English Language Teachers' Corrective Feedback Types in relation to the Learners' Proficiency Levels and Their Error Types

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Abstract

This study investigates the possible relationship among L2 teachers' spoken corrective feedback types, the learners' proficiency levels, and their error types. The database comprises transcripts of 120 hours of naturalistic classroom interactions recorded from ten classes of five teachers (two classes per teacher, one intermediate and one advanced), totaling 1242 reactive focus on form episodes, known as corrective feedback. Chi-square analysis was used to analyze association between variables of this study in pairs (proficiency level and error types, proficiency level and corrective feedback types, error types and corrective feedback types). Statistically significant associations were revealed from the results of the analysis and also recasts were found to be the most widely employed corrective feedback types at both proficiency levels. Overall, the present study can have some insightful implications for the field of second language acquisition.

Keywords: Focus on form, Reactive focus on form episode, Corrective feedback, Recast, Marked recast, Unmarked recast

I.   Introduction

The history of second language teaching has witnessed changing perceptions of corrective feedback. The discussions on how error treatment should be given have developed in the field of second language acquisition (Chaudron, 1988; DeKeyser, 1993), giving birth to a great deal of theoretical and empirical research. The issues discussed include when, which, and how errors should be corrected, as well as whether learners' errors should be corrected at all. In other words, a big question mark is whether to provide learners with only positive evidence as nativists and rationalists believe or to expose them to negative evidence as well. Finally, the seminal works of Long in 1991 enriched the field and provided a rationale for "focus-on-form" (FonF) approach that can guarantee acquisition of linguistics elements. This line of research on form-focused instruction could shed light on the effectiveness of error correction in classroom interaction.

A. Focus on form (FonF)

Focus on form is based on a cognitive psychological theory proposed by Schmidt (1990, 1995) that noticing is necessary for input to become intake. Not only does focus on form provide

learners with opportunity to notice linguistic items, but it may also help them to "notice the gap" (Schmidt and Frota, 1986) between models of the target language and their own language production. Focus on form enables learners to take time out from a focus on meaning and notice linguistic items in input, thereby overcoming a potential obstacle of purely meaning-focused lessons in which linguistic forms may go unnoticed (Loewen, 2003).

B.Focus on form instruction (FFI)

Long and Robinson (1998) define Focus on form instruction as: during a meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features- by the teacher and/or one or more of the students- triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. Ellis (2001) categorized focus on form into *planned* (i.e., the teacher decides in advance what forms should be focused on), and *incidental* (i.e., the forms are focused on in the process of communication, peripherally, and then the focus returns to communicative activity again) focus on form.

Ellis et al. (2001b) define a *Focus on Form Episode (FFE)* as the unit of analysis in incidental focus on form studies. Each (FFE) includes "the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form". Incidental focus on form episodes are of two kinds; preemptive (PFFEs) and reactive (RFFEs) episodes (Ellis et al. 2001b).

According toEllis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001a), *preemptive focus on form* occurs when teacher or learner initiates attention to form "even though no actual problem in production has arisen". In *reactive focus on form*, the teacher perceives the learners' utterance as inaccurate or inappropriate and draws their attention to the problematic feature through negative feedback. So, reactive focus on form is known as error correction, corrective feedback, or negative evidence/feedback in different studies (Long, 1996).

Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) describe *corrective feedback* as follows: Corrective feedback (CF) takes the form of responses to learner utterances that contain error. The responses can consist of (a) an indication that an error has been committed, (b) provision of the correct target language form, or (c) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or any combination of these (p. 340).

Lyster&Ranta (1997) identified six different corrective feedback strategies: *explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic information, elicitation*, and *repetition*. All of these techniques are placed in an explicit-implicit continuum. Farrokhi (2005) also proposed a more

comprehensible and applicable classification of feedback types: *unmarked recasts*, *marked recasts,explicit correction*, and *negotiated feedback.*

C. L2 proficiency and CF

The second dimension of this study is to explore the relationship between the learners' proficiency level and the teachers' employed CF types. Proficiency in an L2 requires that learners acquire a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions, which caters to fluency, and a rule-based competence consisting of knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which caters to complexity and accuracy (Skehan, 1998).Evidence that proficiency level may affect teachers' choice of corrective feedback can be found in Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study. They reported that the teacher of the most advanced class tended to recast learner errors to a lesser degree than the other three teachers did.

D.Types of errors

When correcting learners' errors, it is paramount to identify the type of error the learners make because it is not always the case teachers want or need to correct everything. In setting up taxonomy of errors, many researchers have established their own category of errors. Lyster (1998), for example, distinguishes four main error types: *grammatical, lexical, phonological, and unsolicited use of L1*.

E. A Review of the Related Studies

The role of teacher reaction to learner errors has been seen as a legitimate object of a number of inquiries into classroom teaching and learning. Over the past two decades, a fruitful and often controversial line of research has evolved on teacher Corrective Feedback (CF) and its impact on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The notion that learners need to have their attention drown to formal aspects of the target language is discussed under different labels depending on the theoretical orientation of the researcher: negative evidence (White, 1989; Gass, 2003), focus on form (Ellis et al., 2001, 2002), corrective feedback (Lyster&Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998), negative feedback (Seedhouse, 1997; Williams, 2001), and noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 1995).

Most of the research on feedback has dealt with the role of corrective feedback in foreign and second language acquisition, or different types of corrective feedback received by learners and the extent to which this feedback is noticed, or uptaken, or both by learners.

Carroll and Swain (1993) investigated the effects of different types of negative feedback on the acquisition of the English dative alternation. The subjects (N=100) were divided into different groups according to the type of feedback they would receive upon making an error. The analysis of the data demonstrated that all treatment groups did significantly better than the control group. Implicit as well as explicit types of feedback were found to be beneficial, and both led to learning. Interestingly, giving explicit metalinguistic information was found to be more helpful than simply telling a learner that he or she made a mistake, or giving him or her the desired response.

Oliver (1995) explored the role of negative evidence in NS-NNS interactions. This study examined the pattern of interaction in child NS-NNS conversation to determine whether or not negative feedback existed, and whether or not NNSs incorporated such feedback into their subsequent production. The study focused on both forms and implicit feedback: recasts and negotiation strategies, including repetition, clarification requests, and comprehension checks. The results indicated that the child NS-NNS dyads interacted in a variety of ways, and that implicit negative feedback comprised a substantial proportion of the interaction. The analysis, moreover, showed that the type of the NNS error triggered the type of NS response. It was found that negotiations occurred in response to multiple errors, while recasts occurred in response to singular error. In other words, negotiations occurred to clarify meaning and recasts to correct form.

Using a database of L2 lessons from a variety of settings, Seedhouse (1997) analyzed CF in terms of the type of institution, type of class, level of learners' L2 proficiency, culture, country of origin and age of learner. Using a Conversation Analysis framework, he argues that teachers generally manifested a strong preference for non-threatening, mitigated, implicit feedback. There has been considerable interest in the relationship between types of corrective feedback and their efficacy.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigated the relationship between types of corrective feedback and learner uptake in a primary French immersion classroom. Four teachers provided corrective feedback on learner errors in speech production in 14 subject-matter lessons and 13 French language art lessons. Feedbacks were classified into six types: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. Learner uptake, a student utterance following the teacher's feedback, was also categorized into two types: repair and need-repair, or in other words, successful and unsuccessful responses.

The results revealed that the most frequent type of feedback was the recast. Moreover, the recast never led to student-generated repair; the learner merely repeated what the teacher had said. In contrast, elicitation and metalinguistic feedback were less frequent and were found to be effective in that they encouraged learners to generate repair.

Lyster (1998) further investigated the relationship among error types and corrective feedback in relation to immediate learner repair. The findings of this study revealed that the interaction between error type and feedback type was significant, confirming that error type affected choice of feedback.

To the best of our knowledge, there is not any comprehensive descriptive study investigating types of spoken errors and their frequencies across different proficiencies. Also, none of the previous studies take into account the relationship among different corrective feedback types, learners' proficiency level and the most frequent error types which occur in these levels. So, there is a need to investigate these issues which probably have a relationship with selecting specific feedback types by teachers. This work attempted to explore different types of teachers' corrective feedback relative to different types of learners' errors across two proficiency levels (intermediate & advanced).To meet these objectives, the following research questions were formulated.

1) Which types of L2 learners' spoken linguistic error types are corrected most frequently by their teachers across intermediate and advanced levels?

2) Do L2 teachers use different types of spoken corrective feedback for learners of different proficiency levels?

3) What types of learners' errors lead to what types of teachers' corrective feedback?

II.   Methods

Five teachers from three different language institutes located in the eastern Azarbaijan province of Iran took part in this study. Two of the teachers were males and three of them were females. One intermediate and one advanced class per teacher were selected and 9 sessions from each class (90 sessions, totally 120 hours) were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded and compared. A sample of 127 learners including 69 females and 58 males participated in this study. Their ages varied from 14 to 29 years. The classes ranged in size from 8 to 16 learners, so there were plenty

of opportunities for interaction in all classes. The teachers were not informed that the researcher intended to examine how they deal with their learners' non-target-like forms at these two levels. They were simply told that the study aimed at investigating general patterns of interaction between teachers and their learners. Besides considering these proficiency levels based on the institutes' criteria, a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was administered and the results of the test were taken as the researcher's criterion to guarantee homogeneity of the learners at the very levels they had been assigned to.

Due to the large amount of data, only episodes containing reactive focus on form were transcribed. To analyze data, the researcher first listened to the audio-recordings, identified and then transcribed reactive focus on form episodes (RFFEs).

A. Categories of analysis and data coding system

After RFFEs were identified, they were transcribed in detail and coded. According to the purposes of this study, the RFFEs were then classified as consisting of two main parts. The first part involves linguistic errors committed by the learners, and the second part includes the teachers' responses to the errors in the form of corrective feedback. The definitions of each of these two parts are presented in detail in this section.

a) First, the learners' linguistic errors were classified into four main types based on Lyster and Ranta's (1997) classification. The classification of error types was based on the following operational definitions:

Grammatical errors: determiners, prepositions, pronouns, word order, tense, auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, plurals, negation, question formation

*Lexical errors:*inaccurate choices and non-target derivations of lexical items in open classes-namely, nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, and incorrect use of prefixes and suffixes.

Phonological errors: suprasegmental and segmental aspects of the phonological system

Unsolicited uses of L1: students' use of Persian or Turkish when English would have been more appropriate and expected

b) Then, the corrective feedback employed by the teachers was classified into six types based on a combination of Farrokhi (2005) and Lyster&Ranta's (1997) classifications.

The categorization of various corrective feedback types was based on these operational definitions:

Unmarked recasts: (teacher's implicit corrective reformulation of student's non-target like form)

Marked recasts: (teacher's implicit corrective reformulation and highlighting or marking the reformulation)

Explicit correction: (teacher's direct treatment of students' non-target-like form by explanation, definition, examples, etc.)

Negotiated feedback: (teacher provides students with signals to facilitate peer- and self-correction).

Clarification request: (carries questions indicating that the utterance has been ill-formed or misunderstood and that a reformulation or a repetition is required).

Elicitation: (a correction technique that prompts the learner to self-correct through request for reformulations of an ill-formed utterance, the use of open questions, or use of strategic pauses to allow a learner to complete an utterance).

Once the data were categorized as described above, raw frequencies and percentages of RFFEs were calculated and then Pearson's chi-square analysis was performed on the raw frequencies. In order to determine inter-rater reliability of RFFEs identification, a second rater coded a sample of 10% of the data independently. Analysis of the coding presented 87% agreement.

III. Results and Analysis

The results are reported in three sections using different tables and figures as follows: First, the relationship between the learners' proficiency levels and their linguistic error types are presented. Second, the relationship between the learners' proficiency levels and the teachers' corrective feedback types are reported. Third, the relationship between the learners' error types and the teachers' corrective feedback types are mentioned.

A. Error types across proficiencies

The frequency distribution of error types in the entire database appears in table 1. A total of 1242 error turns were identified in 120 hours of meaning-focused lessons, 680 (54.7%) and 562 (45.4%) at intermediate and advanced levels respectively. It means that each RFFE occurred at a rate of every 5.7 minutes. The relatively low incidence of focus on form in this EFL setting may imply that meaning received primary attention in these classes and the teachers opted less frequently to interrupt an ongoing communicatively-oriented activity.

TABLE I

FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF ERROR TYPES ACROSS PROFICIENCY LEVELS (ALL TEACHERS)

Error type / Proficiency	L1	Phonological	Lexical	Grammatical	Row total
Intermediate	14.7%(100)*	46.2%(314)	18.8%(128)	20.3%(138)	100%(680)
Advanced	1.1%(6)	12.8%(72)	39.9%(224)	46.3%(260)	100%(562)

*Note: Numbers in parentheses show the row frequencies.

The percentages of error types committed by intermediate learners are as follows: 14.7% were L1, 46.2% were phonological errors, 18.8% were lexical errors, and 20.3% were grammatical**.** So, phonological errors were the most frequent error type at this level.The percentages of error types at advanced level show a different pattern, comparing with those at intermediate level. Grammatical errors accounting for 46.3% were mostly occurred at advanced level. And lexical errors, with 6.4% discrepancy, had the second highest percentage (39.9%). Figure 1 displays an even more obvious picture of the percentage of errors.
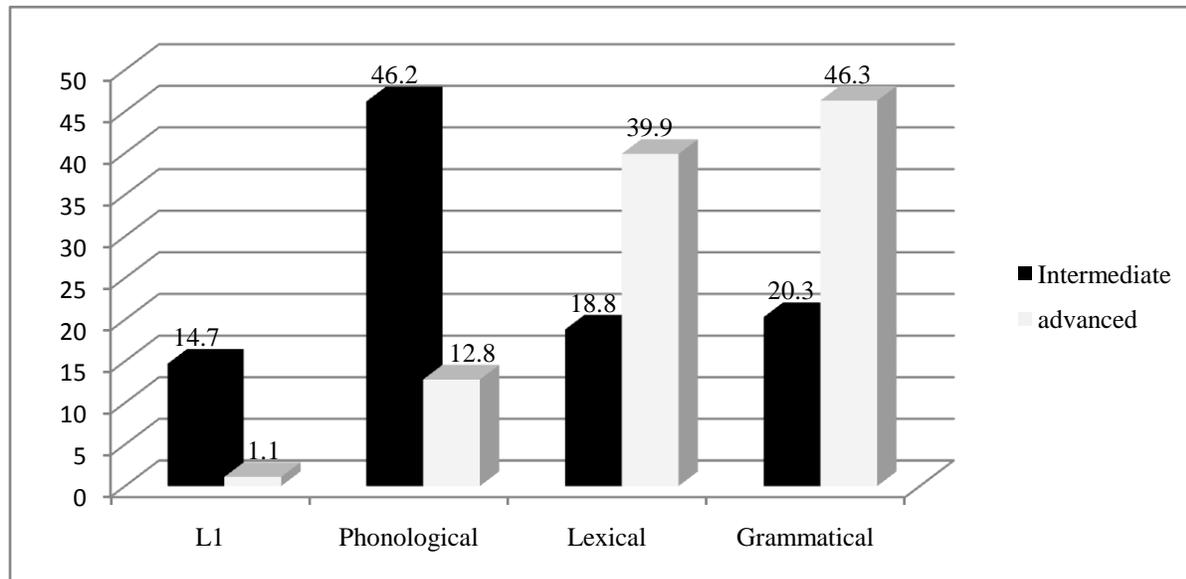
Figure. 1. Percentage of error types across proficiency levels (All Teachers)

In order to find out whether there was a statistically significant association between learners' proficiency level and their error types, the chi-square test was used. The results (χ^2 =2.90, *df* = 3, p< .05) revealed that the association between the variables was statistically significant. This suggests that learners of different proficiencies committed different types of errors.

B. Corrective feedback types across proficiencies

Table 2 reveals the distribution of different feedback moves employed by teachers at both proficiencies, and figure 2 displays the percentagesgraphically.In general 680 (54.7%) instances of RFFEs occurred at intermediate classes, while there were 562 (45.2%) instances at advanced classes. As can be seen in the table 2 and figure 2, marked recasts accounting for almost two-thirds (70%) of all CF moves were the most widely used CF for intermediate learners. And unmarked recasts (63.3%) were favored to be employed more than other corrective feedback types for advanced learners. This might lie in the implicit nature of unmarked recasts. As the definition clarifies, unmarked recasts, in comparison with marked ones, do not highlight the learner's non-target-like form. So, unmarked recasts risk being ambiguously perceived by intermediate learners as alternative forms fulfilling discourse functions other than corrective ones.

TABLE II

FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF FEEDBACK TYPES ACROSS PROFICIENCY
LEVELS (ALL TEACHERS)

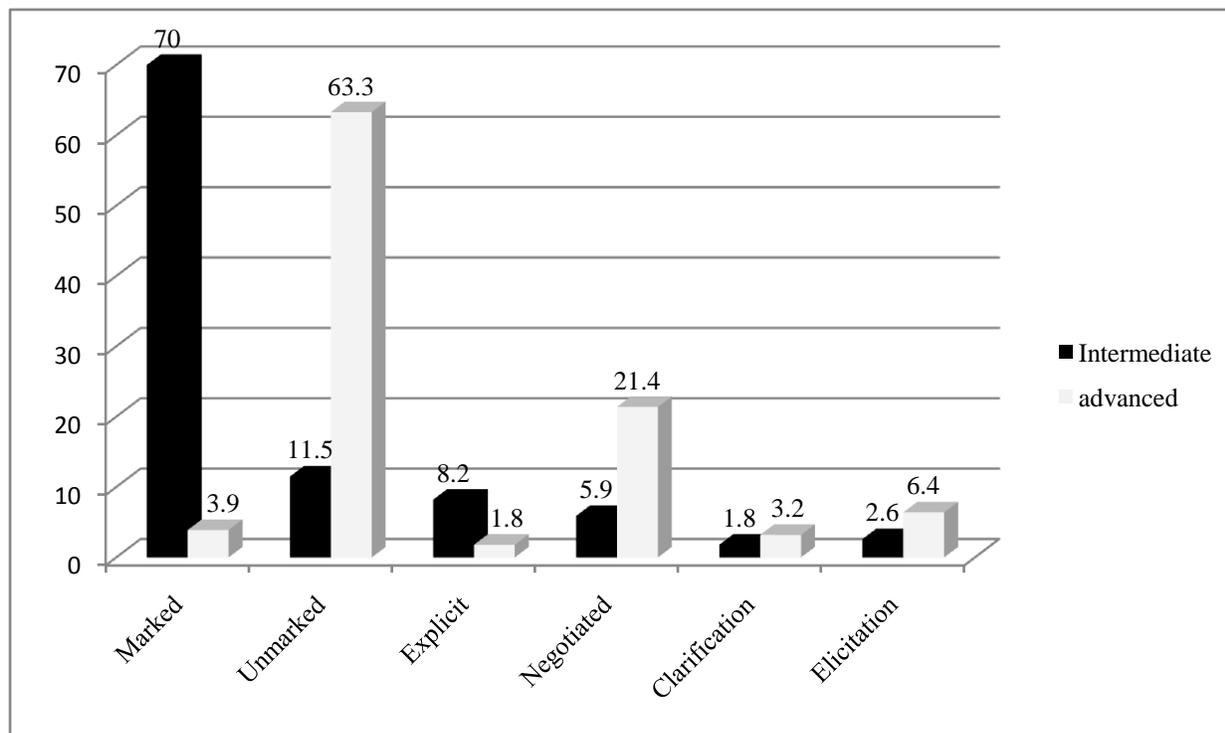| CF type / Proficiency	Marked	Unmarked	Explicit	Negotiated	Clarification	Elicitation	Row total
Intermediate	70%(476)	11.5%(78)	8.2%(56)	5.9%(40)	1.8%(12)	2.6%(18)	100%(680)
advanced	3.9%(22)	63.3%(356)	1.8%(10)	21.4%(120)	3.2%(18)	6.4%(36)	100%(562)

Figure. 2. Percentage of feedback types across proficiency levels (All Teachers)

The results (χ^2 =6.66, *df* = 5, p< .05) indicated a statistically significant association. It means that all the teachers employed different types of corrective feedback for learners of different proficiencies.

C. Relationship between error types and corrective feedback types

A comparison of the distribution of CF types across different error types appears in table 3. Unsolicited uses of L1 invited mostly marked recasts (94.3%). Other types of corrective feedback following L1 errors accounted only for 5.7% of all CF turns. Similarly, phonological errors were mostly followed by marked recasts (63.7%). The second CF type following phonological errors was unmarked recast, accounting for 19.5%. Other four types of CF have very low percentages. Lexical errors were corrected mostly using unmarked recasts which accounted for almost half (50.8%) of the total number of CF. They were secondly followed by marked recasts (22.3%). The third and fourth CF types used to treat lexical errors were negotiated feedback (10.6%) and explicit correction (8.4%) respectively. Clarification request and elicitation following lexical errors totally account for 7.8% of all FC types. And finally, grammatical errors mostly favored unmarked recasts (44.2%). Negotiated feedbacks, accounting

for 27.1% and marked recasts, accounting for 18.1%, were the second and third type of corrective feedback following grammatical errors. Other three CF types totally accounts for 10.5% of the total number of CFs.

TABLE III

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ERROR TYPES & FEEDBACK TYPES

CF type / Error type	MR	UR	EX	NF	CR	EL	Row total
L1	94.3%(100)	1.9% (2)	0%(0)	0%(0)	0%(0)	3.8%(4)	(106)
Phonological	63.7%(142)	19.5%(74)	5.3%(20)	2.6%(10)	4.2%(16)	4.7%(18)	(380)
Lexical	22.3% (80)	50.8%(182)	8.4%(30)	10.6% (38)	2.8%(10)	5%(18)	(358)
Grammatical	18.1% (72)	44.2%(176)	5%(20)	27.1%(108)	1%(4)	4.5%(18)	(398)

Note: MR stands for marked recast, UR for unmarked recast, EX for explicit correction, NF for negotiated feedback, CR for clarification request, and EL for elicitation.

Figure 3 illustrates a clearer picture of the relationship between learners' error types and teachers' CF types. As the findings suggest, the five teachers provided corrective feedback consistently. It means that the teachers' correction of learners' errors showed some degree of systematicity in that they tended to select feedback types in accordance with error types: namely, marked recasts after unsolicited uses of L1 and phonological errors and unmarked recasts after lexical and grammatical errors.
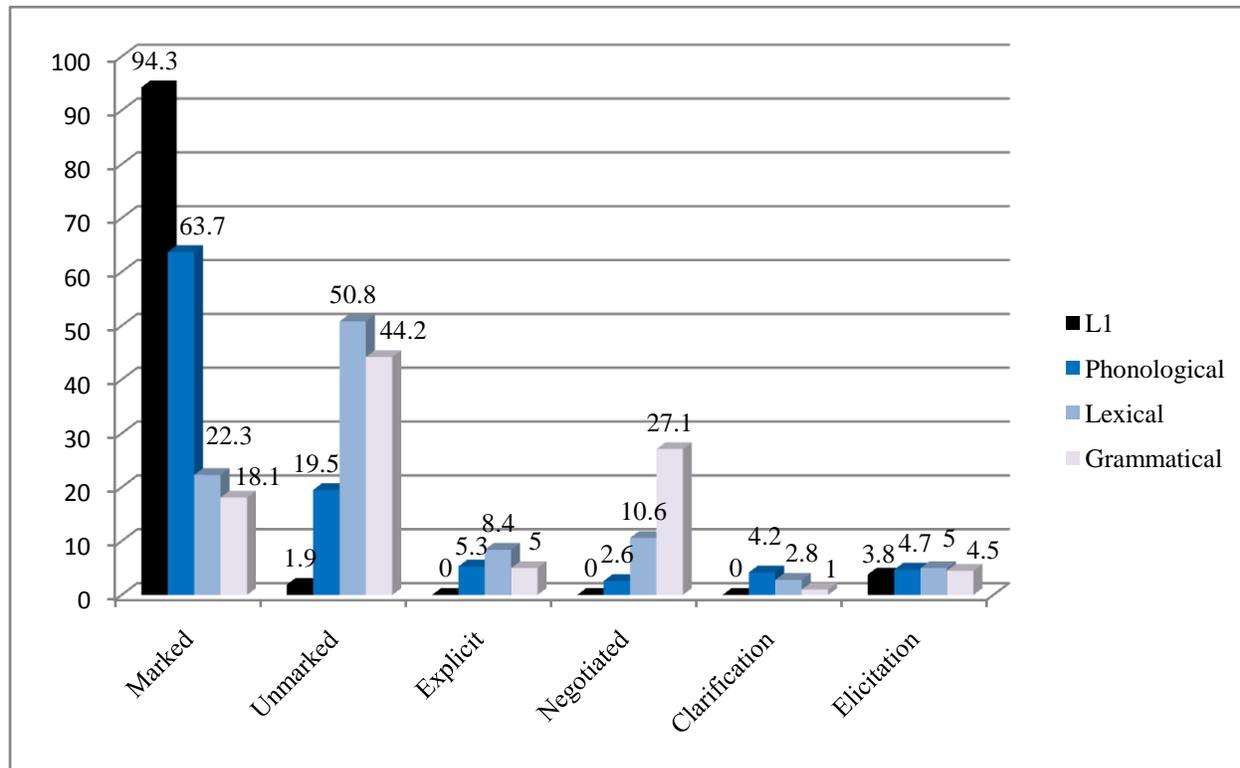
Figure. 3. Relationship between error types & feedback types

According to the results of chi-square test (χ^2 =4.37, *df* = 15, p< .05), the interaction between error types and CF types were statistically significant, confirming that learners' error types affected teachers' choice of CF types.

IV.   Conclusion

It might be concluded that there might be no one single way of treating learners' errors. A variety of factors such as context of instruction, learners' factors like age and developmental readiness, and also learners' error types can affect the teacher's choice of corrective feedback types. This study provides support for the incorporation of focus on form into the context of meaning-focused instruction. From the pedagogical point of view, the findings of the present study can complement SLA research by helping to create a broader understanding of focus on form instruction. It also provides insights for teacher education programs to equip would be language teachers with the knowledge of different types of reactive focus on form techniques, especially the implicit ones which keep the communicative nature of the language classes. Focus on form techniques make L2 learners notice the gap between their erroneous utterance and the target form

and provide them with more learning opportunities, therefore, it would be reasonable to allocate some time to the training of teachers in this regard.

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