive a lot more comprehensible input in daily life (up to 10 hours per day, Tomasello and Stahl, 2004), compared with EFL VYL in a classroom for 45 minutes three times a week (as in Saudi Arabia). The latter cannot achieve that volume of input, so surely must rely on a teacher and language-oriented feedback which prompts noticing.

Commonly several subtypes of such negative corrective feedback are recognised, based on the forms they take and their popularity and effectiveness have been an object of study (Panova & Lyster, 2002; Russell, 2009). 1. One called 'recast' is to say the correct form after the student, without explicitly saying there was an error (as in the *icecream* dialog above). It supplies the correct output but only by implication suggests that what the student said was wrong. Thus, it saves the student's face. 2. Another conversely is to say there was an error but not provide a correct form, or perhaps even say what word exactly was wrong. That includes repeating the incorrect form with a question intonation. This provides 'knowledge of results (KR)' and by implication prompts the student to suggest a correction: it is output prompting. 3. Naturally the third is both to say there is an error, and where, and to provide the correct form ('explicit correction' providing 'knowledge of the correct response (KCR)'). There is no further implication for the student to make. 4. That explicit correction however admits of degrees. It has partial forms where instead of providing the full correct form, the teacher may just provide clues, like what part of a word is wrong, that it is a tense error, etc. Thus, the student is by implication prompted to suggest the full correction: these too are output prompting. 5. Beyond those, 'elaborated feedback' provides an explanation for why the learner's response is incorrect or refers to what was taught: e.g., *Remember, if it is more than one, add 's'*.

All types that provide the correct form (1, 3) are therefore really output providing rather than input providing. The types that do not supply the full correction (2, 4) prompt the learner to attempt to self-correct in a new output. Often the first has been found to be the most popular but least effective, because students do not recognise the reformulation as being different from what they said (Russell, 2009).

Maolida (2017) is an example of a recent study on such types of YL corrective feedback and their effectiveness. Like many such studies, it focuses purely on negative corrective feedback (CF), not the other types, disregards sources of feedback other than a teacher, is not set in KSA (but Indonesia in fact), and targets a slightly higher age group (9 rather than 6). Qualitative data was collected in the form of 540 minutes video recording and observation of classes, and teachers' lesson plans. It assesses the effectiveness, in the form of observed uptake, following instances of negative CF of several types like those above. In fact, the 'output prompting' types of CF are regarded as superior for learning because they produce more 'uptake' (in the form of attempted repairs). Especially effective are repetition of the incorrect form as a prompt that there is something wrong (2), and (4) elicitation partially explicitly, e.g.,

Learner, shown picture of table: *Chair*

Teacher: *No, it's a t….?*

However, such studies are limited by what they accept as evidence of learning/acquisition. They regard uptake as a sign of success, but that is defined as 'A student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance' (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 49). Uptake then is really just an immediate indication that the learner has noticed the error and either repeats the correction supplied or attempts their own correction. That however is a long way from fully demonstrating 'learning' which teachers, and many researchers, regard as the real measure of effectiveness and usually understand to mean acquiring the correct form (not a mistaken one), and remembering it when needed in future: "Learning involves strengthening correct responses and weakening incorrect responses. Learning involves adding new information to your memory" (Clark & Mayer, 2011, p.56).

Noticing, evidenced by uptake, is only the first step in learning. Even if the learner repeats or produces the correct form after the feedback, before moving on, we cannot be sure that a little later, or a week or a month later, the correct form will be produced. A true measure of whether this or that type of corrective feedback produces learning in the full sense must surely measure what the learner produces much later than the next utterance. Few studies do that, but those that do are often in the area of vocabulary learning where both immediate and delayed tests of correct knowledge after feedback are used (e.g. Pashler et al., 2005).

In fact, I would argue that the 'prompting' types of CF (2 4) are superior to the 'supplying' types for VYL for other reasons. First, if the child is given the chance to self-correct, and can do it, she gains self-esteem, a positive emotion. If the teacher always supplies the correct form, the learner feels more often wrong, a negative emotion (see further on emotion below). Second, the learner is more likely to recall the correct form herself next time if she has to do work to recall it this time and therefore process it in more ways than just repetition of what the teacher said. What the teacher supplies tends to lack the need for the 'deep processing' required for long term retention and recall (Craik & Lockhart,

1972).

7.2 Communicative Feedback

Within applied linguistic and language teaching research, movements such as the communicative approach and task-based learning and indeed Krashen's natural approach (Richards and Rodgers, 2001) have highlighted the place in language teaching of language use that is message oriented. This is particularly emphasised for VYL instruction (Garton et al., 2011). That means that the focus, and hence feedback, is not just on the form or meaning of the words and structures but on the actual information or opinion conveyed by that meaning. This is what is the focus in most everyday use of language.

The difference can be seen in this anecdote (first heard from C.J. Dodson, personal communication)

In the corridor the EFL teacher sees one of her English class students; she is crying

The child runs up and says, in perfect English, *Teacher, I have lost my purse*

The teacher replies *Excellent!*

Here the teacher is responding to the language not the message being communicated. *Excellent* targets the fact that the words and grammar are fine and what is said has a perfectly clear meaning. However, what is surely most important in the situation is the information conveyed which relates to an event that nobody would call *excellent*. The communicative response of the teacher would be something like *Oh dear, let's go to the lost property room.* In other words, communicative feedback has the teacher engage with the student like a normal person they might talk to in daily life (though that would usually be in L1 such as Arabic, of course). The social relationship is momentarily less like teacher - student in school and more like adult - child in the general community. Furthermore, language is being used to do what is surely the main thing that people learn languages in order to do, to communicate real messages.

It is difficult to find hard evidence of the benefit of communicative feedback with VYL (Garton et al., 2011). However, the focus of VYL on social relationships at their stage of development suggests that exploitation of this level of interchange with pupils (and between them) would be valuable. Indeed, research in psychology suggests that the warmth of the teacher-pupil relationship in the classroom at the early grade levels has an effect on the general social progress made by the child in peer relationships (Chen et al., 2020), and surely that warmth will be enhanced more by communicative than purely language-oriented feedback.

As Han (2002) points out, however, the extreme view need not be endorsed that only genuinely communicative use of language, including feedback, is appropriate. Rather a judicious mixture of message and language-oriented tasks and feedback is best. In particular, there are ways in which a message-oriented focus can be given to tasks, and associated feedback, which could easily be purely language oriented. For instance, the present simple can be practised not with a dry repetition of *I walk, she walks* etc. but with focus on *What food do we each like?* All (including the teacher) can then volunteer contributions on the lines of, *I like pizza*, or *I like burgers*. This information can be summed up using the third person: *Reem likes pasta but Amal likes KFC.* Missing contributions can be elicited with *You like…. what? …* This can lead on to message-oriented feedback from the teacher and other class members such as *I like pizza too* or *My brother hates pasta*. In such a scenario the teacher's feedback merges with what students say in a conversation, rather than being even recognized as a form of feedback (Littlewood, 2007). Genuine 'message' information not previously known to most of the children or the teacher about each other is shared.

The effects of communicative feedback can be not just social but emotional (Richards, 2020). The children may see the class as more fun and motivating when the teacher talks to them more like a friend in a conversation, and perhaps uses their names liberally when addressing them. We therefore look next at emotional feedback.

7.3 Emotional Feedback

Emotional feedback is defined as feedback that affects a person's emotional state. Its distinct status was recognised long ago (Vigil & Oller, 1979). EF can be delivered separately, e.g., by a teacher just saying *Thank you* (positive EF) or *I'm disappointed* (negative EF). Such utterances deliver no great information, but their meaning or tone would respectively encourage or discourage the learner (Lin et al., 2014). In a computer learning environment, a female avatar can express encouragement every time someone attempts an item (in the style of Terzis et al., 2012). For VYL, smiley faces/emoticons have the same function. Indeed, as Vigil and Oller point out, the affective level of human communication is more often mediated through paralinguistic and kinesic means than through language. The VYL teacher can therefore achieve a lot of positive EF by smiling, a lively tone of voice, not always with falling pitch, and moving around the class looking actively at the children, not staying still and at a distance (Paulman & Weinstein, 2023).

Often however EF is delivered combined with CF, either positive or negative (Mayordomo et al., 2022), as in *Well done, that is right* or *That's wrong, you should pay more attention*. Clearly CF, which is typically in linguistic form, can also be accompanied by EF in any of the non-linguistic modes. It can also be argued that CF on its own usually has an unstated affective overtone. If errors are corrected, the EF overtone is negative, but when someone is recognised as correct, the EF overtone is positive (Mayordomo et al., 2022). However, the teacher can counter the inherent negative emotional effect of negative CF by accompanying it with positive EF either as a smile or friendly tone of voice or added words: *Well, done, but it sounds better to say....* (Vigil & Oller, 1979). Often this can be achieved by praising the effort even where the accuracy is absent.

Emotional feedback is important because of the key role played in learning by the emotional state and attitudes of the learner. Some recognised teaching approaches have focused on it. Lozanov's Suggestopedia (Kharismawati, 2014) tries to relax the learner and reduce

anxiety, so feedback would project a positive view of mistakes. Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis emphasizes how emotion can get in the way of input that would have a beneficial role in learning. Both those would avoid negative CF or try to present it in a positive EF light.

The benefit for learning is hard to quantify but the negative effects of negative EF associated with negative CF are widely attested. For instance, much work has been done on learner anxiety in second/foreign language classrooms, especially their anxiety about speaking (Horwitz, 2010). Among the factors creating such anxiety 'fear of negative evaluation' from teachers (and indeed peers), and fear of testing, routinely emerge as crucial (Horwitz, 2010).

As suggested above, negative EF typically accompanies negative CF, and positive EF accompanies positive CF. Vigil and Oller (1979) were among the first to explore the situations where there is a mismatch, i.e., where positive EF occurs with negative CF and vice versa. The latter rarely occurs, while the former is quite common where teachers want to combat the usual association of error correction with negative EF. In Vigil and Oller's view, the former is the most likely combination to lead to learning. This supports Edge's (1989) view of the need to present errors as 'learning steps', so positive, rather than as something bad.

8. Other Dimensions on Which Feedback Can Vary

Aside from the substance of the feedback, a number of other dimensions are relevant. These are once again mostly discussed and researched in relation to negative corrective feedback on language form, but usually apply to all types.

8.1 Audience, Generality and Immediacy of Feedback

Feedback can be given to individual learners separately, and maybe privately, or to a whole class (Collin & Quigley, 2021).

It can be very general, e.g. *You need to learn more vocab* or very specific, e.g. *You need to say* was *here.* It can be immediate, e.g., spoken right after the student says something, or delayed, e.g., at the end of an exercise or lesson, or at the end of the semester (e.g., written term reports etc). Often immediate feedback will be more specific and delayed feedback more general. In addition, immediate feedback (both verbal and non-verbal) favourably affects student attitudes (Andersen & Andersen, 2005).

All those would seem to have their place with VYLs: it is not possible to say that certain choices will always be better (Collin & Quigley, 2021). However, we saw that attention span is quite short for six-year-olds. It could make sense to give feedback as soon as possible and within a quarter of an hour of whatever utterance or task prompted it, so that the learner still has that in mind and can connect the feedback to its stimulus. Otherwise, the feedback may appear to the child unconnected with anything, and meaningless: in that case they will not learn from it. The wider research literature also favours immediate feedback although research has mostly been done on written feedback to older learners: it regards delay as disadvantaging the learner by denying them usable information (Dempsey et al., 1993). There are some circumstances that seem to favour delayed feedback, however. One is where it is associated with a later event of reteaching, or extending the teaching of, whatever prompted the feedback. In that case however the benefit comes more from the reteaching than from the delay in the feedback. In fact, this illustrates the proven greater benefit of spaced rather than massed teaching and learning of material (Kulik & Kulik, 1988).

8.2 What Feedback is Given <u>On</u>, and Who <u>To</u>

Mostly, feedback is a response to what students produce. For VYL, primarily what they say in English is important, even when they are just imitating what the teacher said, and the feedback is also mostly spoken (Garton et al., 2011). However, teachers need to be aware that often the feedback is indirectly also on what the children have understood. E.g., if they speak in answer to a teacher question in English, they have to understand the question as well as speak. Much EFL teacher feedback at older ages is on written English production (and is itself often written). Again, that often may indirectly be feedback on reading or listening, since writing tasks usually require something to have been understood first (e.g., the title, prompt, topic related material). However, this is unlikely to be prominent for VYL, since such children are still only beginning to write in L1 and should not be expected to write much in English (Nunan, 2016).

An important forgotten third kind of product that can receive feedback, especially for VYL, is non-English. I.e., it could be the VYL speaking in Arabic, or it could be non-linguistic, such as something drawn by the VYL. Often that is again really an indication of what they have understood from what the teacher said, or some other source of English input. Actions, such as hands up, or a computer press, also show comprehension (amongst many other things) and can receive feedback (Hammond, 2016).

In all the above, a key decision for the teacher is what to choose to give feedback on and what to let pass. Collin and Quigley (2021) mention how the need for feedback should ideally be limited by improving the quality of the initial teaching so that mistakes are fewer and feedback is not required. That however assumes that only negative CF is considered. In a class lesson, unless the teacher is excessively teacher-centric and affords few opportunities for the children to say or do anything on which feedback could be provided, there are usually very many potential occasions for the teacher to also provide positive CF, let alone communicative or emotional feedback. However, clearly, they cannot and should not all be exploited. It is necessary to choose.

Broadly that choice can be made either based on what the feedback targets, or the particular student(s) to whom it is given. An obvious criterion is to limit feedback to whatever is the target of the current lesson (Han, 2002). If the focus is on verb past tense, then pass over any errors or impressively correct features of what is said that do not relate to that. This should especially be sensitive to the students' developmental level or inbuilt syllabus (Krashen, 1985): errors related to things that they are not yet 'ready' for at their level (such as

perhaps always getting the irregular past tense forms of verbs correct) can be passed over. The other kind of criterion for limitation is to mainly address feedback to certain members of the class that might most benefit from it. They would typically be the weaker students who especially need positive CF when they get something right, and positive emotional feedback when they get something wrong.

8.3 The Medium of the Feedback

Some parts of feedback are necessarily in the target language, English, as they are words and structures that are the target of the feedback. However, the feedback can be framed in L1 (e.g., Arabic), not necessarily also in target language English, or even be non-verbal (Andersen and Andersen, 2005). Hanif (2020) points to the value of L1 in the EFL classroom as it decreases cognitive load and creates positive emotions. However, the use of L1 specifically in feedback is not highlighted. Indeed, in lists of functions where L1 is regarded as useful, feedback is rarely found (e.g., Schweers, 1999). We feel however that, for VYL, at a very low level of English proficiency, it could be suitable to frame feedback in L1 where it involves any complexity beyond words like *good* or *incorrect* etc.

Within Arabic there is also the choice of local spoken dialect or MSA (which children learn effectively as a second language). Common sense suggests that, for VYLs, the local spoken Arabic dialect is going to help the child the most. The English class need not be also the MSA class, creating a second challenge. In the same vein, terminology and difficult words, even in Arabic, should surely be avoided at this level.

The choice of what language and type of feedback to focus on is not necessarily just a teacher's choice but may also differ between schools. For instance, international schools versus nationals' schools, or urban schools versus remote schools. The environment and the type of school can generate a local community of practice with respect to feedback that a teacher may feel obliged to endorse (Yıldırım, 2008).

9. Conclusion

The general literature on teacher feedback in educational contexts is huge. This account has limited itself to insights that could be relevant to feedback in the EFL VYL (c. 6 years old) classroom in a country such as Saudi Arabia. From the above review we may tentatively summarise the main implications for VYL teachers in a set of guidelines as follows.

Do not present feedback, especially error correction, as if it is the main focus of the lesson

Do not present feedback as being like assessment/testing/exams

When feedback targets error correction, offer first the supported chance to self-correct

Use feedback to add further information, not just evaluate

Remember that 'corrective' feedback is about celebrating correctness, not just pointing out errors

Remember that feedback is about language meaning, not just form

Address individual children by name as you give feedback, to create a social connection

Exchange real messages with the children, to help improve rapport

Use praise liberally to create positive emotion and motivation

Give feedback as soon as possible after the event it relates to

Select what to give feedback on: what the children are ready for, and is the focus of the current teaching

Select who to give feedback to: especially positive types to weaker students

Use familiar spoken Arabic to frame the feedback

Avoid abstract concepts and linguistic terminology in feedback

To many experienced teachers of EFL to VYL, the above list may seem like déjà vu. It is perhaps simply what they feel they do anyway. However, what the present review hopes to have achieved is to locate such wisdom of experience in a systematic framework where teaching practices can be informed by, if not based on, evidence in published sources.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Manal Alghannam was the only one who was responsible for the study design, revising, data collection, data analysis.

Competing interests

I declare that I did not use any personal relationship in my study to influence the results of the conducted research.

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