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## An Investigation of Implicit vs. Explicit Oral Corrective Feedback on Chinese Pupils' Use of Past Tense



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### Abstract

This experimental study investigated the relative effectiveness of two broad categories of oral corrective feedback (i.e., implicit vs. explicit feedback) on primary pupils' use of past tense. Data was collected from a primary school in Hong Kong involving 24 pupils in two experimental groups and one control group. A pre-test was given in the first week to ensure the three groups were equivalent at the beginning. Afterwards, students were asked to retell a story, during which students in one experimental group received implicit oral feedback on their use of past tense, whilst those in the other experimental group received explicit feedback. The control group did not receive immediate oral feedback. All three groups received an immediate post-test at the end of story retelling, and a delayed post-test two weeks later. Test scores were analysed to examine changes within each group and differences across groups. The study found both experimental groups outperformed the control group, but there was no significant difference between the two experimental groups, except that the group receiving explicit feedback tended to outperform the implicit group, especially in repairing regular verbs. The findings suggest both types of oral corrective feedback could be given to ESL young learners during form-focused classroom instruction.

**Keywords:** oral feedback; feedback types; primary ESL learners

### Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) refers to responses (often from teachers) to errors made by second language (L2) learners in their oral or written production (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Li, 2014). CF can be oral or written (Mansourizadeh & Abdullah, 2014), direct or indirect (Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 2006; Ellis,

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Loewen, & Erlam, 2006), and implicit or explicit (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Implicit feedback is less direct than explicit feedback in signalling to learners that an error has been committed (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). It may take the form of partial or incomplete reformulation of the expression (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Explicit feedback is more direct than implicit feedback in signalling and correcting an error; it either provides the correct form directly (Lyster, 1998; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006) or gives metalinguistic comments to explain errors (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). Oral CF is usually given immediately when an error is noticed, whilst written CF tends to be delayed. Both oral and written CF can take implicit or explicit form and can be given directly or indirectly (Sheen, 2010). Oral CF is the focus of the present study.

Research studies on teacher feedback found it tends to be random and unsystematic (Lyster & Mori, 2006). Because teachers commented on a wide range of error types without specific focuses, the amount of corrective feedback can overwhelm learners (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In contrast, selective feedback, focusing on one grammar form each time was found to be more effective in improving learners' grammatical accuracy (Day & Shapson, 2001; Lyster 2004b). Form-specific feedback can draw learners' attention to a particular aspect of a target language (Spade, 1997) within a meaningful context or a communicative task (Yang & Lyster, 2010).

The present study examined the impact of six CF strategies, broadly grouped as implicit and explicit CF, on students' use of the English past tense in story-retelling. The implicit CF strategies investigated were (a) recasts (b) clarification requests, and (c) repetition, whilst the explicit CF strategies were (d) explicit correction (e) metalinguistic feedback, and (f) elicitation. The study was conducted with Chinese pupils at Grade 5 (10 to 11 years old) in a primary school in Hong Kong.

### Literature Review

According to Sheen (2010), the modality of CF, whether oral or written, is not the key factor influencing its effectiveness. It is the degree of explicitness that makes the difference. Lyster and Saito (2010) and Ellis *et al.* (2006) categorised CF into two broad types: implicit or explicit feedback. The main difference between the two is whether there is an overt indicator that an error has been committed. Implicit feedback does not provide an overt indication of error, and it can take the form of recasting, clarification, and repetition.

Among the three, recasting is generally considered as a typical example of implicit feedback (e.g., Long, 1996; Long & Robinson, 1998; Lyster, 1998; Kim & Mathes, 2001; Leeman, 2003; Li, 2009). According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), recasting refers to instances when a teacher indicates a learner's error by replacing it with another word or using the same word but with grammatical or lexical modification. For instance, in response to a student's tense error in using the verb "*stretch*," a teacher said "*stretched*" without eliciting students' correction. Recasting is believed to be the most effective type of implicit CF in facilitating L2 learning (Doughty, 2003; Long, 2007). This is probably because recasting helps learners make cognitive comparisons between the correct and the wrong forms immediately and on the spot.

Similar to recasting, clarification requests indirectly indicate learners' errors. Clarification requests indicate an ill-form by the use of phrases like "*Pardon me*" and "*Do you mean...?*" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Students can either repeat or reformulate what they have said. Clarification requests alert students that their utterance is misunderstood, ill-formed, or both. Another implicit CF strategy is repetition. This refers to instances where a teacher repeats a learner's error by adjusting his or her intonation so as to stress the error (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Sample repetition requests can be a teacher stressing the error form of the verb "*try*?" when a student is expected to use the past tense "*tried*."

Unlike implicit CF, explicit CF overtly states that a learner's output is not part of the target language to be learned (Carroll & Swain, 1993). Explicit CF also takes a variety of forms, such as indication of an error (e.g., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Carroll, 2001), metalinguistic information (e.g., Nagata, 1993; DeKeyser, 1993; Ellis *et al.*, 2006), and elicitation (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Explicit correction refers to instances where a teacher provides a correct form and clearly indicates that what the student has said is incorrect. For instance, to indicate an error a teacher says "Oh, you mean..." and "You should say..." (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001). Metalinguistic feedback contains either comments, information, or questions relating to the well-formedness of the student's utterance without explicitly providing the correct form (Ellis, 2007). For instance, a teacher indicates that there is an error in the learner's utterance by saying "Can you find your error?" or "You need past tense" (Lyster & Randa, 1997). "Elicitation is another type of explicit feedback; it refers to directly eliciting the correct form from the learner" (Tavakoli, 2013, p.128). Two eliciting techniques are commonly used. A teacher can leave a pause to allow learners to "fill in the blank" or ask questions, such as "How do we say...?" to elicit correct forms from students. If these cannot elicit correct production from students, a teacher would ask students to reformulate their utterance by saying "No, not that. It is ...". Table 1 illustrates the six CF strategies with examples drawn from the present study.

Table 1 *Illustration of the six CF types with data from the present study*

ImG - Implicit CF	ExG - Explicit CF
(I) Recasts Student: He <b>stretch</b> ... Teacher: He <i>stretched</i> . Student: (ignored the teacher) And try to...	(IV) Explicit corrections Student: Max <b>see</b> ... Teacher: <i>Saw</i> . Student: Max <i>saw</i> a bird and opened the window.
(II) Clarification requests Student: Something <b>happen</b> . Teacher: <i>Pardon?</i> Student: Something <i>happened</i> .	(V) Metalinguistic feedbacks Student: He took a chair and <b>step</b> on the chair. Teacher: You <i>should use the past tense</i> here. Student: He <i>stepped</i> on the chair.
(III) Repetitions Student: He <b>try</b> to touch. Teacher: <i>Try?</i> Student: <i>Tried</i> .	(VI) Elicitations Student: He <b>try</b> to touch. Teacher: No. He ( <i>pause</i> ) to touch./ <i>Which tense do we use here?</i> Student: He <b>tries</b> to touch. Teacher: No, not that. <i>Which tense do we use for things happening in the past?</i> Student: He <i>tried</i> to touch.

### **Implicit CF versus Explicit CF**

Existing feedback studies found both implicit and explicit CF to be effective. Carroll and Swain (1993) and Carroll (2001), for instance, found their implicit groups performed better than the control group. Studies on recasts also demonstrated that implicit feedback was associated with a longer retention time and higher awareness, showing that implicit CF can produce additional benefits to L2 acquisition. Mackey and Goo (2007) and Li (2010) found that implicit CF was able to produce more long-term effects than explicit CF. Long (2007), Nicholas *et al.* (2001), and Ellis and Sheen (2006) noted that recasts could have facilitated L2 acquisition by drawing learners' attention to forms throughout a conversational exchange.

In general, the majority of studies comparing implicit and explicit CF found the latter to be more effective on correcting students' errors in oral production. For instance, Carroll and Swain's (1993) study with 100 ESL learners found the group receiving metalinguistic CF (explicit) outperformed the

group receiving recast feedback (implicit). Ellis *et al.* (2006) also found explicit explanation had a clear advantage over implicit feedback (recasting) for both immediate and delayed effects. The relative advantages of explicit feedback are also observed in other research (e.g., Lyster, 1998; Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Sheen, 2004; Lyster, 2004a). Some researchers think this is probably because learners are more likely to notice explicit than implicit feedback (e.g., Mackey *et al.*, 2007; Nassaji, 2009). However, there are also studies that did not find explicit CF to be advantageous than implicit CF. Kim and Mathes (2001), for instance, replicated the study of Carroll and Swain (1993) but did not find significant differences between the two.

One noticeable feature of the studies that supported explicit feedback to be more advantageous is that they tend to choose recasts to represent implicit CF, although they may operationalise explicit CF in different ways (Ellis *et al.*, 2006). Very few studies have experimented with other forms of implicit CF. Sanz's (2003) study is an exception. He used requests (implicit) and compared their effects with those of the explicit metalinguistic CF but did not find any significant difference between the two. Muranoi (2000) used both recasts and requests in his study and found this combination to be effective in improving participants' performance. Muranoi's (2000) study, however, did not enable a contrast between the combined set of implicit strategies and any of the named explicit CF in the literature.

It is possible to hypothesise that if other implicit CF (or their combinations) were chosen, the conclusion may not be the same. Moreover, comparing with singular uses of one or two feedback strategies in experimental settings, different combinations of feedback strategies seemed to better approximate teachers' feedback strategies in classroom. Havranek and Cesnik's (2003) classroom observation study, for instance, documented teachers' use of a variety of implicit forms of feedback and their combinations, such as recast, rejection + recast, and recast + repetition. The present study, therefore, conducted an experiment to compare two sets of implicit vs. explicit feedback strategies, with the implicit CF operationalized as the combination of recasts, request and repetition, and the explicit CF operationalised as the combination of explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitation (more in the method section).

### **Significance of learning the past tense**

Gass (1991) claimed that a target language needed to be consciously noticed in order to become part of a language learner's existing system. For different linguistic targets, the effects of CF may vary widely. Sheen (2011) stated "we cannot assume that because CF assists the acquisition of one grammatical feature, it will necessarily do so for all other features" (p. 165). As such, feedback studies tend to focus on one grammatical feature at a time. The past tense is chosen for the present study.

The unique feature of the English past tense appeals to us both at practical and theoretical levels. At the practical level, the past tense is particularly difficult for Chinese learners and there is a general lack of mastery of past tense (Cai, 2007). Some researchers believe this is related to the linguistic distance between the Chinese and the English language, because the former does not mark time with morphological change (Cai, 2007). The learning difficulty with the past tense is especially salient among beginner Chinese learners of English at primary level. Ellis *et al.* (2006) observed that the past tense was introduced early in textbooks, but students did not seem to gain full control of this structure until intermediate or advanced levels.

At the theoretical level, the English past tense is unique in that it evokes two distinct learning processes. Past-tense forms in the English language involve regular and irregular verbs, which have identical semantic and functional value (Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986). The regular past tense is rule based (i.e., add -ed to the base form of a verb), whilst the irregular past tense is item or exemplar based (i.e.,

with no clear rule to follow) (Ellis, 2005; Yang & Lyster, 2010). Because of this difference, regular and irregular past-tense forms may be processed through two distinct channels (Pinker & Prince, 1994; Pinker & Ullman 2002). The regular verbs may be acquired via a procedural system, whilst the irregular verbs via a declarative memory system. It follows that regular and irregular verbs may be susceptible to different types of feedback. DeKeyser (1995), for instance, found that participants learned regular verbs significantly better with explicit feedback, yet they learned irregular verbs better in implicit-inductive conditions. Choosing the past-tense form to investigate therefore holds a theoretical appeal for present researchers.

### **Gaps in the literature**

Despite extensive studies in the CF literature, we noticed several gaps in this line of research. Firstly, existing studies are primarily concerned with adult learners (Lyster & Saito, 2010) and a few studies investigated young learners of English in ESL or EFL contexts (e.g., Ammar & Spade, 2006; Choi & Li, 2012). In the handful of existing studies where young learners were considered, they were investigated in order to compare and contrast with adult learners. Studies dedicated to investigation of young learners remain scarce. MacKey and Oliver (2002) is one of the few exceptions which investigated young pupil in an ESL context. Because cognitive maturity is likely to distinct adult learners from young learners, research focusing on young learners' responses to CF is warranted. Secondly, existing studies were mostly conducted in western societies with advanced adult ESL students in immersion, communicative or content-based settings, and process-oriented classrooms (e.g., Sheen, 2004; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013) and a few studies were conducted in a Chinese context, among which more were focused on tertiary contexts (e.g., Cai, 2007; Yang & Lyster, 2010), some in secondary context (e.g., Tsang, 2004; Yang, 2009), and even fewer in primary settings (e.g., Zhao, 2008). Finally, as mentioned earlier, previous studies tend to limit their investigations to one or two types of feedback conditions (e.g., Kim & Mathes, 2001; Ellis *et al.*, 2006;), making the findings of limited practical significance for natural classroom settings where teachers tend to employ a variety of combinations of different feedback strategies.

In light of the above review of literature, the present study investigated six feedback types in two broad categories to understand their effectiveness for young Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Does teachers' corrective feedback affect primary students learning the past tense? If so, in what ways and to what extent?
2. What is the relative effectiveness of implicit versus explicit feedback?

### **Method**

The present study compared the effectiveness of six CF strategies in two broad categories, namely, implicit CF in the forms of recasts, clarification requests and repetitions, and explicit CF in the forms of explicit corrections, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitations. The study made use of three random groups of primary students. The first group received three implicit feedback strategies (hereafter referred to as the implicit group or ImG), the second group received three explicit feedback strategies (hereafter referred to as the explicit group or ExG) and the third group received no feedback (hereafter referred to as the control group or CG).

### **Setting and participants**

The research was conducted in a local primary school in Hong Kong. Participants comprised 24 students at Primary 5 level who was learning English as their second language (L2), 16 of whom spoke Cantonese as their first language and eight spoke Mandarin as their first language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment options or to the control group. Each group had eight participants. The sample size for the experiment (N=24, 8 persons per group) was small due to practical constraints in enrolling participants of equivalent abilities. According to existing feedback studies, the expected differences between implicit and explicit feedback types could be large. For instance, Ellis *et al.* (2006) used only 12 participants for each of his two experiment groups and reported differences of rather large effect sizes (i.e., Cohen's  $d = 0.80$  for immediate post-oral-test and 1.19 for delayed post-oral-test<sup>1</sup>). We, therefore, considered that even with the small sample size the differences can be detected.

### **Instruments**

Two sets of four picture-cued narrative tasks (see Appendix A and B) were used for the three assessment points (Appendix A) and the two treatment sessions (Appendix B). Design of these tasks followed the principles outlined in previous studies (Han, 2002; Ellis *et al.*, 2006; Yang & Lyster, 2010). Students were required to retell the story using cartoon strips and a list of verbs. All the strips were based on stories about the superhero Max and his family. Using the same characters and interconnected stories motivated young participants to engage in the tasks. The narrative tasks were adapted from the original story with some words replaced with easier words to match the ability of the participants. A verb list was provided alongside each cartoon strip to remind students to make use of these verbs in retelling the story. Altogether, there were 26 regular verbs and 26 irregular verbs in the four stories. Care was taken to ensure the verbs included had already been taught and were known by the participants so that when they made errors, it was safe to infer such errors were related to language usage rather than knowledge.

### **Data collection procedures**

Data was collected in an 8-week period. Figure 1 presents a flow chart of the data collection procedures of this study consisting of a pre-test (T1), two treatment sessions, an immediate post-test (T2), and a delayed post-test (T3). All participants received a pre-test at the outset of this study and participated in two consecutive treatment sessions. They received an immediate post-test at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> treatment sessions and a delayed post-test two weeks later. The purpose of the pre-test was to ensure the three groups were equivalent groups with comparable usage of past-tense in retelling a story. The immediate post-test aimed at detecting the immediate effects of feedback, whilst the delayed post-test was aimed at investigating the retention of feedback effects. To reduce method effects, the three tests adopted the same format.

### **Treatment sessions with oral corrective feedback**

The two CF feedback sessions were conducted over a four-week period. For each session, a 13-minute narrative task (see Appendix B) was used to elicit oral language production from each student. When a student made an error in using the past tense, a researcher would correct the error using recasts, clarification requests or repetitions for the implicit CF group, or explicit corrections, metalinguistic

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<sup>1</sup> The two effect size figures of Cohen's  $d$  were computed by the first author based on the means and SDs reported in Ellis *et al.* (2006, Table 3, p.357). Cohen's  $d$  reference values are 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 for small, medium and large effect respectively.

feedback, and elicitations for the explicit CF group. Each treatment session followed seven steps:

1. The researcher provided a story to the participants and told them that they were to read a short story and to re-tell the story afterwards.
2. The participants read the story silently.
3. The researcher collected the story and gave the participants two pictures.
4. Participants had four minutes to plan the story re-telling but they were not allowed to take notes.
5. Participants retold the story to the researcher one by one.
6. Whenever the participant made an error in past tense usage, the researcher corrected the error using either implicit CF (in ImG) or explicit CF (in ExG).
7. After each correction, the researcher paused to give the participant a chance to make a correction if he or she chose to do so.

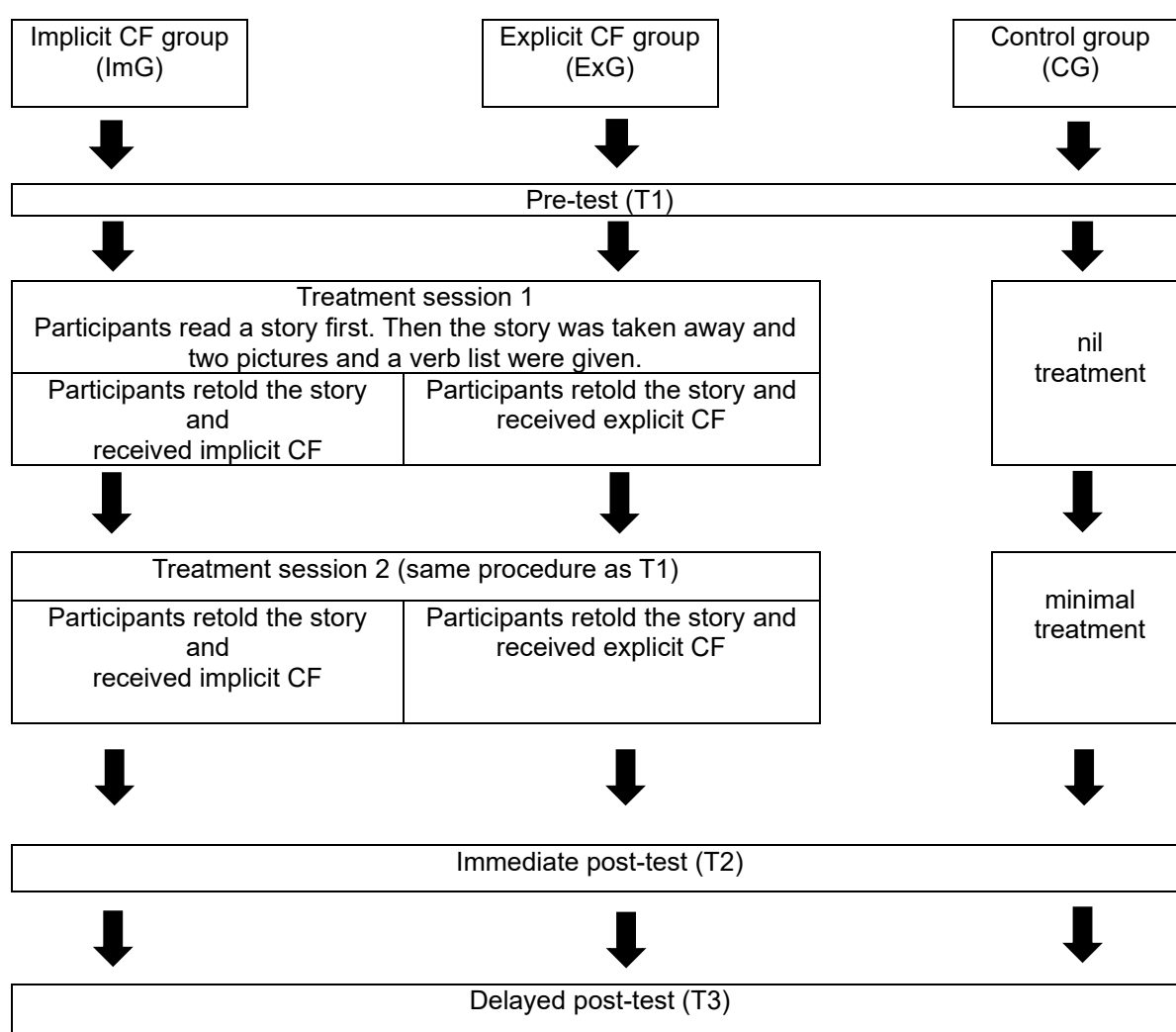


Figure 1 Design of the study (based on Han, 2002)

All treatment sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed to identify the number of errors in the use of the past tense, the researchers' CF and students' immediate self-repairs. As each student spent 8 minutes on a session, each group produced 64-minute audio-recording, the three groups produced a total amount of recording is around 192 minutes (8 minutes\*8 students\*3 groups).

The three groups produced similar amount of errors during the two treatment sessions (see Table 2),

93, 90, and 95 errors in treatment session 1 and 66, 62, 67 in session 2 for ImG, ExG and CG respectively. Also reported in Table 2 are the counts of different kinds of feedback given to each group, which indicated that the researcher consistently provided the appropriate CF (implicit or explicit) to the respective group with minimal use of the other feedback type. Specifically, of the 161 CF responses given to the implicit group, 56 were recasts, 48 were clarification requests and 53 were repetitions. In response, students produced 105 instances of repair; of which 56 cases of feedback (including 50 recasts, 3 clarifications and 3 repetition) did not elicit students' immediate repair. On the other hand, a total of 153 CF were given to the explicit group: 50 of them were explicit correction, 54 were metalinguistic feedback and 37 were elicitation. In response, students made 150 moves of self-repair. The control group did not receive any feedback or produce any repair during the first session, but they produced three repairs in the second session when three EC feedback were given to them.

Table 2 *Frequency of errors and corrective feedback*

		Treatment1			Treatment2		
		ImG	ExG	CG	ImG	ExG	CG
Implicit CF	Errors	93	90	95	66	62	67
	1. Recast	32	0	0	24	0	0
	2. Clarification request	28	1	0	20	0	0
	3. Repetition	31	1	0	22	0	0
Explicit CF	4. Explicit correction	2	29	0	0	21	3
	5. Metalinguistic feedback	2	32	0	0	22	0
	6. Elicitation	0	28	0	0	19	0
Total CF moves		95	91	0	66	62	3
Repair moves		63	90	0	42	60	3

### Testing

Participants' performance on the accurate use of the past tense was measured three times in a pre-test, an immediate test and a delayed post-test. Similar to the treatment session, the three tests each used a picture-cued narrative task. The three tests were of identical test format to ensure comparability across time (see Appendix A for a sample test). Audio recording was made during each testing period. After the tests, the researcher transcribed the conversations between the participants and the researcher, count the number of CF and the number of student repairs before moving on to the next step.

### Data Analysis

Before comparing error statistics within and across different times, raw error counts for T1 were rescaled so they were on the same range as T2 and T3. Specifically, the error space (i.e., number of verbs occurred) for T1 was eight regular and eight irregular verbs, whilst the error space for T2 and T3 was six regular and six irregular verbs. The error counts for T1 were rescaled to be between 0 and 6 (i.e. the minimum to the maximum number of errors) via this function ( $\text{new score} = \text{old score}/8 * 6$ ). SPSS 21.0 was employed to process statistical comparisons across the three time points. Because of the relatively small sample size (8 students \* 3 groups) of the experiment, non-parametric statistical tests, namely Wilcoxon and Kruskal-Wallis test (see McKight & Najab, 2010), were chosen for cross-group comparisons to ensure the rigour of statistical testing.



Following the standard procedures for conducting non-parametric comparisons across groups, the analysis started with checking whether the equal variance assumption was fulfilled. Non-significant results ( $p=.386, .147, .421$ ) indicated that the equal variance assumption held for the three groups at all three time-points and further comparisons of means (in this case medians) were valid. Afterwards, Wilcoxon test was conducted to compare changes of test scores within each group, and Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare the differences among groups. The Wilcoxon test, also named as two-related sample test, is conceptually similar to the parametric paired  $t$ -test. It compares changes in the error counts within each group across the three time-points, namely T1 with T2, T2 with T3, and T1 with T3. Results of Wilcoxon tests indicate the overall effects of CF on students' use of past tense (Research Question 1). The Kruskal-Wallis test is conceptually similar to the parametric ANOVA; it compares test scores across the three groups, namely, IMG vs ExG, ExG vs CG, and ImG vs CG, to verify whether the observed differences are statistically significant, or, whether the groups receiving different CF treatment and the group receive no CF produce similar or different amount of errors in their past tense usage. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test address Research Question 2.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of data analysis to answer the two research questions. In the interest of space, the discussion is presented immediately after the results.

*RQ 1. Does teachers' corrective feedback affect primary students learning the past tense? If so, in what ways and to what extent*

Table 3 presents the medians of error counts for the three groups at three testing times. Figure 2 presents the distribution of error counts. As can be seen, the three groups made a similar number of errors in the pre-test (median = 6 for regular verbs, and 5.25-6 for irregular verbs). On the whole, the two experiment groups see a pattern of past tense errors reducing significantly in T2 and T3 but an increase of errors from T2 to T3. For the implicit group, regular verb errors dropped to 1.5 errors at T2 and 3 errors at T3; for irregular verbs, the errors dropped from 5.25 to 1 at T2, but increased to 4 at T3. Similarly, both regular verb and irregular verb errors of the explicit group dropped substantially at T2 (to 0) and saw an increase in T3 (to 1 and 3 respectively). In answering the first part of RQ1, overall, the results from the quantitative overview supported the usefulness teachers' corrective feedback in reducing students' errors in the use of past tense. These findings are consistent with findings from previous studies (e.g., Han, 2002).

Meanwhile, the extent of the effectiveness of the oral corrective feedbacks were explored through statistical testing via within-group Wilcoxon tests. The numbers of errors made by the control group remained largely unchanged across the three time-points. Statistical testing via within-group Wilcoxon tests found the differences within two experimental groups to be statistically significant (see Table 4). For the implicit group, all pair-wise comparisons were significant. For the explicit group, all pairs except one were statistically significant. The exceptional pair concerns the differences in regular verb errors at T2 and T3. Because no significant change was observed, this indicates students performed similarly at the two time-points. Unlike the other three T2 vs T3 pairs in the experimental groups which had substantial repercussion of errors at T3, the students in the explicit group maintained their performance of repairing regular verb at T2 and T3.

Table 3 Medians of error counts

	Regular verbs			Irregular verbs		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
ImG	6	1.5	3	5.25	1	4
ExG	6	0	1	5.63	0	3
CG	6	6	6	6	6	5

Table 4 Results of the Wilcoxon test (2-related sample test)

p-values	Regular verbs			Irregular verbs		
	T1 vs T2	T2 vs T3	T1 vs T3	T1 vs T2	T2 vs T3	T1 vs T3
ImG	0.012	0.047	0.012	0.012	0.026	0.011
ExG	0.01	0.054	0.011	0.011	0.011	0.011
CG	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.016	0.016

(1) T1 = Pre-test, T2 = Immediate post-test, T3= Delayed post-test

(2) n.s. refers to  $p > 0.05$

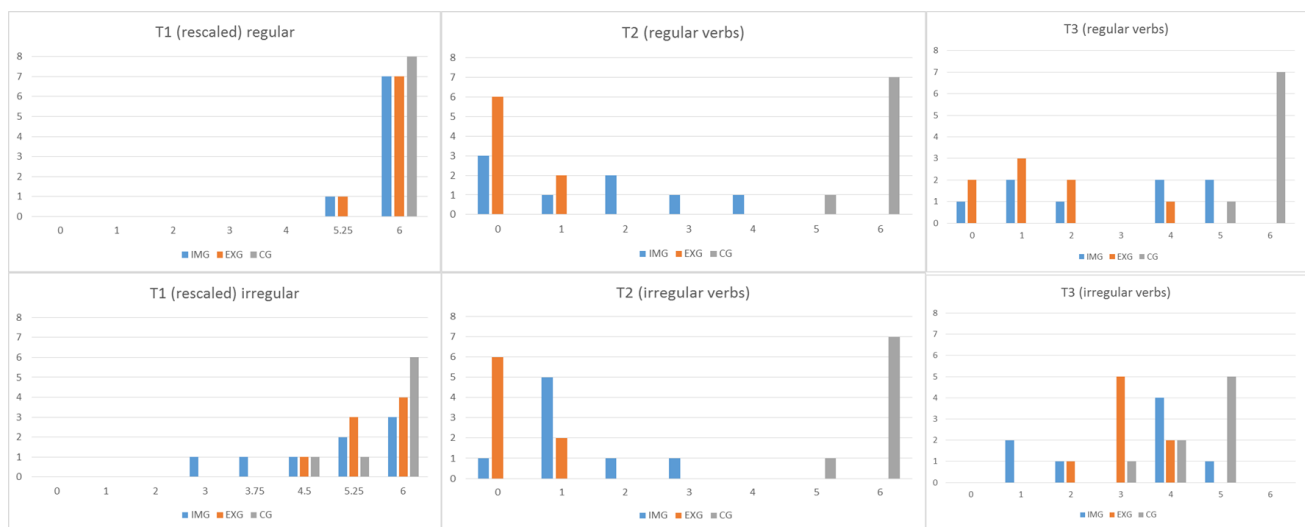


Figure 2 Error count distributions across the three time points

There are three possible explanations for the above findings. The first one is related to the design of the study, which facilitated participants to have sustained focus on the target language form. Firstly, participants were exposed to CF on past-tense, and past-tense only, consistently in the two treatment sessions. The intent and linguistic target of the pedagogical instruction were made clear to the students, which raised their awareness of their own oral production and in turn better monitoring of the target language form. The effectiveness of such awareness was especially salient in the results of the immediate post-test. Secondly, because the target language form (i.e., past tense), was not a new but known language feature to the students, students were spared the cognitive load of processing new knowledge thus able to concentrate on the output stage, retrieving and producing the target form correctly. The second design feature benefiting effective oral CF was setting the task within a meaningful context. According to Oliver (1995), learners can benefit if the CF was contextualized within meaningful tasks. In this study, both usages of past tense and CF were contextualized within narrative tasks of retelling stories. The third reason is having individualized attention in the research. Unlike typical classroom settings, each participant received individualised attention and CF from the researcher during the treatment periods. Every participant's errors were noticed and received appropriate feedback. As different learners made different mistakes, they received different CF. Though one-on-one teaching may not always be possible in classroom, this finding indicates the power

of individual coaching. Where resources allow, the researcher would recommend teachers have individual sessions with students.

The wash-off effect of time was noticed from the results of the three T2 vs T3 pair-wise comparison in the experiment groups. For the implicit group, we observed an increase in the incorrect use of past tense for both regular and irregular verbs at T3; for the explicit group, we observed an increase of incorrect usages only in irregular verbs. This wash-off effect may be related to the intensity of the treatment on changes in tense consistency over time. According to Doughty and Varela (1998) and Oliver (1995), the frequency and saliency were crucial for CF to be effective. The study only contained two instruction sessions over a period of 4 weeks. Whilst significant positive effects were observed in the immediate post-test (T2), the two-time instruction might not be sufficient for the participants to retain their awareness of the past-tense to monitor their tense usage in speaking. Further studies should extend the frequency and duration of the feedback sessions to investigate their relationship with students' retention time. Meanwhile, the sustained effectiveness of explicit feedback for regular verbs is consistent with DeKeyser's (1995) study which also found explicit feedback to be more effective than implicit feedbacks for learning regular verbs.

*RQ 2. What is the relative effectiveness of implicit versus explicit feedback?*

Two examples were extracted from our data to illustrate the differences between the implicit and explicit feedback given to pupils in this study (Table 5). In both cases, the researchers' feedback overlapped with the participant's response, yet the metalinguistic (explicit) feedback was longer (seven words as opposed to one) and slightly better attended to; that is, in (2), the participant said 'yes' to acknowledge that repair was required. Informed by existing literature, the present researchers expected that explicit feedback may be more effective in raising learners' awareness of repairing because it is overtly corrective.

*Table 5 Examples for implicit vs. explicit feedback*

Implicit feedback	Explicit feedback
(1) Student: Max want to = Researcher: = Want? Student: Wanted to bring the bird back.	(2) S: Max want to = R: = want > you need the past tense here S: Yes, he wanted to bring the bird back.
	<i>Notes.</i> = signifies overlapping elements; > signifies rising intonation

Table 6 presents the results of our comparative analysis. Comparing the two experiment groups with the control groups, we found both experiment groups outperformed the control group for both regular and irregular verbs during the immediate test and the delayed test (except for T3-irregular between ImG and CG). Although the error counts data (Table 4) indicate that the pupils receiving explicit feedback tended to have higher accuracy in their use of past tense at T2 and T3, contrary to our expectation our study did not find statistically significant difference between the two experiment groups across the four comparison points (see Table 6, the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test). This finding indicates that the two types of feedback seem to be equally effective. A similar finding is reported in Kim and Mathes (2001) that they also failed to find any statistically significant differences among the two oral CF approaches with their adult EFL learners.

*Table 6 Results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests*

<i>P</i> -values	ImG vs ExG	ExG vs CG	ImG vs CG
T2-regular	n.s	0.039	0.035
T2-irregular	n.s	0.001	0.001
T3-regular	n.s	0	0.001
T3-irregular	n.s	0.011	n.s.

*Note.*

T2-regular = T3 errors in regular verbs – T2 errors in regular verbs;

T2-irregular = T3 errors in irregular verbs – T2 errors in irregular verbs;

T3-regular = T3 errors in regular verbs – T1 errors in regular verbs;

T3-irregular = T3 errors in irregular verbs – T1 errors in irregular verbs

n.s.  $p > 0.05$

Nonetheless, this finding contradicted to multiple existing studies as reviewed earlier (i.e., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Lyster, 1998; Mackey *et al.*, 2000; Lyster, 2004a; Sheen, 2004; Ellis *et al.*, 2006); these studies found explicit feedback to be more effective than implicit feedback. In hindsight, we believe that this discrepancy may be related to the selection of CF types. In the study conducted by Ellis *et al.* (2006), for instance, only two CF types, recast and metalinguistic explanation, were investigated, whereas the present study compared six CF types in two groups. Besides recast and metalinguistic explanations, other CF types (such as clarification request and explicit correction) were also included. It is possible that the CF strategies in each category have different effectiveness and that mixing them together may have, on the one hand, diluted the effectiveness of metalinguistic explanation in the explicit group, and on the other hand, increased the effectiveness of recast in the implicit group.

Finally, only one difference was observed between the two groups of oral CF. As can be seen from Table 5, the explicit group achieved significantly better results against the control groups on all four comparison points, whilst the implicit group outperformed the control group in but three points except for T3-irregular verbs. At Time 3, the implicit group did not outperform the control group in their accuracy with irregular verbs. It seems that the effects of implicit feedback on irregular verbs did not last; at Time 3, the pupils receiving implicit feedback performed similarly as those in control group who did not receive any feedback.

## Conclusion

Previous studies on corrective feedback to young pupils in English learning classrooms have largely been descriptive and observational in nature, investigating occurrences, types and patterns of teacher feedback and student uptake (Sheen, 2006; Yang, 2009; Zhao, 2009; Yang, 2010; Choi & Li, 2012; Kırkgöz, Babanoğlu, & Ağçam, 2015; Brown, 2016). This study contributed to the limited number of experimental studies on the effects of different types of oral feedback for young English learners in a Chinese/ Cantonese EFL context. It investigated the effectiveness of teachers' oral explicit and implicit corrective feedback on students' use of the past tense in retelling a story orally. The experiments, involving three assessment points (i.e., pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test), found both experimental groups outperformed the control group, supporting the effectiveness of both types of oral feedback. Whilst students in both experimental groups exhibited substantial improvement in producing much more accurate past tense forms in immediate tests, their levels of accuracy did not sustain in the delayed tests. Explicit feedback was found to have more sustained effectiveness on regular verbs than implicit feedback had. However, overall no statistical significant difference was found between the two experimental groups, indicating that when multiple feedback strategies of the same type were used together, the differences between the two feedback types may diminish and that they seemed to have similar effects on oral accuracy.

This finding coincided with Kim and Mathes' (2001) and Lyster's (2004b) studies on the effect of oral

corrective feedback on form-focused instruction but contradicted to quite a few existing studies which found explicit feedback as a type generally outperformed implicit feedback. However, as noted earlier, these studies tended to limit their investigations to one or two feedback strategies under each of the explicit or the implicit type (e.g., recast for implicit and metalinguistic explanation for explicit in Ellis *et al.*, 2006). They, nonetheless, made conclusions on the effectiveness of the types of feedback (implicit vs. explicit feedbacks). Whilst the focus on a few exemplar feedback conditions is useful, as stated by Ellis *et al.* (2006) that metalinguistic explanation and recasts are “exemplars of the explicit and implicit corrective feedback” respectively (p.365). The present study argues that the finding that an explicit feedback strategy (i.e., metalinguistic explanation) was more effective than an implicit feedback strategy (i.e., recasts) cannot be safely extended to other CF strategies under the same category, nor could it be generalised to represent the effects of feedback types. If nothing else, the finding of the present study, we hope, provides a useful reference to future CF studies to consider the differences between instructional and experimental settings.

However, as in all classroom-based quasi-experimental studies, there were limitations. The findings of this study need to be interpreted with caution, especially due to the small sample size in each experiment group. Although non-parametric statistical tests were applied in data analysis to ensure the rigor of statistical testing, a larger sample size or longer treatment lengths would be more desirable for future investigations. In this study, it could be the case that the differences between the two feedback types were not detected because of lack of statistical power in association with the small sample size.

Russell and Spada (2006) called for greater attentions to “the constellation of moderating variables at different levels, include linguistic, cognitive, and contextual ones” (p.156), to further explore the theoretical and practical implications of the effectiveness of corrective feedbacks. At the linguistic level, we mentioned earlier of the particular difficulty of past tense in English language for Chinese learners and its possible relation to the linguistic distance between L1 Chinese and L2 English. Results from this study on the effectiveness of oral feedback on past tense accuracy also points to further studies on other linguistic errors of Chinese pupils. As noted by Lyster, Saito, and Sato (2013), the effects of corrective feedback differed widely depending on the linguistic targets; further form-specific feedback studies on Chinese learners, for instance, can investigate the grammatical errors along the interlanguage continuum (e.g., inter-linguistic errors that can be traced back to L1 interference and intralinguistic errors that are developmental) in relation to the different types of feedback.

Further studies can also explore the different effects of CF on young pupils of varied ages with different levels of cognitive maturity, as well as pupils living in different English language use contexts (e.g., ESL vs EFL). Several questions were raised from this study, such as individual learner differences in terms of the effects of different types of CF overtime, the languages used (L1, L2, or their mix) for giving oral feedback and their relative effectiveness, or the effects of different mixtures of CF strategies in instructional settings, which may as well be interesting areas for further exploration in EFL settings, especially for young learners.

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