



EFL Teachers' Cognition of Feedback Techniques on Pronunciation

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Introduction

The correspondence between different aspects of teacher cognition and classroom practice has drawn significant research attention in both mainstream education and language education (see Basturkmen (2012) and Borg (2003) for reviews). Teacher cognition is a large concept that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes. All those mental constructs are claimed to be “dynamic”, “defined and refined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers’ lives” (Borg, 2006, p. 35). Each of those constructs has been investigated to some extent and research findings consistently indicate that teachers’ cognition has a powerful impact on their practices (Borg, 2003) though what teachers say they know or believe may not be always enacted in their classrooms (Borg, 2003).

In the field of pronunciation teaching, feedback is an integral component with its role in learners’ pronunciation development being widely confirmed. In several contexts where teachers are not properly trained in pronunciation teaching, feedback serves as the main, if not the only, form of pronunciation teaching (Derwing, 2018; Phuong & Phuong, 2019). However, teachers’ cognition of feedback on pronunciation still remains under-profiled in language teaching research; a few studies were mainly conducted in ESL contexts (for example, Baker and Burri (2016) and Couper (2019)). In EFL contexts, teachers were found to be highly dependent on feedback to teach pronunciation (Phuong, 2019); however, what EFL teachers believe in, know about, and how they correct learners’ pronunciation mistakes are little known. The only study that looks at teachers’ beliefs and provision of pronunciation feedback by Phuong (2022) indicates that EFL teachers in Vietnam are poorly-informed in several aspects of feedback on pronunciation, including when, how often to give feedback, and also which pronunciation errors to give feedback on. In such a situation, teachers often rely on their own intuition to make decisions on what to do and what not to do regarding their students’ pronunciation mistakes. However, some questions remain unanswered: Are those EFL teachers well aware of the existing techniques to give feedback on pronunciation? To what extent are they using those techniques? What are their beliefs and attitudes towards the techniques they are using (or not using)? To bridge the knowledge gap, the current research especially investigates EFL teachers’ knowledge of, beliefs in, and attitudes toward different techniques to give feedback on pronunciation.



The Significance of the Study

The knowledge gained from this study would greatly benefit teacher training courses in EFL contexts by informing teacher trainers about the aspects of knowledge and pedagogical techniques that student teachers need to be equipped with to confidently provide feedback on pronunciation. For in-service teachers, the research findings would help them reflect on and improve the effectiveness of their feedback on their students' pronunciation. This study focuses on two research questions:

1. What is the knowledge of experienced Vietnamese EFL teachers of feedback techniques on pronunciation?
2. How does teachers' cognition of feedback techniques influence their classroom practices of giving feedback on pronunciation?

Literature Review

Feedback in Language Education Research

Since the consensus was built around the contribution of focus-on-form instruction to language learning within a communicative language teaching approach (Brown, 2016), feedback has been increasingly attracting research attention and has gained a central position in many important SLA theories such as Interactional Hypothesis, Noticing Hypothesis, and Output Hypothesis among others. In language education research, studies on feedback have centered around five main questions, including if errors should be corrected, which errors should be corrected, how, when, and by whom errors should be corrected (see Brown, 2016). Among those major questions, that of how errors should be corrected is of much interest to both language teachers and researchers. In response to this question, Lyster and Ranta (1997) developed a taxonomy of feedback techniques, which include clarification request, explicit correction, recast, repetition, elicitation, and meta-linguistic feedback. The efficacy and preferences of those techniques have been explored to some extent. However, there has yet been a consensus regarding what techniques are more effective in L2 improvement (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2020); also, preferences for feedback techniques vary under several contextual factors and teachers' beliefs. Recast, however, has been widely indicated as the most popularly used technique (57%) (Brown, 2016). Research inquiry into feedback has also been extended with several experimental studies which examine the efficacy of feedback on learners' language improvement, the findings of which are generally positive (see Li, 2010 for a review).

Feedback-on-Pronunciation Research

Research on feedback on pronunciation makes up a significant proportion of all studies on feedback (22%), just behind that of grammar and lexis (constituting 43% and 28%, respectively) (Brown, 2016). However, it is stated that research on feedback on pronunciation and findings applied to feedback on pronunciation may be even greater given that several studies do not specify aspects of language on which feedback is provided. Research generally indicates the efficacy of feedback on pronunciation regardless of instruction types (meaning-focused vs. form-focused) and instruction focuses (segmentals vs. supra-segmentals) (see Saito, 2012). Moreover, feedback benefits learners not only in terms of speech production and speech perception (Lee & Lyster, 2017) but also in the reduction of their anxiety (Lee, 2016; Zhang & Rahimi, 2014).

As for the efficacy of different feedback techniques, there is little research to date. Recast is the most popularly used technique but less effective than prompts (Gooch, Saito, & Lyster, 2016). However, this technique is claimed to be more effective if used for previously taught items (Saito & Lyster, 2012).

Research on Teachers' Cognition in Pronunciation Pedagogy and Pronunciation Feedback

In pronunciation pedagogy, some aspects of teacher cognition that have recently attracted research attention include teachers' beliefs regarding English models for the classroom (Phuong, 2021), pronunciation teaching techniques (Baker, 2014), pronunciation features to focus on to ensure the comprehensibility of learners' English speech (Saito, 2011), and obstacles facing teachers in pronunciation teaching (Phuong, 2020). Regarding teacher cognition of feedback on pronunciation, there has been little research. Few studies of this line, including those of Couper (2019) and Baker and Burri (2016) were both conducted in the ESL contexts. In EFL contexts such as Vietnam, it is often that teachers are more poorly-prepared to teach English pronunciation (Phuong, 2020) and thus teachers often rely on feedback to teach pronunciation (Phuong, 2022; Phuong & Phuong, 2019). However, teachers' knowledge of and beliefs in feedback on pronunciation remain little known. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the repertoire of feedback techniques of Vietnamese teachers of English, and their cognition underlying their using or not using those techniques. The data analysis is based on the Lyster and Ranta's (1997) taxonomy.

Methodology

Design of the Study

The current research is based upon the principles of a qualitative case study. This research design enables the in-depth exploration into a phenomenon in a real-world context. Yin (2013) emphasizes that a case study typically features data from multiple sources, which are often triangulated, and that research findings benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions that provide guidance about how data is collected and analyzed. In this study, the triangulation of interview and class-observation data was utilized. Also, the themes that emerged were either anticipated on the basis of prior theoretical propositions or became of interest to the researcher.

Participants

Participant recruitment in this study was based on convenience sampling (depending on teachers' availability and interest to participate). Participants included ten experienced Vietnamese teachers who were teaching in an English Preparation Course (ECP) at the time of data collection. The teachers were all female, aged between 28 and 40 years old, and had obtained a Master's degree in TESOL from a higher-education institute in Vietnam (8) or in an English-speaking country (2).

Instruments

This study utilizes two main data collection tools, namely semi-structured interviews and class observations. While the semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to obtain insight into teachers' beliefs in, knowledge, perception of, and attitudes towards techniques to give feedback on pronunciation, class observations provide slices of classroom life that reveal teachers' practices.

Data Collection

Data was collected during an eight-week semester. All ten participants were involved in three data collection procedures: a round-1 semi-structured interview, two class observations (constituting 3 teaching hours), and a round-2 semi-structured interview. The first round of interviews was conducted in the second

week of the semester and each was about 40 minutes in length. Two weeks after that, two classes of each teacher were observed with observers taking fieldnotes, the purpose of which was to keep track of pronunciation feedback instances. The second round of interviews was conducted one week after class observations and were mainly for member-checking and to obtain teachers' explanations/clarification regarding observed instances of feedback on pronunciation. Each interview in the second round lasted for around 30 minutes. Though all teachers were experts in spoken English, Vietnamese was used as the language of the interviews to maximize in-depth discussion on the complicated matter of teachers' cognition. Both interviews and class observations were audio recorded with teachers' signed consent.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure consists of three stages: 1) transcription of interview data; 2) segmentation and coding of interview data; 3) segmentation and coding of classroom-observation data. Coded data from class observations and interviews was combined to search for themes.

Findings and Discussions

Teachers' Knowledge of Feedback Techniques

Table 1 provides a description of feedback techniques on pronunciation used by teachers in the course during the time of the investigation. Table 2 provides the summary of the range of feedback techniques on pronunciation that each teacher used as indicated in both teachers' self-report and classroom observations. Table 3 shows the frequency at which each technique was used by each teacher (measured in the number of instances that each technique was used).

TABLE 1
Summary of Feedback Techniques

Techniques	Code	Descriptions
Explicit correction	EC	Teachers point out students' mistakes and provide correct forms
Recast	RC	Teachers reformulate parts or the whole of students' utterances
Clarification request	CR	Teachers use phrases such as 'Pardon?'
Elicitation	E	Teachers directly elicit a reformulation from students
Repetition	R	The teacher repeats the students' ill-formed utterances, using intonation to signal students' errors
Metalinguistic feedback	MF	Teachers provide comments or questions related to the well-formedness of students' utterances

Among all feedback techniques, RC and EC were the most popularly used. Nine of the ten teachers reported using those and they were also observed in the classes of nine teachers (except for Nu's). However, in terms of frequency, RC was used far more often with 93 instances, which nearly doubles that of EC (51) and is almost half of all observed feedback instances. The finding of the popularity of recast hereby resonates with a pool of similar findings in language education research. According to Yates and Zielinski (2009), it is more important to let students know that they have made a mistake rather than pointing out the mistake; and the adoption of this implicit technique of recast is an effective way to do so (Lightbown et al., 2006). After RC, the popularity of EC also indicated that teachers in the context of this study, akin to experienced EFL teachers elsewhere, also highlighted the importance of metalinguistic knowledge in students' language development (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015). MF and E were also observed with 29 and 20 instances respectively in six teachers' classes. However, CR and R did not seem to be known and used by many teachers.

TABLE 2

Feedback Techniques Used by Each Teacher Categorized by Data Source

Techniques	Dung		Thao		Hong		Tu		Nu		Binh		Hanh		Anh		Thuy		Le	
	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O	I	O
EC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
RC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CR		0		0																
E		0		0				0								0		0		0
R		0																		0
MF			0	0	0	0	0	0			0				0	0	0	0	0	0

Note. I: interview; O: Observation

TABLE 3

Instances of Feedback on Pronunciation by Teacher and by Technique

Techniques	Dung	Thao	Hong	Tu	Nu	Binh	Hanh	Anh	Thuy	Le	Total/technique
EC	6		10	3		4	5		15	8	51
RC	16	7	27	1		6	10	2	10	14	93
CR	1	1									2
E	3	1		5				1	5	5	20
R	1									1	2
MF		2	5	1		7		1	10	3	29
Total/teacher	27	11	42	10	0	17	15	4	40	31	197

Both data sources seem to highlight a close link between teachers' training, including self-training, and their knowledge of feedback techniques. In interviews, teachers also revealed a different repertoire of techniques. Two teachers, who were trained in a TESOL course overseas (Thuy and Le) claimed that they were trained in pronunciation teaching and also in giving feedback on pronunciation. The others, in contrast, reported receiving no training in this field and, thus, did not know much about how to give feedback. However, some among them, such as Dung and Tu, reported spending time self-training in this aspect. Tables 2 and 3 also show that Thuy, Le, Dung, and Tu displayed not only a richer repertoire of feedback techniques, but also a higher frequency of feedback provision. Additionally, teachers who emphasized the importance of feedback in learners' pronunciation development were also seen to give more feedback despite their limited repertoire of techniques. For example, Hong declared that she did not know many techniques to give feedback on pronunciation, but "it is important to help my students with their pronunciation in some way, so I try to help them correct their errors when I can" (interview 2). This belief was reflected in Hong's classes with more instances of feedback on pronunciation observed than in any other teachers (42 occasions). Thuy, Le, and Dung were also observed to provide feedback frequently with 40, 31, and 27 instances respectively. In contrast, teachers who did not believe in the usefulness of pronunciation feedback and/or declared a lack of techniques were found to rarely or not at all provide feedback on pronunciation (such as Nu and Anh).

Teachers' Learning Experience/Previous Training and their Use of Feedback Techniques

As in other fields of language teaching, teachers' cognition and practices of giving feedback were influenced by their language learning experience and previous teacher training (Borg, 2006). Some teachers, including especially Binh, Hanh, Nu, and Hong revealed that some techniques such as CR, E, and R were not familiar to them. Those techniques were not observed in those four teachers' classes either. On the contrary, teachers tended to use techniques that they had been taught or those which they had seen their teachers use. Hanh, for example, disclosed that she did not think RC was very effective, but she still relied on this technique because "it was how our teachers helped us with our pronunciation and I know no other ways to help my students with their pronunciation" (Interview 2).

As mentioned, two out of ten teachers (Thuy and Le) had obtained their master's degree in TESOL from an English-speaking country. They confirmed to have been trained in how to give feedback on pronunciation. As for Dung, she claimed to benefit from often watching English classes taught by native-English-speaking teachers on YouTube. "I really enjoyed watching those lessons and learned a lot including several feedback techniques on pronunciation" (interview 2). Those teachers were observed to be confident and flexibly combine different techniques in their practices of feedback provision.

Clearly, teachers' training and language learning experience have a profound impact on teachers' practices. In other words, while adequate training enabled teachers to be confident and effective in their use of feedback techniques, poor training might cause teachers to form and retain practices even though they might perceive those techniques as of limited efficacy.

Teachers' Consideration of Efficacy and Efficiency of Feedback Techniques in Different Contexts

Some teachers at the second-round interviews claimed to have considered the effectiveness and efficiency of feedback techniques to use in different situations. Comments of six teachers (including Dung, Thao, Hong, Binh, Nu, and Le) converged at the point that RC and EC were the most time-saving. Those teachers also mentioned that the majority of their students paid little attention to pronunciation learning and to correcting their own mistakes for a range of different reasons. Therefore, "feedback should be as direct and explicit as possible to be effective" (Le, Interview 2). Nu also added that:

I am not quite familiar with many feedback techniques, but I think using recast and pointing out students' errors are just enough. These are the quickest and most effective ways to give feedback. You know, we just had a limited amount of time to cover so many things in the curriculum.

Though such considerations of how to give feedback to fit the class time available and specific learners are reasonable and also reported by teachers in, for example, the ESL context of Australia (Baker & Burri, 2016). It should be noted that so strongly impacted by the time constraint and the impression that RC and EC were "the quickest and most effective" techniques, teachers such as Nu might not find good reasons to explore and try to apply techniques that they were not yet familiar with.

Six teachers confirmed the efficacy of MF at second-round interviews. According to Thuy, this technique was an important 'source of motivation', an 'essential practice that encourages students to learn pronunciation' (Hong- interview 2). However, just three of those six teachers were observed to use MF frequently (Thuy: 10 instances, Binh: 7 instances and Hong: 5 instances).

Notably, though considering the strengths of different techniques for use, several teachers, especially those who had a richer repertoire of feedback techniques rarely attached a special favor to any certain technique; instead, they seemed to be more flexible using different techniques in different situations to increase the efficacy. Thuy, a representative teacher, commented:

You should understand your students. Some of mine really welcome explicit correction but some prefer being implicitly alerted for their mistakes so they can correct their mistakes themselves. I think a technique works when it is suitable for errors, students, and situations. (Interview 2)

Also, the correspondence between students' English proficiency and the efficacy of certain feedback techniques was also considered by two teachers, Nu and Anh.

Learners' demand for and the ability to benefit from pronunciation feedback is only found at high levels of English so I often just use general comments like "your pronunciation is good" or "your pronunciation is not very clear yet" for lower-level students (Anh Interview 2).

Though class observations did not reveal several instances of such MF in her classes, Anh was observed to rarely give feedback in any form on her pre-intermediate learners' pronunciation errors (only four instances during 3 teaching hours). Sharing this point of Anh, Nu emphasized that:

At lower levels, students just need to have something to say and can say it. Correction may embarrass them and cause them to be afraid of speaking so I normally don't prefer feedback on the pronunciation of students with limited proficiency (Interview 2).

Some teacher guidelines may have suggested discouragement as a possible side-effect of corrective feedback on pronunciation errors. Similarly, some scholars have cautioned teachers about feedback provision. For example, Murphy (2014) argues that teachers should be "tactful" when giving feedback on pronunciation errors to spare students' embarrassment. Nevertheless, the minimalization of feedback on lower-level students' pronunciation to the extreme or skipping feedback altogether does not seem to be in line with both SLA and language-teaching research. Yates and Zielinski (2009), for example, pointed out that pronunciation teaching, including feedback, is beneficial for and also in high demand among learners of low English proficiency (Phuong, 2019; Phuong & Phuong, 2019).

Findings hereby show that teachers considered several contextual factors such as time constraints, learners' attitudes and interests, and their English proficiency in their decision regarding what techniques were more effective to use in their classes with their specific students. Though their decisions might or might not have been well-informed by research findings, the values of teachers' teaching reflection and contextual flexibility were obviously of great importance in shaping their feedback provision.

Conclusion

This study found that knowledge of feedback techniques was not equal among teachers. Apart from the two teachers who were trained overseas (Le and Thuy) and two others, who claimed to actively self-train in how to give feedback on pronunciation (Dung and Tu), most teachers knew and used few feedback techniques. It seems that the poor pedagogical preparation facing teachers in pronunciation teaching (Murphy, 2014; Phuong, 2020) also faced them in the field of feedback on pronunciation.

The current research extends the findings of previous studies in other EFL contexts (eg. Rahimi & Zhang, 2015) indicating that many teachers considered providing feedback as one of their important responsibilities because feedback serves as an essential source of information and support for learners to recognize and correct their own mistakes. However, most teachers were found to rely heavily on RC and EC. Though such techniques were highly evaluated by most teachers as time-saving and effective, the reliance on such few techniques was not sufficient to reassure teachers of the efficacy of their feedback provision given that there is no single technique that can be used to correct all mistakes and for all groups of learners (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015).

A little contradictory to previous studies which indicate that teacher education does not emerge as a key factor in the transforming of teachers' cognition (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015), the current study found that teacher education and learning experience greatly influenced teachers' cognitions of feedback on pronunciation. However, as mentioned earlier, teachers' training does not seem to have adequately assisted teachers in fulfilling the responsibility of giving their students effective assistance in pronunciation learning via feedback. Some teachers such as Hong, Nu, and Hanh claimed not to know many feedback techniques. Some other teachers such as Dung and Tu had to turn to the internet for another source of guidance. Other teachers such as Nu and Anh relied on their intuition which led their teaching practices in ways that may diverge from the common knowledge of the field to some extent.

EFL teachers in Vietnam have been previously found not well-prepared to give feedback on pronunciation regarding the questions of which pronunciation errors to give feedback on and also how often to provide feedback (Phuong, 2022). Furthering those findings, the current study indicates that teachers

could also be struggling with the issue of how to give feedback on pronunciation. With the limited repertoire of feedback techniques being the main cause behind teachers' inadequate feedback provision, this study would inform English teacher-training program designers in Vietnam, and possibly similar EFL contexts, about the content that needs including to the existent syllabi to better prepare pre-service teachers in this aspect of English teaching. In-service teachers could also benefit from the findings hereby in the way that they could get more aware of the significant role of feedback provision and reflect on their use of different feedback techniques to better assist their students' pronunciation development.

In light of the findings, the suggestion is that teacher education should provide student teachers with a chance to be exposed to research in the field to raise their awareness of the prolonged efficacy of feedback on pronunciation (Li, 2010), even for beginning learners. Teacher education programs should also equip student teachers with the necessary pedagogical knowledge of how to give feedback on pronunciation. Several teachers in this study apparently benefited from observing classes of others who had more knowledge and/or experience. Therefore, professional development sessions which are followed by class observations and reflective sections would be clearly beneficial to in-service teachers to improve the effectiveness of their feedback on students' pronunciation.

The Author

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