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## Oral Corrective Feedback on Pronunciation Errors: Implications for Teacher Trainers

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### Introduction

The existing literature has explored teachers' practices and their cognitions, or what teachers know, believe, and think (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015). Although many of these studies have focused on teachers' cognitions regarding teaching grammar (Borg, 2003), a considerably smaller body of research has investigated second-language (L2) teachers' cognitions about corrective feedback (CF) (Baker & Burri, 2016). In the latter, exploring teachers' cognitions about CF has primarily revolved around morphosyntactic and lexical features, whereas CF on learners' pronunciation errors has received much less attention (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015). Baker and Burri (2016) and Couper (2019) rightly assert that teachers' cognitions about CF on pronunciation have received almost no empirical attention. This means that, although teachers have been provided with numerous pedagogical implications regarding incorporating CF-embedded pronunciation instruction in their classrooms (Saito & Lyster, 2012), it is still largely unknown how L2 teachers—the main source of CF in the classroom—perceive and provide CF on their learners' pronunciation errors and how teachers' background factors mediate this process.

In an investigation of teachers' cognitions and practices regarding CF in New Zealand, Couper (2019) reported that the participating teachers mostly provided recasts on pronunciation errors, and that they tended to provide CF on learners' word-level (i.e., segmentals and word stress) pronunciation errors, rather than issues related to prosody. This was because the teachers did not possess sufficient knowledge about prosodic elements, which in turn made them less confident in incorporating CF on prosody issues in their pedagogy. In a similar vein, Foote, et. al. (2016) collected data from class observations of three teachers in Quebec, Canada and found that most of the pronunciation instruction was in the form of CF which addressed segmental deviations. Baker and Burri (2016) reported that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers deemed CF an indispensable component of their L2 pronunciation pedagogy aimed at promoting L2 comprehensibility. In doing so, in their CF practices, the teachers addressed deviations that impaired comprehensibility rather than nativelikeness. Rahimi and Zhang (2015) also found that compared to novice teachers, experienced teachers (1) attached more value to the importance



of CF, especially immediate CF and CF after the activity, (2) viewed explicit CF as more effective than other types, and (3) attributed their cognitions about their CF practices to their prior teaching experiences.

Without exploring teachers' cognitions about CF, we may not be able to fully comprehend the rationales behind the translation of their cognitions into actual CF practices. In fact, Borg (2003) argues that contextual factors (e.g., institutional guidelines) mediate whether teachers' classroom practices reflect their cognitions and whether these cognitions are translated into actual practices in the L2 classroom. The empirical inquiries surveyed above have focused primarily on teachers' cognitions and CF practices. However, none of those empirical attempts have examined how teachers' background factors may shape teachers' cognitions and their CF practices. Furthermore, the previous research in this domain has been only limited to English as a second language (ESL) contexts. Addressing the existing gaps in the literature, the current empirical inquiry investigates to what extent teachers' background factors (i.e., years and contexts of teaching experience, prior teacher training, and level of academic education) shape teachers' cognitions and CF practices on pronunciation errors in Iran—a context that has received very little empirical attention regarding teachers' cognitions in general. In addition, using the results from our study, we can hopefully provide some pedagogical implications for language teachers, language school directors, and policymakers in a wide range of contexts.

## **The Present Study**

As part of a larger study investigating Iranian teachers' pronunciation training, beliefs, and practices, data were collected to investigate how Iranian teachers' background factors shape their cognitions and CF practices on pronunciation errors. This research study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian EFL teachers' cognitions about CF on pronunciation errors?
2. Do these teachers' background factors shape their cognitions and practices?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

401 EFL instructors were recruited via social media, professional contacts with language institutes, and personal contacts in Iran. However, 346 teacher participants completed the entire survey. 270 of these teachers were in their 20s, 30 in their 30s, 40 in their 40s, and 6 in their 50s. Of these 346 teachers, 268 were female, 76 were male, and 3 picked neither category. In terms of their highest level of education in Applied Linguistics, English teaching, and other related areas, 172 participants held/were working toward a B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Linguistics, or other related fields, 172 held/were working toward an M.A. in these fields, and 22 held/were working toward a Ph.D. in these fields. To operationalize our participants' teaching experiences, we followed Rahimi and Zhang's (2015) recommendations for defining our participants' teaching experience. Therefore, those with less than five years of teaching experience were categorized as novice, and those with five and more years as experienced. Following this guideline, 234 teachers were categorized as experienced and 112 as novice.

### **Data Collection**

Our survey was administered on Qualtrics in 2021 (see Appendix). The questions were adopted and adapted from those used in Foote et al. (2011) and Huensch (2019). The survey, administered in English, comprised 89 questions of three types: Short answer, multiple-choice, and Likert-scale. The questions reported in the current study covered several areas pertaining to the participants' background information,

their CF cognitions, and their CF practices. Before we delivered the survey, we piloted our questions with three experienced EFL teachers. It should be noted that these answers were not included in our final analyses. To answer our research questions, we first analyzed the quantitative data gleaned from our surveys and then took a qualitative approach to code our open-ended data.

## Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results for our questionnaires, focusing on both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. We should note that the term accuracy was mostly associated with native-like pronunciation and accent in our results, while intelligibility was associated with ease of linguistic understanding.

### Survey Results

Our analyses identified several variables which impacted our participants' cognitions and reported practices regarding CF. First, education level was shown to affect whether the teachers decided to correct students' pronunciation errors. Those with a Ph.D. tended to correct significantly fewer pronunciation errors ( $M = 6.45$ ,  $SD = 2.46$ ), as opposed to those holding either a B.A. ( $M = 8.06$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) or an M.A. ( $M = 7.91$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ):  $F = 12.48$ ,  $df = 2$ , 345,  $p > .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .068$ . The fact that the participants holding/working towards a Ph.D. provided fewer corrections is likely due to their knowledge about the value of intelligibility over accuracy. This result highlights a possible link between teachers' academic education and their awareness about overcorrection of pronunciation errors, especially segmental errors.

Next, prior ESL teaching experience affected whether the teachers decided to correct students' errors: Those without prior ESL teaching experience ( $M = 8.06$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) tended to correct more pronunciation errors than those with ESL teaching experience ( $M = 7.68$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ):  $F = 5.77$ ,  $df = 1$ , 345,  $p = .017$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .016$ . We think that our experienced teachers' tendency to provide less CF is caused by an appreciation for intelligibility over accuracy gained through their higher experience in teaching English, an association also supported by Lortie (2002) and Kartchava et al. (2020).

The analysis also showed that previous teacher training courses (TTC) influenced whether the teachers had a principled reason for correcting student errors. In fact, our analysis revealed that those with prior training ( $M = 7.45$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) provided a significantly higher number of principled CF instances on their students' pronunciation errors, as opposed to those with no prior training ( $M = 6.67$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ):  $F = 9.37$ ,  $df = 1$ , 345,  $p = .002$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .027$ . Similarly, pronunciation-centered TTC affected whether the teachers had a principled reason for correcting students' pronunciation errors. Those who had received pronunciation-centered training ( $M = 7.46$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) planned for principled CF, as opposed to those without such training ( $M = 6.79$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ):  $F = 8.22$ ,  $df = 1$ , 345,  $p = .004$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .023$ . In addition, our participants' teaching experience was a variable that significantly affected their principled CF provision. Our analysis indicated that the experienced teachers ( $M = 7.50$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) provided significantly more instances of principled CF, compared with the novice teachers ( $M = 6.88$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ):  $F = 3.81$ ,  $df = 1$ , 345,  $p = .023$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .022$ . These results, again, highlight the role of proper training in raising teachers' awareness about CF.

Overall, the results showed that the teachers' cognitions and practices were influenced by several background factors, a result supported by Rahimi and Zhang (2015) and Kartchava et al. (2020). In fact, our teachers' education level, ESL teaching experience, and previous training shaped the way they provided CF on their students' pronunciation errors. In the following section, we provide more insights from the open-ended data we collected from the 'Please explain' boxes which supplemented our Likert-scale questions (see Appendix).

## Open-Ended Findings

Here, we present the coded findings of our open-ended data. First, the findings showed that the teachers provided CF to increase pronunciation accuracy, improve intelligibility, or both, even though increasing students' pronunciation accuracy was the most commonly reported purpose of providing CF.

### Purpose of correction

Increasing accuracy (276/346):

'Usually when students say 'Tree' or 'Tink' instead of 'Three' or 'Think'

Increasing comprehensibility (36/346):

'If it [the error] is hindering communication... Once a student meant to say 'measurable' but ended up saying 'miserable' which changed the meaning of her sentence.'

Both (33/346)

'When the mispronunciation blocks communication or when it is that day's lesson [accurate pronunciation].'

Our teachers strongly preferred CF to improve their students' pronunciation accuracy, a result that is in contrast with those in Baker and Burri's (2016). We can think of a sociocultural explanation for this discrepancy, which is the stronger preference for pronunciation accuracy in the Iranian EFL contexts, as supported by Saeli et al. (2020). Additionally, our teachers who had received both general and pronunciation-specific training reported providing principled instances of CF on their students' pronunciation errors. The effects of previous training on teachers' cognitions and practices have been acknowledged by Kartchava et al. (2020).

The next finding pertained to our teachers' timing of CF. We coded the data into immediate and delayed, each of which could be aimed at increasing accuracy or intelligibility.

### Immediate CF

Aimed at increasing accuracy (64/346)

'As students are talking. I prefer to correct pronunciation problems on the spot.'

Aimed at improving intelligibility (2/346)

'[When] running a discussion and learners are talking about the topic but what the learner is saying is not intelligible.'

### Delayed CF

Aimed at increasing accuracy (4/346)

'I will wait until they finish their speaking; then I will correct their errors and ask all students to repeat.'

Aimed at improving intelligibility (6/346)

'I wait for them to finish speaking; after that, [I correct the errors] when they block or change the meaning/communication.'

Aimed at sustaining fluency (1/346)

'As long as the error does not affect fluency, I correct them.'

Our teachers showed a strong preference for immediate CF to increase their learners' pronunciation accuracy. Similar results were reported by Rahimi and Zhang (2015), whose experienced participants also

preferred immediate CF over delayed feedback. Our results are also similar to those from Couper's (2019), whose participants preferred less disruptive methods of correction. However, Kartchava et al. (2020) reported more prevalent hesitation among their teachers to disrupt their learners' communication flow, thus providing more delayed CF. Irrespective of our teachers' experience, we found a strong preference for immediate feedback, likely caused by the more elusive nature of pronunciation errors, the need to address these errors with no delay, and the perceived effectiveness of immediate CF in increasing pronunciation accuracy.

After we asked the teachers about the pronunciation features that they targeted in their CF practices, we identified the following thematic categories:

Segmentals (209/346)

'The basic pronunciation features... Like the correct pronunciation of /th/ or /r/ in American English'

Suprasegmentals (106/346)

'Timing and rhythm, word stress, and prominent words (sentence stress)'

Both (30/346)

'Mistakes on word stress; pronunciation of segmental and suprasegmental elements'

L1 to L2 transfer (15/346)

'The difference between Persian and English pronunciations'

Our teachers provided more CF on learners' segmental errors, a result also reported by Foote et al. (2011). We think that our teachers may have felt more confident in providing CF on their learners' segmental errors. In fact, our coding revealed that these teachers were concerned with such segmentals as /θ/ and /ð/. Similar results were reported by Couper (2019) who concluded that his teacher participants 'corrected phoneme level errors at least some of the time' (p. 45). Our participants probably viewed CF on segmental errors as a way of increasing their students' pronunciation accuracy. They likely felt more comfortable providing CF on segmental errors because they thought of CF on suprasegmental features as challenging.

Finally, we asked the teachers about the greatest challenges they face when providing CF on learners' pronunciation errors. Our analysis identified several categories and subcategories:

Provision of CF on phonetic/phonological issues

Segmentals (38/346)

'The articulation of /th/'

'[Students'] mixing up short and long vowel sounds'

Suprasegmentals (65/346)

'Teaching stress and intonation'

Both segmentals and suprasegmentals (13/346)

'The greatest challenge is pronouncing /th/ and the fact that students mainly tend to speak English with Persian intonation.'

Attainment of natively like accent (13/346)

'When students have some accents.'

L1 to L2 transfer of pronunciation features (13/346)

'The learners' not letting go of or suspending their L1 presuppositions and the myriad of exceptions when dealing with word pronunciation [in English].'

#### Contextual factors which hinder effective provision of CF

##### Student-related variables

Learners' affective factors hindering L2 pronunciation development (5/346)

'For some students, it may be embarrassing [to make errors and be corrected].'

Learners' unreadiness to develop their L2 pronunciation (4/346)

'Some adult students seem to lack the ability [proficiency] to tell the differences between different phonemes.'

Learners' over-emphasis on nativelikeness (2/346)

'Making students believe that they do not have to sound like a native speaker to be intelligible.'

Learners' lack of motivation (1/346)

'Some students think that working on pronunciation in the class is a waste of time and most students do not take it seriously.'

##### Teacher-related variables

Lack of knowledge about the English sound system and teaching it (8/346)

'Not having enough knowledge about the English sound system.'

Lack of self-esteem among teachers to correct pronunciation errors (5/346)

'Lack of confidence'

Non-nativeness of teachers (1/346)

'I'm not a native speaker [of English].'

##### Variables related to availability of teaching materials

Lack of resources and facilities useful in providing CF (71/346)

'Lack of language lab or computer lab and different books.'

Unavailability of reliable/valid assessment methods (1/346)

'There is no objective way for testing pronunciation accuracy.'

##### Practical constraints (10/346)

Time constraints (8/346)

'Time constraints caused by the classroom syllabus'

Mask mandates at language schools (2/346)

'Wearing masks while teaching phonetic symbols'

Overall, the above findings suggest that our participant teachers mostly aimed to increase their learners' pronunciation accuracy by providing immediate feedback. In doing so, they provided CF mostly on their learners' segmental errors, although many teachers also focused on improving their students' intelligibility by providing CF on their suprasegmental errors. In addition, when asked about the greatest challenges in correcting learners' pronunciation errors, the teachers highlighted a variety of student-centered, teacher-related, and contextual factors.

## Conclusion

Our results show that Iranian EFL teachers value pronunciation accuracy, that they use CF to help their learners increase their pronunciation accuracy, and that their feedback practices are affected by various contextual and background factors. These results suggest that these teachers' pronunciation-centered feedback cognitions and practices are not always aligned with the recommended feedback practices, such as feedback aimed at improving intelligibility (Saito & Lyster, 2012). Although we identified prior training, education level, and ESL teaching background as factors which affected our teachers' cognitions about CF on pronunciation errors, the analyses point to the relative ubiquity of these cognitions among our participants, irrespective of their age, gender, and experience levels.

We think our results can be translated into several implications. These implications are aimed at teacher trainers, educators, teachers, policymakers, involved in designing curricula and materials. First, our results suggest that many teachers, especially in EFL contexts, may under-appreciate the importance of L2 intelligibility in their CF practices. This, in turn, means that many such CF practices are meant to increase learners' accuracy in L2 pronunciation. These results underscore the importance of raising teachers' awareness about speech intelligibility. Coupled with this is another finding: use of immediate CF. Again, we think that immediate CF is generally, at least among the teachers we surveyed, aimed at increasing learners' accuracy in L2 pronunciation. Therefore, we believe that teachers' knowledge about delayed CF, and even lack of CF, can be enhanced through various forms of intervention, such as workshops. In fact, our questionnaire results point to a clear link between teachers' education level and their over-correction of pronunciation errors. Although we realize that not every EFL teacher will obtain a graduate degree, we strongly recommend teacher educators, language institute directors, and policymakers to hold various teacher training workshops to highlight the importance of concerted efforts aimed at educating teachers about CF on pronunciation errors.

Additionally, more of these workshops can address the construct of speech intelligibility by discussing its main constituents. Because our teachers' CF practices were mostly concerned with the correction of segmental errors, we assume that many teachers may not be familiar with the components of speech intelligibility, such as suprasegmentals. Aligned with this implication, CF on segmentals will probably increase learners' accuracy, rather than intelligibility. Interestingly, our teachers named CF on suprasegmentals as the most important challenge they face when providing CF on learners' pronunciation errors. We think that teacher trainers and language school directors can, at least partially, address this challenge by educating teachers about the English suprasegmentals and effective CF methods on suprasegmental errors. This awareness can contribute to teachers' heightened familiarity with the importance of more learner-centered feedback methods, such as selective CF, delayed CF, and recasts. Overall, we believe that our results provide some important insights for teacher training programs, language school directors, curriculum designers. Interestingly, our teachers were cognizant of their own challenges in providing CF (e.g., lack of resources in providing CF). Along with the recommended awareness-raising interventions (e.g., workshops), teacher trainers and language school directors should make concerted efforts to provide teachers with the necessary means to provide theoretically-informed CF on learners' pronunciation errors.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire Items

What is your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Other

What is your education level?

- A. Bachelor's
- B. Master's
- C. Doctorate

How many years have you taught English?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4
- E. 5
- F. 6
- G. 7
- H. 8
- I. 9
- J. 10 and more

Have you ever taught English in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) contexts?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Have you had previous teacher training?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Have you had previous pronunciation-related teacher training?

- A. Yes
- B. No

I correct students' errors during class.

- 1. Strongly disagree ... 9. Strongly agree  
Please explain.

I have a principled reason for choosing when to correct students' errors.

- 1. Strongly disagree... 9. Strongly agree

Please explain.

I correct students' errors when they interfere with communication.

1. Strongly disagree... 9. Strongly agree

Please explain.

How do you decide when to correct learners' pronunciation errors? Please explain.

What are some challenges you face while providing CF on learners' pronunciation errors? Please explain.