

# **CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON ARABIC PRONUNCIATION: TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

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Pronunciation research has recently focused on investigating teacher beliefs and classroom practices of English and other language instructors. Yet few studies have explored teacher beliefs about pronunciation feedback for learners of Semitic languages. This study aimed to explore Arabic teacher cognitions of corrective feedback (CF) on pronunciation errors and their classroom practices. Data were collected from teachers of Arabic using two different tasks: semi-structured interviews (n=10) and classroom observations (n=5). The results demonstrated that all teachers believed in the significance of CF in improving the comprehensibility of learners' speech. Observations also showed that teachers used both explicit and implicit feedback techniques such as explicit metalinguistic information, and implicit recast to correct learners' pronunciation of individual phonemes. Comparing teachers' stated beliefs and teaching practices revealed some differences that reflect teachers' relative lack of awareness of the amount and types of CF they tend to provide.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Exploring second language teacher cognition (SLTC) regarding language instruction and how teacher beliefs and knowledge are related to their teaching practices have been the focus of second language (L2) research for decades (Borg, 2003; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Yoshida, 2010). Previous L2 research studies indicate that such investigations are important for several reasons. First, they display insights into teachers' pedagogical beliefs which consequently influence their actual teaching practices (Borg, 2015). Second, examining teacher cognitions about classroom teaching informs curriculum designers, researchers, and practitioners. For Johnson (2018), for example, teacher beliefs are "the unobservable or hidden side of language teaching" that could help in improving teacher training and professional development programs and through which they learn how to teach a second language effectively (p. 259). Third, SLTC research reveals how teacher cognitions are developed. Due to its significance, L2 research has examined teacher cognitions of different language skills including grammar (Borg & Burns, 2008; Graus & Coppen, 2018; Sato & Oyanedel, 2019), vocabulary (Gao & Ma, 2011), pronunciation (Shehata, 2017), learner autonomy (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019), and intercultural teaching (Oranje & Smith, 2018). Importantly, some have expressed a need for more research into SLTC about unplanned aspects of teaching such as feedback (Basturkmen, 2012). In this regard, very little is known about teachers' beliefs regarding Corrective Feedback (CF) on pronunciation teaching and how their beliefs related to their actual teaching practices.

### **Teacher Beliefs about Corrective Feedback**

CF is referred to as teachers' responses to learners' erroneous productions of the target language that can be provided orally or in written forms (Ellis, 2009). According to Chaudron (1988), CF is defined

as “any teacher behavior following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error” (p. 150). It has become an important topic in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) over the past several decades and has triggered descriptive and experimental research studies that have addressed a variety of issues. Some CF research studies have examined the impact of teachers’ CF behavior on learners’ linguistic outcomes. Polio (2012), for instance, finds that CF enables learners to monitor their errors and avoid turning wrong information into inaccurate procedural knowledge. Bitchener (2012) also notes that CF is a valuable tool that provides learners with an opportunity to practice the target language. In addition, Hattie and Timperley (2007) add that CF is “one of the most powerful influences on learning, occurs too rarely, and needs to be more fully researched by qualitatively investigating how feedback works in the classroom and learning process” (p. 104). To have positive effects, however, “there must be a learning context to which feedback is addressed” (p. 82). Other CF studies have explored different types of CF. In this respect, Ranta and Lyster (2007) classify CF into two main categories: reformulations and prompts. Whereas reformulations include explicit correction and recasts, prompts include various signals that encourage learners to self correct such as repetition, elicitation, clarification requests and metalinguistic clues. A similar classification is provided by Sheen and Ellis (2011) who explained the differences between explicit and implicit CF (See Table 1 below).

**Table 1**

*CF Types adapted from Ranta & Lyster (2007); Sheen & Ellis (2011)*

	Implicit	Explicit
<u>Reformulations</u>	<u>Conversational recasts</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a reformulation of a student utterance in an attempt to resolve a communication breakdown</li> <li>• often take the form of confirmation checks</li> </ul>	<u>Didactic recasts</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a reformulation of a student utterance in the absence of a communication problem</li> </ul> <u>Explicit correction</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a reformulation of a student utterance plus a clear indication of an error</li> </ul> <u>Explicit correction with metalinguistic explanation</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in addition to signalling an error and providing the correct form, there is also a metalinguistic comment</li> </ul>
<u>Prompts</u>	<u>Repetition</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a verbatim repetition of a student utterance, often with adjusted intonation to highlight the error</li> </ul> <u>Clarification request</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a phrase such as ‘Pardon?’ and ‘I don’t understand’ following a student utterance to indirectly signal an error</li> </ul>	<u>Metalinguistic clue</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a brief metalinguistic statement aimed at eliciting a self-correction from the student</li> </ul> <u>Elicitation</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• directly elicits a self-correction from the student, often in the form of a wh-question</li> </ul> <u>Paralinguistic signal</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an attempt to non-verbally elicit the correct form from the learner</li> </ul>

Previous CF research has compared teachers' beliefs to actual classroom practices, but shows inconsistent results. Lyster and Ranta (1997), for instance, reported that teachers in French immersion classrooms in Canada preferred using recasts more than the other types of CF. In contrast, Sheen (2004) found teachers used different types of CF in four teaching settings: Canada French

immersion, Canada English as a second language (ESL), New Zealand ESL and Korean English as a foreign language (EFL). While explicit correction was frequently used in New Zealand ESL classes, it was rarely used in Canadian ESL classes. Furthermore, the two teachers in Basturkmen, Loewen and Ellis's (2004) study stated that they preferred not to correct learners' errors during communicative activities, but their actual teaching practice of CF did not align with their stated belief. Moreover, the teachers stated that they favored prompts, but they used recasts. The same mismatch between reported strategies and actual practice was observed for 10 pre-service ESL teachers in Kartchava's (2006) study. The teachers stated that they would mainly use recasts to correct all learners' errors; however, class observations indicated their tendency to correct fewer errors than they said they did.

In contrast, greater consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding CF was reported in other studies. Dong (2012), for instance, found that teachers preferred to use implicit CF and they were observed to use recasts. In a similar vein, other studies revealed that teachers' beliefs and practices matched in terms of CF techniques (e.g., Dilans, 2016), the least used feedback strategies - i.e., prompts- (e.g., Bao, 2018), and the amount of CF given (e.g., Olmezer-Ozturk, 2019). More recently, Kartchava et al. (2020) compared teachers' beliefs about oral CF with their actual teaching practices. To this end, 99 pre-service ESL teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their teaching beliefs and 10 of them were observed teaching an ESL class. Results demonstrated consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the CF techniques. However, teachers tended to correct fewer errors than they believed.

Additionally, teachers' experience was found to influence their beliefs about CF. Classroom observation, for example, in Junqueira and Kim's (2013) study displayed the impact of teacher experiences on their use of CF. While a novice teacher mainly used implicit CF including recasts and clarification requests, an experienced teacher used various implicit and explicit CF. Similarly, Rahimi and Zhang (2015) found a difference between experienced and novice teachers regarding CF. Whereas novice teachers did not favor explicit CF, experienced teachers were more positive about CF and preferred using a balanced approach of explicit and implicit CF.

Taken together, these findings emphasize the important role of teaching experience in shaping teachers' beliefs and the mixed findings regarding teachers' beliefs about CF and their classroom practices, which show the need for further research in this regard.

### **Corrective Feedback and Pronunciation Instruction**

In pronunciation pedagogy, the role of CFs is still not fully understood (Baker, 2014). Some empirical inquiries have found that CF plays a positive role in improving language learners' pronunciation as it draws learners' attention to the mispronounced aspects of the target language which facilitates acquisition (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Lee, et al., 2015). One of the earliest studies to consider in this regard is Sifakis and Sougari (2005). In their study, secondary school teachers provided less CF with an emphasis on pronunciation than did primary school teachers. However, their findings were based on teachers' stated beliefs and were not confirmed by their classroom practices, which previous research suggests could differ (e.g., Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004). Moreover, Saito and Lyster (2012) examined the role of CF in pronunciation instruction. More specifically, they explored the production of the English /r/ by 65 Japanese learners of English in three experimental groups. The results revealed that the group who received pronunciation instruction along with meaning-based instruction and pronunciation feedback performed better than the group who only received meaning-based instruction. Thus, using form-focused instruction along with CF positively affected the pronunciation development of Japanese learners of English.

Furthermore, Dalska and Krekeler (2013) investigated the impact of CF on the comprehensibility of speech production by 169 learners of German who were divided into two groups. One group listened only to recordings of their own pronunciation of utterances in addition to the teacher's model pronunciation and the second group listened to the same listening activities as well as an explicit individual CF from the teacher. Using a pre-and post-test design, it was found that the speech of learners who were exposed to both CF and listening activities was more comprehensible than their counterparts in the other group. CF was reported to be "a significantly more effective training tool for improving comprehensibility of L2 speech than listening-only activities" (p. 33). Additionally, Gooch et al. (2016) examined the effects of two CF types (i.e., prompts and recasts) on the pronunciation development of the English /ɪ/ by 22 Korean EFL learners who were divided into three groups: form-focused instruction (FFI) only, FFI-recasts and FFI-prompts. Using both controlled and spontaneous tests to measure learners' production, findings indicated that prompts were more effective than recasts in improving learners' production of the English /ɪ/. While recasts helped learners improve the controlled production of /ɪ/, prompts facilitated both the spontaneous and controlled production of /ɪ/. Similarly, Lee and Lyster (2017) explored the influence of CF types on the speech production of L2 learners. To this end, they assigned 100 Korean learners of English to five groups: a control group with no CF and four distinct CF treatments. The results showed a positive role of CF types in improving learners' production of the target English vowels (i.e., /i/-/ɪ/ and /ɛ/-/æ/).

With respect to the Arabic language, little is known about pronunciation instruction and teachers' beliefs regarding classroom practices (Shehata, 2015). While a few studies have investigated teachers' beliefs about Arabic pronunciation instruction (Shehata, 2017) and the difficulties faced by native English speakers (Al Mahmoud, 2013; Shehata, 2018), the data does not seem to address CF in relation to pronunciation. In sum, few studies have focused on teachers' feedback practices (Lee, 2014) in general and within the realm of pronunciation teaching in particular (Baker, 2014). To my knowledge, moreover, no previous studies have explored the role of CF in learners' pronunciation of Arabic. Furthermore, we still know very little about teachers' cognitions and practices of CF regarding pronunciation teaching in the L2 Arabic context (Shehata, 2017). Informed by the multi-dimensional perspective of feedback and its positive impact on L2 learners, this study aims to investigate the beliefs about CF on pronunciation as well as the classroom practices of experienced Arabic language teachers. It is guided by the following two research questions:

1. What do experienced teachers of Arabic believe about providing feedback on learner pronunciation?
2. Do experienced teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback on learner pronunciation match their practices?

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

The data reported in the present study were collected from 10 teachers of Arabic who were recruited from three different universities in the United States, two public universities (n=8) and one private university (n=2); they represented a range of experience (from five to more than 10 years), and qualifications (from a BA to a PhD). While eight participants were native Arabic speakers, the other two were native English speakers who were experienced instructors of Arabic. All participants were teaching various levels of the Arabic language at the undergraduate level using different parts of the

*Al-kitaab fii ta'allum al-'arabiyya* textbook (Brustad, Al-Batal & Al-Tonsi, 2011; 2013a; 2013b). While the beginner classes met for 50 minutes four times a week, the intermediate classes met for 60 minutes three times a week. The advanced classes met twice a week for 75 minutes. All teachers were interviewed, but only five volunteered to provide content and to be observed while teaching.

### Data Collection Instruments

Two sets of instruments were used in the present study (i.e., interviews and classroom observations) that are described in the following lines.

#### a. *Semi-structured interviews*

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic and English during week two and week 14. The first interview focused on discussing pronunciation-focused CF including what learners' pronunciation errors they tended to correct, when and how often they provided CF, and their typical CF practices. In the second interview teachers discussed their beliefs about successful ways of providing pronunciation CF. Finally, teachers were asked if they had any other comments they would like to share. Each interview lasted for 30-40 minutes and was recorded (See Appendix A).

#### b. *Classroom observations*

To complement these data, some of the teachers (n=5) who were teaching five different levels of Arabic were observed as indicated in Table 2 below. Whereas three of the observed teachers were native speakers of Arabic who held a Master's degree in applied linguistics and/ or TESOL, the other two were PhD holders who were nonnative speakers of Arabic. Each teacher was observed four times: two consecutive classes in week 3 and two consecutive classes in week 13. To document classroom interaction and teachers' CF practice, all observations were video recorded for transcription and later analysis.

**Table 2**

*Information about the Observed Teachers*

Teacher	Gender	First language	Years of experience	Class Level	Number of Students
Nusiba*	F	Arabic	11	Beginner	22
Ziad	M	Arabic	9	High beginner	17
James	M	English	7	intermediate	16
Joan	F	English	8	Low Intermediate	15
Noura	F	Arabic	10	Advanced	12

\* pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy

## **Procedures**

A number of teachers in the eastern part of the United States were invited to participate in the present study via e-mail but only ten agreed to participate. The data were collected over the course of a semester in which all teachers were interviewed twice via Zoom on Week 2 and Week 14. Moreover, four classroom observations were conducted for only five teachers who agreed to have their classes observed: two consecutive classes in Week 3 and two consecutive classes in Week 13.

## **Data Analysis**

A trained teaching assistant initially transcribed and coded all data from semi-structured interviews and class observations categorizing them into major themes including what pronunciation errors teachers tended to correct, how teachers corrected them, the timing of corrections, and reasons for paying attention or disregarding errors. Then the researcher coded the same data again and any differences in coding were negotiated between the two raters who finally agreed on a single final code. Inter-rater reliability was calculated to be 95%.

## **RESULTS**

Research question one asked about experienced teachers' beliefs regarding CF on pronunciation errors. In the two semi-structured interviews, all teachers asserted the significance of giving feedback on pronunciation errors that positively affected learners' oral performance. In this respect, teachers indicated that they tended to correct learners' wrong pronunciation of individual sounds, stress, and intonation using both implicit (60%) and explicit feedback (40%). In general, different techniques were used such as implicit recasts, repetition, prompts (i.e., repeating incorrectly said words with a question tone), word comparison (i.e., comparing the problem word with a more familiar one to better show the target sound), and elicitation (which involves asking questions or partially repeating students' responses to encourage them to provide the correct form) as shown in Table 2. The most frequent type of feedback reported was repetition followed by recast which teachers believed to be the most successful one. Yet two teachers (i.e., Ezz and Noura) reported knowing only one type of CF, i.e., repetition, that they tended to use frequently. Teachers' responses differed regarding the amount of errors they corrected, and the correction rate ranged from 10.2% to 71% with a mean rate of 45%; furthermore, 70% emphasized encouraging students to self-correct the error. Although teachers believed in the importance of peer correction, only four emphasized using it in correcting students' pronunciation errors. It was also reported that this correction process typically took up about 10% of class time.

Regarding the timing of corrections, teachers' answers demonstrated their use of different techniques. While seven teachers reported using immediate feedback to correct learners' common errors, three teachers preferred to wait for a quiet moment to provide individual or group correction to learners working in groups. In addition, most teachers expressed their reluctance to correct all learners' pronunciation errors preferring instead to only correct errors that impeded communication. For example, Joan noted, "our main objective as teachers of Arabic is not to help students speak like native speakers but to help them speak intelligibly and be able to communicate successfully". The same idea is emphasized by Faris who said "In our program, we aim at fluency rather than accuracy and therefore I tend not to interrupt students' speech to correct every single error. Instead, I collect common errors and anonymously correct them later". In other words, although all teachers believed

in the positive effect of CF, they expressed concerns about interrupting students and evoking negative responses.

**Table 3**  
*Categories of Corrective Feedback Reported in the Semi-interviews*

Teacher	Recast	Repetition	Prompt Peer Correction	Compare Words	Elicitation
Seif	x	x	x	x	
Shyma	x	x	x	x	
Sameh	x	x	x		x
Laila	x	x			x
Ezz		x			
Nusiba	x	x		x	
Ziad	x	x	x	x	
James	x	x			
Joan		x	x		x
Noura		x			

The second research question asked how experienced teachers' beliefs about CF on students' pronunciation matched their teaching practices. The results showed that teachers used a combination of explicit and implicit feedback techniques primarily focused on correcting learners' pronunciation of individual phonemes such as /h/ and /s/. In this respect, seven types of CF were identified including two more categories than those reported in the interviews (see Table 4). That is, teachers used explicit approaches including breaking each of the target words into individual phonemes and syllables as well as the prompt self-correction technique. In agreement with the interview data teachers only corrected pronunciation errors that disrupted communication. Recasts were found to be the most frequently used CF technique (46.6%) and prompt self-correction was the least used one (6.25%). Unlike the interview data, however, the correction rate of errors ranged between 44% to 70.8%, and all teachers tended to use immediate feedback.

**Table 4**  
*Amount and Types of Corrective Feedback Provided by Teachers in the Observed Classes*

Teacher	N# of errors	N# of feedback moves	% of errors corrected	Recast	Repetition	Prompt Self Correction	Prompt Peer Correction	Compare Words	Break it Down	Elicitation
Nusiba	75	33	44%	22	4	1	1	3	0	2
Ziad	50	26	52%	12	5	2	1	3	2	1
James	35	15	42.9%	5	3	2	2	0	2	1
Joan	89	49	55.1%	19	5	3	4	2	5	11
Noura	120	85	70.8%	39	11	5	6	9	6	9
Total	369	208	56.36%	97	28	13	14	17	15	24
				(46.6%)	(13.5%)	(6,25%)	(6.73%)	(8.17%)	(7.21%)	(11.54%)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this preliminary study was to explore the cognitions of experienced teachers of Arabic and their actual instructional practices in relation to pronunciation-focused feedback for L2 Arabic learners. The results revealed teachers' agreement about the significance of CF in general and pronunciation-focused feedback in particular due to its contribution to increasing learners' comprehensibility. Additionally, the correction rate was relatively similar in both interviews and observations in which teachers' focus was mainly on correcting errors that impeded communication. In line with Basturkmen et al. (2004), however, there was a relative discrepancy between teacher beliefs about CF and their actual teaching practices. In interviews, for instance, teachers reported that repetition was the most common type of CF they tended to use and elicitation was the least used. In contrast, recast was the most frequently observed type of CF followed by repetition and elicitation, which is consistent with a number of other studies (i.e., Sheen, 2004; Lyster et al., 2013). Furthermore, teachers reported the use of different CF techniques (e.g., immediate and delayed CF), but only immediate CF was identified in the class observations. Such discrepancies may be explained in light of Basturkmen's (2012) claim that CF is an unplanned teaching aspect for which instructors depend on "automatic and generally unexamined behaviors" (p. 291). Another possible reason is that these differences may result from a conflict between teachers' desire to enhance learners' fluency without breaking the flow of communication and their willingness to provide feedback.

Although this study is limited in terms of the number of participants, it contributes to several current research concerns. First, it adds to the body of teacher belief research regarding pronunciation CF in a non-English classroom setting. Second, it presents the types of CF provided by teachers of Arabic, which has rarely been a focus of L2 pronunciation research in general, and CF research in particular. Third, it reveals gaps in teachers' training as well as knowledge and the need for further investigations into Arabic teachers' CF about pronunciation. Finally, this study not only adds to the growing research on Arabic pronunciation but also sheds light on Arabic instruction in the United States context as it relates to CF.

A replication of the present study with a larger sample is a possible direction for future research that could investigate the robustness of the present findings and give a clearer picture of the role of CF in improving Arabic pronunciation by native English speakers. More research is also needed to compare teachers' preferences for CF and those of learners. Such investigation could help us know the type of feedback each of them prefers and reveal similarities and/or differences between them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## **APPENDIX A**

### Interview Questions

1. How important do you think it is to give students feedback on pronunciation errors during class activities? Why do you think it is (not) important?
2. Do you usually correct students' pronunciation errors, or do you encourage them to self-correct?
3. How often do you use peer correction? What do you think about this technique?
4. Do you give feedback on all of your students' pronunciation errors? If not, what types of errors do you think you should focus on? Why?
5. What percentages of pronunciation errors do you usually provide feedback on?
6. What techniques and types of CF do you use to give feedback on pronunciation?
7. Any other comments?