Corrective Feedback in Classrooms at Different Proficiency Levels: A Case Study of Chinese as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study investigating the relationship between corrective feedback, students' language proficiency and classroom communication orientation in classrooms of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) at a US university. Inspired by Lyster and Mori (2006), this comparative analysis of teacher-student interaction investigates the immediate effects of prompt, recast, and explicit correction on learner uptake and repair across three different Chinese proficiency levels. By use of two measurement tools—Error Treatment Model and COLT coding scheme, the study attempts to seek the distribution pattern of feedbacks and the sequent uptakes, as well as the impact of learners' proficiency levels on the pattern of feedback and uptakes in CFL classrooms. Results show that recasts still remain the most common feedback type across the classes in this study. The uptake of feedback is influenced both by classroom communication orientation and the students' language proficiency.

Key words: corrective feedback, Chinese, communicative orientation, uptake

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in the role of corrective feedback in second language acquisition (SLA) in the last decade. Although studies on the roles of feedback in teaching and the functions of uptakes in learning have been quite active, a majority of them were conducted in the settings of European languages. An observation on the interactions in Chinese learning classrooms would undoubtedly provide meaningful data for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research.

In this study, three major types of communicative feedback were examined: explicit feedback, recasts and prompts. Explicit feedback is the correction of the error made by the student and the clear indication of the error provided by the instructor, as illustrated in (1), which comes from the data.

Student: 我 来 学 校 明天。

(wǒ lái xuéxiào míngtiān)

Instructor: 我 明 天 来 学校. The adverbial phrase precedes the verb.

(wǒ míngtiān lái xuéxiào)

Recasts are implicit reformulations of the incorrect forms in the student's utterance, as illustrated in (2) from the data.

Student: 北京 是 很 美。

(Beijing shì hěn měi).

Instructor: 北京 很 美。

(Beijing hěn měi)

Prompts are signals to push the student to correct the error himself/herself, as illustrated in (3) from the data.

Student: 我 不 看见 你的 中 文 书。

(wǒ bù kànjiàn nǐde zhōngwén shū)

Teacher: Can you say it again?

By examining the patterns of these three types of communication feedback provided by the instructors and the way the students responded to them, this paper attempts to find out:

1. The impact of learners' proficiency on the types of both feedback and uptake in the classrooms. Because of the limited number of the previous studies, the findings can serve as a guide for teachers to adopt appropriate feedbacks in order to match the students' proficiency levels.
2. The impact of the classrooms' communication orientation on the types of feedbacks in the classrooms. The Chinese writing system is based on logographic symbols. It poses tremendous difficulty for students with alphabetic language backgrounds. It has often been asked if the teachers in the Chinese classroom spend excessive time focusing on reading and writing in the classroom at the cost of ignoring speaking and listening. In order to answer this question, we take into account of the types and the amount of the classroom communicative activities in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985), and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 1995; 2001) provided theoretical support to the research on interactive communication in various situations. Corrective feedbacks are teachers' responses to the learner utterance that contains an error. In Lyster and Ranta's study (1997), corrective feedback is described as either negative or positive evidence provided by the instructor to the students who make an error in their utterance. The responses can consist of (1) an indication that the utterance has an error; (2) a reformulation of the sentences with error; (3) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006). Corrective feedback encourages not merely comprehensibility, but also learners' repair involving more accurate and precise production. In Lyster and Ranta' study (1997), learner uptake is defined as a student's utterance that immediately follows the teachers' feedback, and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspects of the student's initial utterance.

According to the Noticing Hypothesis, noticing is a necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake. Although no research has been done to find out whether explicit demonstration of uptake is an oral manifestation of noticing, it is reasonable to speculate that there are some noticed linguistic features involved in learners' uptake. For this reason, it is worthwhile to examine uptake as a possible indicator of language development (Suzuki, 2004).

Following these theoretical frameworks, a number of empirical studies have looked for different kinds of negative feedback produced in response to learners' non-standard utterances, including negotiation moves such as clarification requests and confirmation checks. Some observational studies probed into the occurrence and effect of negative feedback in L2 classroom. Among them Lyster and his colleagues' researches contribute substantially to the understanding in the area. Lyster and Ranta (1997) conducted a study in a Canadian immersion context. They noted that recasts were by far the most common type of feedback (55%), followed by elicitation (14%), clarification requests (11%) metalinguistic feedback (8%), explicit correction (7%), and repetition (5%). However, recasts were much less likely to lead to immediate self-correction by the students than are other feedback types.

Lyster (1998) further studied the same recorded lessons and found that the kinds of negatives feedback provided by the teachers were much more likely to respond to lexical errors with some kind of negotiation, while they typically responded to both grammatical and phonological errors with recasts. Similar evidence was offered by a study of a communicatively-oriented adult ESL classroom (Panova & Lyster, 2002) in which learners had been examined to find out which feedback types lead to the greatest amount of uptake. In the study, the researchers examined the range and types of feedback used by the teacher and their relationship to learner uptake and immediate repair of error. The database consisted of 10 hours of transcribed interaction, comprising 1,716 student turns and 1,641 teacher turns, coded in accordance with the categories identified in Lyster and Ranta's (1997) model of corrective discourse. The results revealed a clear preference for implicit types of reformulative feedback, namely, recasts and translation, leaving little opportunity for other feedback

types that encourage learner-generated repair. Consequently, rates of learner uptake and immediate repair of error were low in this classroom. These results were discussed in relation to the hypothesis that L2 learners might benefit more from retrieval and production processes than from only hearing target forms in the input.

The findings of the above studies showed that while recasts may offer valuable negative evidence, students were not necessarily under pressure to attend to them, at least in communicatively-oriented classroom settings. Lyster and his colleagues suggested that more corrective feedback modes may be more effective in pushing classroom learners to amend their hypotheses about L2 grammar and vocabulary. To test this hypothesis, Lyster and Mori (2006) conducted a study to compare the distribution of feedback type in two different instructional settings: Japanese immersion and French immersion. They found that pervasive type of feedback was recast regardless of the variations in the two classroom settings. Although the Japanese classes were far less communication-oriented with the total number of recast at 169, which was half less than the number of recasts in the French classes, recasts accounted for 65% and 54% in Japanese and French classes, respectively. Moreover, the frequency of recasts in the Japanese classroom was higher and students seemed more receptive to recasts. In the Japanese classes, 61% of students' uptakes followed the recasts, while in the French classes, 62% of the uptakes occurred after the prompts. Lyster and Mori attributed these results to the difference in the communicative orientations. Japanese immersion classrooms were more attentive to forms, which led to more recasts for correction. French classes, on the other hand, paid more attention to language functions, which led to the ambiguity of recasts in the class, that is, the students probably took the corrective functions of recasts as the pragmatic functions in the classroom interactions. Based on these findings, they proposedthe "counterbalance hypothesis", which supposed that L2 learners from a wide range of instructional settings were likely to benefit from a balanced provision of feedbacks.

There are only a few empirical studies on interactive feedback with Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). Li (2010) investigated the interactions between feedback type, proficiency, and the nature of the linguistic target in the learning of Chinese as a foreign language.

Seventy-eight learners from two large US universities participated in the study. The participants were divided into two proficiency levels based on their performance on a standardized proficiency test. At each proficiency level, they were randomly assigned to three feedback conditions: recasts, metalinguistic correction, and control. Learners in the experimental conditions received feedback on their non-target like use of classifiers and the perfective *-le*. Results revealed that for the perfective *-le*, recasts benefited the high-level but not low-level learners; at the high proficiency level, the effects of recasts were more sustainable than those of metalinguistic correction. With respect to classifiers, recasts were effective for learners at both proficiency levels. For both target structures, metalinguistic correction showed larger effects than recasts for the low-level learners, but the two feedback types were equally effective for the advanced learners. The results underscore the importance of taking an interactional approach to the investigation of corrective feedback. The results also undermine the commonly believed superiority of explicit feedback over implicit feedback.

Fu (2012) examined teacher feedback, learner uptake, and feedback perceptions in an adult CFL context. A 200-level Chinese reading course was observed for data collection. Participants included 13 students and one teacher. Thirteen class sessions (10 hours) were videotaped. A short survey, given at the end of each of the last six class sessions, was designed to elicit the teacher's and the students' perceptions of feedback frequency. Video-recorded data was fully transcribed and coded using Panova and Lyster's (2002) feedback categorization. The teacher's response to the survey was compared to that of the students' regarding perceptions of feedback frequency. The results showed that the teacher provided feedback to 68.1% of all students' errors. On average there was one feedback move every 2.4 minutes. All feedback types in Panova and Lyster's model were present, and there were a few new moves, namely "asking a direct question," "directing question to other students," and "using L1-English." A total of 245 teacher feedback moves occurred during the observation. Recasts accounted for 56.7% of all feedback moves, followed by metalinguistic feedback that accounted for 10.6%. Elicitation moves achieved the highest uptake rate (94.1%). Next, explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback had 88.9% and 53.8% uptake rate respectively.

Concerning perceptions of feedback, the teacher was more accurate in perceiving four types of feedback while the students were accurate about three. It was concluded that recast was the predominant type of feedback in this study. Other explicit types of feedback were more successful in leading to learner uptake. The teacher and the students were generally not accurate in perceiving the frequency of each feedback type, due to the challenge of remembering the feedback move after the lesson had finished.

Sung, Tsai, and Sung (2014) explored student errors, teachers' oral corrective feedbacks, learner uptake and repair, and learners' preferences on corrective feedback in a Chinese language classroom setting. The results showed that the two most frequently made errors were phonological and lexical, and that recasts were the most frequently used type of corrective feedback. They also found a statistical significance between the type of corrective feedback and learner repair in the beginner class. In addition, the majority of the beginner participants preferred recasts while the advanced participants had preferences more scattered among different types of corrective feedback. The participants' preferences on corrective feedback were influenced by their learning styles and beliefs, their proficiency levels, the nature of the Chinese language, and the differences between Chinese and their native language, English.

The above studies provided insightful information into the understanding of interactive feedback. However, there are still some questions unsolved. Some studies (Fu, 2012; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Sung et al., 2014) examined the corrective feedback in classroom settings, yet they did not examine if the students' proficiency level would influence the types of feedback teachers use and students' response to them. Li (2010) in his study examined the extent to which the learner noticed the reformulation of their errors in their inter-language grammar in an experimental context. Although he (2010) found that the learners' successful uptake of recast was related with their developmental levels in his experimental study, it has still remained a puzzle if the students' uptake to corrective feedback is linked to their proficiency levels in naturalistic classroom settings. It would be meaningful to examine the relation between the corrective feedback, the classroom communicative orientation and the learner's language

proficiency in the real classroom setting.

Research Questions

To address these issues, the current study utilized data from three classes at different proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced level. Four questions are addressed:

1. What is the distribution pattern of different types of corrective feedback in the elementary, intermediate, and advanced Chinese as Foreign Language classrooms?
2. What is the distribution of uptake and repair following different types of corrective feedback in the elementary, intermediate, and advance Chinese as Foreign Language classrooms?
3. What is the communicative orientation for each class of the three proficiency levels?
4. What is the relationship between the classroom communicative orientation, the distribution of feedback types, and the students' proficiency?

METHODOLOGY

Drawing upon the methods used by Lyster and Mori (2006) in their investigation of corrective feedback in French and Japanese classroom settings, the design of this study focuses on the methods examining the patterns of the interactional feedbacks and the communicative orientations of the classrooms.

Participants

Three Chinese classes at the different proficiency levels in an American university were involved in the study: one elementary, one intermediate and one advanced. The three instructors were native speakers of Chinese. The instructor for elementary classes was in his twenties, with 3 years of EFL teaching experience in Mainland China, but without prior CFL teaching experience. The teacher for intermediate class was in her thirties. The instructor for advanced class was in her fifties, with over thirty years of experience in teaching FL. Table 1 shows the background information of the instructors.

Table 1

Teachers' background information

Background	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Gender	male	female	female
Age	Late 20s	Late 30s	Late 50s
L1	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
Length of living in US	3 months	12 years	25 years
Proficiency in Chinese	Native speaker	Native speaker Native-like	Native speaker Nativelike
Proficiency in English	Native-like		
Teaching experience	3-year of EFL teaching experience	7 years of CFL teaching experience	12 years of CFL teaching experience

All the instructors in the Chinese Program at this university followed a coherent and consistent communicatively-oriented curriculum to design their syllabus and conduct classes. Pedagogical discussions and class observations were regularly held among instruction to ensure there was no noticeable difference in terms of teaching style as a result of gender or age. Therefore, the impact of the three instructors' age and gender on this study was minimal.

There were 22 students in the elementary class, 20 in the intermediate class, and 15 in the advanced class. The students in elementary level were beginners. The intermediate students had studied Chinese for one year or equivalent. And the advanced students had been learning Chinese for two academic years or equivalent. Table 2 shows the students' demographic information in these three classes. The heritage students here were the students of Chinese descent who had learnes some Chinese from their family background. Students from other countries included those from Singapore, Thailand and Fiji. The textbooks used by Elementary and Intermediate classes are *Chinese Link I* and *Chinese Link II* respectively. The advanced class used *A New Text for a Modern China* (2nd ed.) as their textbook.

Table 2

Students' demographic information

Class demographic	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Number of students	21	20	15
Number of Heritage students	4	6	10
Number of Korean students	8	7	2
Number of students of other origins	9	7	3

Instruments

One primary instrument for analysis is Lyster and Ranta's Error Treatment Model (1997), which is used to identify specific patterns of corrective feedback, uptake, and learner repair in classrooms. The error treatment sequence begins with a learner utterance that contains one or more errors, coded as grammatical, phonological or lexical. Topic continuation moves initiated by either students or the teacher can immediately follow learner utterances with error; so can feedback moves initiated by the teacher. The present study classifies feedback moves into explicit correction, recasts, and prompts.

Feedback moves can be followed either by topic continuation moves or by learner uptake, which refers to a student's immediate response to the teacher's feedback. Uptake includes two possibilities: repair or needs repair. Repair can occur in the following forms: learner-generated repair (i.e. self-repair or peer-repair) and repetition or incorporation of a teacher's reformulation. Prompts can be followed by either self-repair or peer-repair: the former produced by the student who initially made the error. Repetition follows only recasts and explicit correction because these feedback types include the target form, which can be repeated or incorporated in a longer utterance. The category of *needs repair* refers to an utterance in which the student responds to the teacher's feedback move in some way but the uptake has not resulted in repair. Altogether six subcategories were identified as needs repair: acknowledgement, same error, different error, off-target, hesitation, and partial repair.

Another instrument is Spada and Fronhlich's (Spada & Frohlich, 1995) communicative orientation to language teaching coding scheme (COLT) Part A used to identify instructional variables in different classrooms in the current study. COLT Part A allows us to assess the overall communicative orientation of each instructional setting and to provide explanatory support for any differences across settings with respect to observed patterns of corrective feedback. Part A is a description of classroom activities designed for use in coding data based on the audio recording of the classes observed. It records the pedagogic events as they occur and consists of a set of general

categories broken down into seven narrower sub-categories: time, activities and episodes, participant organization, content, content control, student modality, materials. *Time* refers to the period of time spent on the various activities. *Activities and episodes* are basic units for analysis marked by changes of categories of main features in COLT. *Participant organization* indicates the way the students were organized in a given activity. Some examples include class work, group work, and individual work. *Content* refers to subject matter/theme of the activity, i.e., what the teacher and students are talking or writing about. This category is used to measure the extent to which a focus is on meaning and/or form. *Content control* is the feature developed to describe the extent to which classrooms may vary along the dimension of encouraging students to negotiate methods, tasks, materials, and content of instruction. In other words, it refers to the topic or task. *Student modality* indicates whether students are listening, speaking, reading or writing, or whether these skills occur in combination. *Materials* describe the different types of materials used in the classroom. According to the COLT categories, classes which could be described as "more communicatively-oriented" are those in which teachers spend more time focusing on meaning and group work interaction. More communicatively-oriented classes are those in which teachers and students ask genuine questions and where students are given opportunities to use language in creative and unrestricted ways and participated in the negotiation of topics and tasks. Less communicatively-oriented classes, on the other hand, are those in which the instruction focused primarily on form and error and where teachers tend to ask questions to which they already know the answers and place restrictions on the variety of language forms that learners can produce.

Data Collection Procedure

Audio-recordings were the main source of data. The instructors were told separately to record 4 consecutive class periods. The class periods were 50 minutes for each. Altogether there were 10 hours (600 minutes) of recording. The recordings were transcribed and subject to analysis with the above-mentioned measurement tools.

Data Analysis

Data from the classrooms were analyzed by examining classroom interactions and communicative orientations. The digital recordings of four class periods across each level was transcribed, checked by two native Chinese speakers, and then coded with the two instruments.

Analysis of corrective feedback and uptake

The error treatment sequence identified in Lyster and Ranta (2006, p. 281) is the major tool for analyzing error treatment in classroom settings. Error treatment sequences that occurred in the three classrooms were identified in the transcripts and coded according to the coding categories. And the frequencies were counted and recorded.

Analysis of communication orientation

COLT Part A is used to assess the overall communicative orientation of each instructional setting and to provide explanatory support for any differences across settings with respect to observed patterns of feedbacks. It allows for observed pedagogical activities to be coded according to five main categories: participant organization, content, content control, student modality, and materials. Coding for Part A involves putting check marks into the right boxes under these five major features. In the cases which only one category was focused on, an exclusive check mark can be placed. In those instances which more than one category was checked, more than one check mark was to be entered. Such cases could be further described as primary or equal in focus. The former was when most of the time was spent on a particular category. In this case, a circle was drawn around the predominant feature. The latter was when almost the same amount of time and the same emphasis were spent on more than one category; here more than one check mark was used to indicate equal emphasis. Coding for all categories on Part A of the scheme was done after the recording has been finished, on the basis of transcription from audio recording.

RESULTS

Table 3 represents a comparison of the total number of student turns in each instructional setting, along with the number of student turns with error and student turns followed by feedback. The dataset for each class contains a similar number of students' turns: 390 for the elementary class, 325 for the intermediate class, and 430 for the advanced class. However, among these turns, the proportion of the student's errors in the total turns decline from the elementary class (35%, n = 390) through the intermediate class (28%, n = 90) to the advanced class (24%, n = 105). This means that the advanced students made fewer mistakes in terms of both ratio and number. Teachers in these three classes provided different proportions of feedback to the errors. Much larger proportion of feedback were provided in the elementary class (93%, n = 135) and 94% in the intermediate class (94%, n = 90), compared with the lower proportion of feedback in the advanced class (52%, n = 105). A large percentage of errors (48%, n = 105) was ignored by the teacher in the advanced class.

Table 3

Total student turns, turns with error, and turns followed by feedback

Student turns	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Total	390	325	430
With error	135	90	105
% of turns with error among the total turns	35%	28%	24%
Followed by feedback	125	85	55
% of turns with error followed by feedbacks	93%	94%	52%

Table 4 displays the number and percentage distribution of learner uptake moves following feedback. For the elementary class, altogether 61% of feedback provided by the teacher was responded with the students' uptakes, including the uptake that needed further repair. 39% of the feedback was ignored by the students and was not followed by any uptake. In the intermediate class, 86% of the feedback has been responded, although among these uptakes 16% still needed further repair. Only 14% of feedback was ignored. In the advanced class, 56% of the feedback was followed by uptakes, in which 11% still needed further repair. Similar to in the elementary class, 44% of the feedback were ignored by the students.

Table 4

Number and percentage distribution of learner uptake moves following feedback

	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
Move	n	%	n	%	n	%
Uptake						
Repair	50	40%	60	70%	25	45%
Needs repair	26	21%	13	16%	6	11%
No uptake	49	39%	12	14%	24	44%

Table 5 displays the number and percentage distribution of teacher feedback types. Although recasts stood as the largest proportions in all the levels, the exact proportions in each level were different. In the elementary class, only 44% of the feedback was recasts, followed by prompts (36%), and explicit corrections (20%). The overwhelming proportion of the intermediate class consisted of recasts: 84% of the feedback was recast, followed by explicit corrections (10%), and then prompts (6%). In the advanced class, recasts still accounted for 71% of all the feedbacks, followed by prompts (18%) and explicit corrections (11%).

Table 5

Number and percentage distribution of feedback types

	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
Feedback type	n	%	n	%	n	%
Prompts	45	36%	5	6%	10	18%
Recasts	56	44%	71	84%	39	71%
Explicit correction	24	20%	9	10%	6	11%

Table 6 presents the number and percentage distribution of repair moves after each feedback type. Despite the fact that recasts accounted for the largest portion in each level, it did not follow that recasts were most effective in eliciting students' uptake for each level. Although in elementary class and intermediate class, uptakes after recasts accounted for 52% and 85% respectively, in the advanced class, there was almost no uptake after recasts (3%). The largest proportion of the uptake occurred after explicit correction (63%) in the advanced class. Prompts were effective in eliciting uptake in the elementary class and the advanced class, with the proportions being 40% and 34% respectively. However, it is not true for the intermediate class, where prompts led to almost no uptake (3%). On the contrary, uptake after explicit correction accounted for 12% of total uptake moves in the intermediate class.

Table 6

Number and percentage distribution of repair moves after each feedback type

	Elementary		Intermediate		Advanced	
Uptake context	n	%	n	%	n	%
After prompts	31	40%	2	3%	11	34%
After recasts	40	52%	67	85%	1	3%
After explicit correction	6	8%	10	12%	20	63%

This section discusses the results of COLT analyses, which are presented in Table 7—Table 10. Table 7 shows that participant organization in three classes for the most part was structured around whole-class activities. This is more the case for the intermediate class and the advanced class, where the students were engaged in individual seat work all the time. In the elementary class, 22% of time was devoted to group work. Choral repetition is the only type of whole-class activity that was found in the elementary and intermediate class but not appeared in the advanced class.

Table 7

Participant organization (percentage distribution of total time)

Activity	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Whole class			
Teacher-led	54%	80%	98%
Student-led	3%	7%	2%
Choral	21%	13%	0%
Individual	0%	0%	0%
Group	22%	0%	0%

Table 8 reveals that classroom management, which involved either procedural directives or disciplinary statements, occupied about 5% or less in the three classes. Additionally, a focus on classroom management was found in combination with a thematic focus 4% of the time in the intermediate class. A primary focus on language comprised 58% and 45% in the elementary and intermediate class respectively, but only 7% in advanced class. A primary focus on subject-matter comprised 88% of the content in the advanced class. Integration with equal emphasis on language and thematic content comprised 19% of the content in the intermediate class.

Table 8

Content focus (percentage distribution of total time)

Content focus	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Management	3%	2%	5%
Language	58%	45%	7%
Thematic	39%	30%	88%
combinations			
Management + theme	0%	4%	0%
Language + theme	0%	19%	0%

Table 9 reveals only slight differences across the three levels with respect to content control, which was seldom in the hands of students and was, instead, governed for the most part by teacher and text, and only occasionally was in collaboration with students. In the elementary and intermediate class, only a small proportion of time were controlled by students when they took the initiative to ask questions concerning the language forms and the language content they did not understand.

Table 9

Content control (percentage distribution of total time)

Content control	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Teacher/text	90%	89%	96%
Teacher/text/student	7%	2%	4%
Students	3%	7%	0%

The breakdown of student modality in Table 10 shows that students in the three levels spent a significant proportion of their time engaged in various combinations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. Students in the elementary and intermediate class spent more time listening than did the students in the advanced class. However, the students in the advanced class spent more time on speaking. Oral activity coded in the three classes as speaking in isolation involved repetition (including choral repetition) and reading aloud. No reading, writing, or the combination of these activities was found across the levels.

Table 10

Student modality (percentage distribution of total time)

Student modality	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Listening	49%	57%	41%
Speaking	51%	43%	59%
Reading	0%	0%	0%
Writing	0%	0%	0%
Combination (reading aloud)	0%	0%	0%

The COLT findings confirm that the communicative orientation observed in the three classes integrated pedagogical features that varied from analytic to experiential. Students in three classes had almost no control over the content. However, in terms of content focus, the proportion of focus on language declines from 58% at the elementary level and 45% in the intermediate level to 7% at the advanced level. This means the advanced class was highly communication-oriented, whereas the elementary and intermediate focused more on form. Although both the elementary and intermediate classes attached much importance to language, the intermediate were less form-focused since 49% of the content in the intermediate are thematic or theme-related. The elementary class spent less time on thematic topic (39%), but more time on language forms. In addition, from Table 7, we can see that the 21% of class activity in the elementary class was choral repetition, a highly formed-focus activity which strongly indicated the less communicative nature of the elementary class.

DISCUSSION

To summarize and discuss the results that pertain to corrective feedback in three different proficiency levels, we return to our research questions. The first research question asked: what is the distribution of different types of corrective feedback in elementary, intermediate and advanced CFL classrooms? We found that recasts constituted the greatest proportion of feedback in three classes (45%, 82%, 73%), which conformed to Lyster and Mori's (2006) findings. As to prompts and explicit corrections, the distribution was slightly different. Although prompts took the second place in both the elementary class (36%) and advanced classes (18%), it was explicit correction that took the second place in the intermediate class (12%). Despite this slight deviation, the overall pattern of distribute was similar to what Lyster & Mori (2006) found: recasts > prompts > explicit corrections. Lyster & Mori (2002) offered four reasons for the popularity of recasts in classes: (a) provide positive or negative evidence, (b) maintain the flow of communication, (c) keep students attention focused on content, and (d) scaffold classroom learners as they communicate about subject matter that requires communicative abilities that exceed their current developmental level. These explanations seem also applicable to the CFL classrooms examined in this study. Despite the dominant role of recasts across the three levels, there was slight difference among the classes. While in the intermediate and advanced class recasts accounted for an overwhelming majority (82%, 73%), this type of feedback only shows a moderate advantage over prompts and explicit corrections in the elementary classroom (45%). The reason for such a discrepancy may be due to the students' different proficiency levels. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that recasts might be ambiguous to learners; that is, instead of perceiving recasts as containing corrective feedback, learners might see them simply as literal or semantic repetitions without any corrective element. This might be true particularly to the students in the elementary class, who, unlike those in the intermediate and advanced classes, were beginners, thus far less sensitive to recasts. Consequently, the teacher had to resort more to explicit feedback such as prompts and explicit correction even at the cost of sometimes breaking the flow of communication. In the elementary class, there was a substantial amount of time devoted to choral repetition. And the

teacher often repeated the some words or sentences in order to increase the amount of input to the students. This is a common phenomenon in many foreign language classrooms. Under such a circumstance, it would be difficult for the beginners to distinguish recast from mere repetition. It would be particularly difficult for them when the recast appeared in a form of a long sentence, because the beginners were constrained by their language level to notice the gap between their erroneous utterance and the teacher's reformulations (Philp, 2003). In addition, the elementary class was more form-focused. As shown from COLT, about 58% of class time focused on language rather than theme-related topics. Since one of its objectives was to train students on language forms, interruption with prompt or explicit correction did not appear abrupt in the elementary class. Contrary to the beginner's proficiency in the elementary class, the students in the intermediate class were more competent in distinguishing recasts from repetition, and they were more sensitive to their mistakes, which to some extent also encouraged the teacher to try more recasts. Feedback distribution in the advanced class was quite different from the two lower level classes. The advanced class attached more importance to communication and 88% of class time concentrated on theme or theme-related topics. The teacher often did not interrupt to deal with the language mistakes. Only 52% of error was followed by the teacher's feedback, compared with 93% in the elementary class and 94% in the intermediate class.

The second research question asked: what is the distribution of uptake and repair following different types of corrective feedback in elementary, intermediate and advance CFL classrooms? We found that recasts were effective in the elementary (with uptake rate at 53%), and to intermediate class in particular (with uptake rate at 87%). Proficiency levels mentioned above can explain why the intermediate class outperformed the elementary class in recognizing teacher feedback and responding with uptakes: the students were more sensitive to their own errors and more skilled in distinguishing recasts. Contrary to the effectiveness of recasts at the levels, recasts did not work so well in the advanced class. As a matter of fact, recasts seemed not to work at all in the advanced class. Despite the fact the teacher in the advanced class provided recasts frequently (71%), almost none of these recasts was responded by the students. The students did not

respond to the teacher's recasts with uptakes. Several reasons may account for the lack of uptake after recast in the advanced class. First, the advanced class was highly communicatively-oriented. The result of the COLT scheme indicates that 88% of class time dealt with theme-related topics. In such a classroom setting, the teacher favored recasts as feedback because recasts would not interfere with content communication. However, the students did not correct their errors immediately after the recasts, either because their error has been fossilized (and therefore resistant to correction), or because they do not bother to interrupt communication with uptakes. The second reason is that students may be confused with the ambiguity of recasts and took them as pragmatically redundant (Lyster, 2004). In the advanced class, explicit correction elicited most uptakes in ratio (67%), followed by prompts (33%). This suggests that the students would not pay much attention to the feedback until the teacher explicitly drew their attention to the mistakes.

The distribution of feedback types and the proportion of uptake after each type of feedback indicates that students' proficiency plays a role in the classroom interaction. There is a line between the elementary and intermediate class in terms of the effectiveness of recasts, indicating that higher proficiency may contribute to the students' ability of "noticing of the gap" between their interlanguage and the target language (Philp, 2003; Li, 2010), and their ability to respond to the recast appropriately.

However, the students' language proficiency alone does not tell the whole story. The communicative orientation of the classes should also be taken into account. Otherwise, it is impossible for us to explain why students in the advanced class failed to produce and uptake after recasts. When we examine the communicative orientation of these classrooms, it is fairly easy to see the relation between classroom communication orientation and the proportion of uptake following recasts. The advanced class is highly communicative, predominantly focused more on form content; therefore, the students' attention has been directed to content rather than the language forms. Even though the advanced students may have noticed the recasts, they might deliberately choose to skip the uptake so that they could maintain the communication flow.

The third research question was: what is the communicative orientation of each class at different proficiency level? It has been found from the COLT scheme that the elementary and intermediate class focused more in form, while the advanced class worked far more on semantic communication. Constrained by the students' proficiency levels and the pedagogical goals, the elementary class and the intermediate class focused more on forms rather than meaning. In addition, the teachers in these two classes provided corrective feedback to almost all of the mistakes (93% for the elementary, 94% for the intermediate). On the the other hand, nearly half of the mistakes were ignored by the teacher in the advanced class. And 88% of class time was dealing with theme-related topics.

Another interesting finding is that the three CFL classes did not spend time on reading or in the classroom. The Chinese writing system is orthographic, which drastically different from the alphabetic writing system in English. Reading and writing are notoriously difficult for most of the native speakers of English to learn. It was assumed that teachers would devote a huge amount of classroom time to tackling reading and writing. However, our findings do not support this assumption. Despite a seemingly deficient amount of time spent on literacy skills, the students in this study appeared to have developed level-appropriate reading and writing ability through the researcher's observation. This seems to suggest that communicative teaching style may also be effective in teaching a foreign language with a totally different writing system.

The last research question was: what is the relationship between the classroom communicative orientation and the corrective feedback in CFL classes? In Lyster and Mori's study (2006), it was found that recasts was least effective in the highly communication oriented classroom. Our study confirms Lyster and Mori's findings: in the advanced class which was highly communicative, recasts harvested almost no uptake. However, in the less communicatively focused classes—the intermediate and the elementary—our findings tell us a slightly different story, as the students' different proficiency levels play a role here. Although the intermediate class was more communication oriented than the elementary class, the students, owing to their higher language proficiency, were more apt to notice recasts and made

correspondent repairs. Despite the fact that the teacher in the intermediate class used more repetition (55 times) than the elementary teacher (9 times), the intermediate students were still more skillful than the elementary students at taking up the teacher's recasts from repetition. Therefore, although it does offer us substantial information about the distribution of the feedback type, the classroom communication alone cannot tell us the whole story. To get a complete picture of the distribution of corrective feedback and uptakes, the student's proficiency levels should also be taken into account.

There are some limitations in this study. First, there was only one instructor and one class at each proficiency level. Any idiosyncratic features of the teacher or the class may influence the generalization of the study. Second, error types were not looked into in the study, thus some important typological feature of Chinese might have been overlooked. Third, this is only a case study and that no inferential statistical measures were used to answer the research questions. We need to be aware of the limitations stemming from very limited statistical procedures.

In future studies, more classes and instructors should be included for generalization. In addition, an examination on the feedback types to different errors will bring insight to the unique features of Chinese language learning and teaching.

CONCLUSION

The paper began with a review of the corrective research, which led to the observation that corrective feedback that proves effective in one classroom setting may not be effective in another. In order to find out if students' proficiency influenced the distribution and effectiveness of feedback, three classes at elementary, intermediate, and advanced level have been examined and compared.

It was found that overall the teachers followed a similar pattern providing feedback to the students, with recasts taking the first place across the three levels, although the elementary level demonstrated more eliciting and explicit feedbacks. As the distribution of uptakes after each type of feedback, recasts worked effectively in the elementary and intermediate class, successfully eliciting a majority of

uptakes. The result is at odds with Lyster and Mori's study (2006), which claims that in the more communication oriented intermediate class, recasts should be less effective. However, the results show recasts did not take effect in the intermediate class as much as they did in the elementary class, although the intermediate class was more communicatively-oriented. The students' language proficiency explains the differences here. Compared with the elementary students, the intermediate students were more capable of recognizing and responding to the less conspicuous correction—recast. Thus we can conclude that in this study, both students' proficiency and the classroom communication orientation have impact on the distribution and proportion of feedback type and uptakes.

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