








A sociocultural exploration of Iranian language teachers' corrective feedback: why and how?

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the types and reasons for teachers' corrective feedback (CF) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes from sociocultural perspectives. To do so, 12 Iranian EFL teachers were selected based on convenience sampling, and 18 sessions of their classes (one or two from each teacher) were observed to ensure that there were at least three CF occurrences in each teacher's class. Then, the teachers attended stimulated recall interviews in which they answered questions about reasons for applying specific CFs in their classes. Different subthemes emerged from the data within the three sociocultural mediators' themes, namely psychological, material and peer mediators. The results indicated that teachers use different CFs in their classes for various reasons such as scaffolding learning, enhancing noticing and exposure, and fostering learners' agency. The study ends with suggestions and implications for teachers and teacher educators.

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Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) is a multi-faceted phenomenon containing various functions, and simply refers to 'responding to the error made by students' (Ellis, 2012, p. 28). As knowledge about the complex nature of CF continues to expand, numerous studies argue that it is a key factor influencing the learning process, necessitating careful examination of its impact across different contexts and environments (e.g. Cheng & Zhang, 2024; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mohammadi et al., 2023; Plonsky & Brown, 2015). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), CF helps learners acquire language skills by either explicitly identifying errors or implicitly signalling them in their oral productions (Uddin, 2024); that is, CF is the teachers' reaction to students' performance with the objective of continuous learning (Moss & Brookhart, 2019) and is necessary for raising students' awareness regarding what they need to know to acquire language abilities (Gholami, 2024).

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Building on this understanding of CF, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a valuable framework for analysing its implications, as it posits that human mental functions emerge from the transformation of innate, natural processes through culturally mediated interactions (Pohner & Lantolf, 2024). This perspective highlights the role of social and cultural factors in shaping learning, making SCT particularly suitable for exploring how CF facilitates language development within specific sociocultural contexts (Mao & Lee, 2022). Mediation, as a construct in SCT, can be considered a tool for ‘cognitive development in social interaction, whereby an expert member of the society (e.g. parent, teacher, more knowledgeable peer) provides appropriate forms of assistance to a novice’ (Storch, 2018, p. 263). According to this definition, CF is a powerful mediation tool that takes different forms (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995).

To further explore the effectiveness of CF within this framework, various studies have examined the role of teacher education in it (Atai & Shafiee, 2017; Ha & Murray, 2023; Lavasani, 2010; Lee, 2014; Vidiella & Garcia, 2015). However, some research has yielded mixed results regarding the impact of CF training on teachers’ behaviours and practices (Junqueira & Kim, 2013), with findings indicating no significant connection between teacher education and effective CF implementation. These inconclusive outcomes highlight the need for more research into the factors influencing the translation of CF into classroom practice. Specifically, further investigation is required to understand how different contexts, teacher beliefs, and the specific types of mediation tools provided may affect CF uptake and application (Mao & Lee, 2020).

In the EFL context, while the existing literature is extensive (e.g. Housen et al., 2011; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019; Roothoof & Breeze, 2016; Ha & Murray, 2021), the Iranian context has garnered only limited attention (e.g. Abdollahifam, 2014; Atai & Shafiee, 2017). This gap underscores the urgent need for further research tailored to the unique sociocultural and educational landscapes of Iranian EFL classrooms. Consequently, the present study aims to investigate the strategies and objectives behind teacher feedback in these settings from a sociocultural perspective. By focusing on how mediational tools in sociocultural contexts impact the effectiveness of CF, this research seeks to provide EFL teachers with practical insights about the use and purpose of feedback methods. This is crucial for a better understanding of the CF process and meeting the diverse needs of students, particularly in a context where traditional feedback practices may not suffice. Ultimately, this investigation aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in education and offer implications for CF based on the mediation concept of SCT.

Literature review

Corrective feedback in EFL

To understand the complexities of CF, it is necessary to define the term feedback first. In language education, feedback can be provided at various levels and to or by different stakeholders, including learners (Cheng & Zhang, 2024; Smith & Higgins, 2006), teachers (Banegas & Consoli, 2021; Perry et al., 2020; Seroussi et al., 2019) and even teacher educators (Javahery & Kamali, 2023; Kamali & Javahery, 2024). For learners, it is provided on their performance in a learning activity, typically with the goal of helping

them improve. Feedback can range from a test score to a brief comment made aloud in class (Ur, 1996). Ur describes the purpose of feedback as enhancing performance, as this is presumably the most significant aim of effective feedback. Regarding CF, it involves addressing learners' errors in L2 production or comprehension (Li, 2018), and it entails two types, namely oral and written CF. In oral CF, as its name suggests, the instruction and response are in oral form in interacting with individuals (in this case, students). Oral CF is the most common correction instantly given on-point (Clarke, 2003) and since it is provided instantly, learners feel ambitious and motivated to receive instruction as they are still aware of how they are performing in a given task. Written feedback, as the second type of corrective feedback, performs the same objective as oral CF (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2020; Yoshida, 2008). However, it predominantly pertains to reactions addressing linguistic errors in learners' written compositions (Mao & Lee, 2020), which, unlike oral CF, does not need an immediate response. Teachers hold different beliefs and attitudes towards CF strategies and purposes, which play a significant role in the process and results of teaching and learning (Borg, 2015). In this regard, Ha and Murray (2021), in their study on the influence of a professional development programme on teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback, discovered minor shifts in teachers' views on the significance, focus and sources of CF, alongside significant transformations in their preferences for CF types and timing. Following the programme, teachers reported adopting a wider variety of CF strategies, with a particular emphasis on output-prompting techniques. Additionally, they expressed a greater willingness to deliver immediate feedback in activities aimed at both fluency and accuracy.

Aside from teachers' varying perspectives, there may also be a mismatch between teachers' and students' beliefs about CF. For instance, Roothoof and Breeze's (2016) study indicated that teachers tend to use implicit CF type (e.g. elicitation) in contrast to their students who favoured explicit CF (e.g. explicit correction). This is in line with the findings of Ha and Murray (2021), in which teachers were sceptical regarding the efficacy of explicit and immediate CF. In another study in lower secondary classrooms, Gamlem and Munthe (2013) analysed the quality of formative feedback interactions to enhance student learning finding that while feedback loops and scaffolding (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020) were present, the overall quality of feedback was often low, reflecting teachers' varied beliefs and attitudes towards corrective feedback strategies and their effectiveness in supporting student learning.

The efficiency of teachers' CF relies on several mediating variables, such as individual differences derived from sociocultural and contextual differences (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2020), automated vs. human CF (Mohammadi et al., 2023), metalinguistic CF (Liu & Hwang, 2024), synchronous and asynchronous CF (Cheng & Zhang, 2024), and assessment type (López, 2023), to name a few. The contemporary literature on feedback in EFL has increasingly highlighted the role of individual differences shaped by various contextual factors. Sociocultural backgrounds, in particular, have received significant attention for their influence on the EFL learning process. For example, Housen et al. (2011) and Conroy (2018) examined the contextual differences between EFL learners in Germany and China, revealing how cultural and educational environments can produce varying effects on language acquisition. Similarly, Pfenninger and Singleton (2019) underscored the impact of sociocultural factors on the second-language acquisition process, demonstrating how learners' backgrounds shape their learning trajectories,

strategies and outcomes. In addition to sociocultural influences, the relationship between feedback types and educational settings has also been a focus of research. Milla and Mayo (2014) explored the use of CF and its uptake in Spanish trilingual programmes, wherein students engaged in both EFL and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses. Their findings revealed that explicit CF and learner uptake were significantly more frequent in the EFL context than in CLIL classrooms. This suggests that the goals and dynamics of different educational frameworks can influence the interaction patterns and feedback preferences within EFL environments. Collectively, these studies emphasise the importance of considering contextual and sociocultural variables in EFL pedagogy and feedback practices.

In the Iranian context, Abdollahifam (2014) investigated the impact of interactional feedback on students' motivation. The study highlighted the beneficial effects of interactional feedback, demonstrating improvements in both learners' performance and motivation. Additionally, the findings indicated that the use of interactional feedback contributed to fostering stronger teacher–learner rapport. These findings were supported by the study of Gan et al. (2023), which investigated the relationship between feedback practice and students' motivation. The findings of Gan et al. (2023) indicated that students' self-corrective feedback was the most effective predictor of motivation level in the EFL/ESL context. Furthermore, Ha and Murray (2021) examined the beliefs of EFL learners regarding CF as well as the effect of individual differences in these beliefs in Vietnam. Findings demonstrated that students had positive beliefs regarding CF, in which metalinguistic feedback was preferred, while asking for clarification was the least favoured. A strong correlation has also been observed concerning teachers' CF and students' motivation.

In summary, the effectiveness of corrective feedback in EFL contexts is influenced by a myriad of factors, including the types of feedback provided, teachers' beliefs and attitudes, and the sociocultural backgrounds of learners. As we move forward, we explore the sociocultural perspective on CF, which offers deeper insights into how cultural contexts shape CF practices and learner responses, ultimately informing more effective teaching strategies in diverse educational settings.

Sociocultural perspective on feedback

Vygotsky was the first to propose Sociocultural Theory (SCT), a framework that has significantly influenced the field of language learning. The central premise of SCT is that the 'human mind is mediated' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1), meaning that individuals do not interact with the world directly, but instead through mediating tools, which include both material and symbolic objects. These tools help humans 'establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between ourselves and the world' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1). Over time, as learners interact with these mediating tools, they begin to internalise them, as noted by Li et al. (2022). This process of internalisation is key in SCT, as external mediation gradually transforms into an integral part of the learner's cognitive system.

Building on this, Poehner and Lantolf (2024) explained that SCT posits human mental behaviour arises from the restructuring of natural, innate processes through culturally constructed forms of mediation. Language learning, therefore, is embedded in these mediational processes, where learners constantly engage with and adapt to the cultural

tools around them. A key application of the SCT mediation concept in language learning is corrective feedback, which serves as a mediational tool that helps learners bridge the gap between their current language performance and target norms (Mao & Lee, 2022). Through social interactions like teacher–student exchanges, corrective feedback provides mediating help that allows learners to notice and correct language errors (Rassaei, 2019). SCT emphasises that learners' needs for mediation can differ significantly, even when addressing the same incorrect forms (Rassaei, 2018). This approach recognises that the type and intensity of support that may be beneficial for a learner at a given time can change rapidly, reflecting the dynamic nature of learning processes (Pohner, 2008).

Several studies have explored sociocultural considerations related to feedback. For instance, while analysing CF in the EFL context, regarding students' zones of proximal development (ZPD), Lavasani (2010) found that teachers' ongoing provision of procedural implicit-explicit feedback had a favourable impact on students' error-detecting abilities as well as the number of mistakes they committed. In the mid 1990s, Kozulin and Presseisen (1995) suggest 'new directions for learning theory and cognitive education based on the combination of Vygotsky's "psychological tools" paradigm and Feuerstein's mediated learning experience (MLE) approach' (p. 67). They concluded that cognitive education should be integrated into school. Lee's (2014) study, which draws on the theory of mediated learning experiences (MLE) within the sociocultural framework, examines the shortcomings of traditional feedback methods in the context of EFL. It emphasises the necessity of substituting these methods with more successful techniques found in process-based writing classrooms to enable feedback to facilitate how students learn. Based on activity theory (AT), the study says that adding further innovations and offering MLE as a new item of the feedback system can result in more efficient feedback and assist students in improving their learning. Mao and Lee (2022) explored student engagement with written feedback in second language (L2) writing contexts. In the context of SCT, they investigated the dynamics of engagement, emphasising the interplay between individual factors, social relations and contextual influences that shape how students perceive and utilise feedback. The authors proposed an integrative sociocultural framework that highlighted the core characteristics of engagement and the mediating factors involved. In a recent study, Kao (2023) examined how second-language student writers' perceptions of specific error types influenced the effectiveness of CF in enhancing their writing accuracy. The findings reveal that students who identified the targeted errors showed marked improvements in their writing accuracy, highlighting the critical role of awareness and noticing in the effectiveness of CF. This finding aligns with sociocultural perspectives on learning, emphasising the importance of learner engagement and understanding in the feedback process.

Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates that SCT offers a valuable lens for understanding the role of CF in EFL, highlighting how external mediation shapes learners' cognitive development and fosters self-regulation. The existing literature, some of which is mentioned above, underscores the importance of social and cultural tools in enhancing the understanding of effective CF. However, while substantial insights have been gained, there remain significant gaps in understanding how specific socio-cultural mediations influence the dynamics of feedback and its impact on EFL, specifically in an under-researched context – Iran. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of Iranian EFL teachers, considering the effect of

Table 1. Teachers' demographic information.

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education	Teaching experience
T1	Male	26	MA student (TEFL)	3
T2	Female	24	BA (TEFL)	3
T3	Female	24	BA (English Literature)	4
T4	Male	21	BA student (TEFL)	1
T5	Female	29	MA (TEFL)	8
T6	Female	28	BA (English Translation)	3
T7	Female	25	BA (TEFL)	2
T8	Female	27	BA (Psychology)	4
T9	Female	22	BA student (TEFL)	2
T10	Male	24	BA (English Translation)	3
T11	Female	24	MA student (Psychology)	3
T12	Male	23	BA student (TEFL)	1

different CF strategies and purposes from a sociocultural perspective, and finding out the mediating tools affecting that. Therefore, the research question is proposed as follows:

How do sociocultural mediators explain the types and reasons for CF in the Iranian EFL context?

Method

Context and participants

This study was conducted in two private language schools in Iran, which provide distinct contexts for English language teaching. In Iran, public schools focus on achieving a basic level of communication, while private schools emphasise preparing students for high-stakes exams like the IELTS, which often serve as a key milestone for learners' academic and professional advancement (Zhang & Rahimi, 2014). The first school in this study employs approximately 30 teachers, while the second recruits about 50. Teachers in such environments tend to adopt more immediate and direct forms of correction, aiming to help students quickly meet their exam goals (Farrokhi et al., 2017). This setting creates a dynamic and results-oriented teaching context where educators are required to prioritise effective, efficient and timely feedback to cater to learners' ambitions.

The 12 participants in this study offer a diverse range of profiles across gender, age, education and teaching experience. The group includes five males and eight females, aged between 21 and 29 years, with an average age of 25. This age range reflects a relatively young cohort, many of whom are in the early stages of their teaching careers. The educational background of the participants is varied, with two currently pursuing or holding Master's degrees in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and Psychology, while others possess Bachelor's degrees in TEFL, English Literature, English Translation and Psychology. Three participants are still completing their undergraduate studies in TEFL. Regarding teaching experience, participants range from one to eight years, encompassing both novice teachers with limited experience and those with several years of classroom exposure. The diversity in professional backgrounds and teaching experience, combined with the unique context of private language schools in Iran, provides a rich foundation for exploring the participants' CF strategies and perspectives on their implementation (Table 1).

Design and data collection

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate the types and reasons of CF used by Iranian EFL teachers, as well as their beliefs about these strategies. The study employed a multiple case study approach, focusing on 12 EFL teachers from private educational settings in Iran. The data collection process involved observing 12 lessons, one per teacher. However, after our initial analysis and receiving reviewer comments, we realised that collecting an additional six hours of data from some teachers would enhance its richness. Therefore, to ensure comprehensive coverage, we aimed to document at least three occurrences of CF in every teacher's portfolio. As a result, we conducted an additional six observations for those teachers whose CF occurrences did not initially meet the criteria. This extended effort allowed us to capture at least three occurrences of CF in each teacher's class, bringing the total to 47 distinct occurrences observed across all 18 observed sessions. However, as no new themes or patterns emerged from these interviews, we concluded that data saturation had been achieved.

Then, stimulated recall interviews (40 to 60 minutes each) were conducted to explore specific situations where they applied CF methods to correct students' errors. In each interview, the interviewers (the second and fifth researchers) who had already observed the sessions and taken notes on the feedback stages of the sessions (recording was also done for a back-up and sometimes referred to) asked the participating teachers (interviewees) to explain their thoughts, decisions and actions at specific points where they employed CF. These discussions offered perspectives on why the teachers chose CF strategies and how effective they were in the classroom setting.

The data was collected through a mix of stimulated recall interviews and classroom observation notes. Furthermore, some data analysis included information from the researchers' notes taken during classroom observations, providing an understanding of the participants' behaviours and interactions within the classroom context.

Data analysis

The data were collected through two different methods, including the incorporation of observation notes and stimulated recall interviews. The gathered data were analysed according to the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After gathering the data from the interviews, they were transcribed and translated into English. The data were analysed and the codes were generated according to the components of SCT's mediators. We also considered data saturation, which refers to the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data (Guest et al., 2006). By continuously reviewing and comparing the interview transcripts, we reached a point where we could not yield new codes or themes. This indicated that the data saturation had been achieved. Next, the codes were collated into potential themes, and the emergent themes were agreed upon by all researchers and named based on consensus among them. To increase the reliability of the findings, the analysed data were discussed and agreed upon by the participants through interview transcript review (Rowlands, 2021).

Findings

Through the analysis of the data gathered from observation notes and stimulated recall interviews, three main themes emerged as key mediators influencing teachers' strategies for addressing errors:

- (1) Psychological mediators
- (2) Material mediators
- (3) Peer mediators

Psychological mediators

Psychological mediators play a fundamental role in how teachers approach CF within the classroom environment. One such mediator is the use of 'non-verbal strategies as cognitive tools to promote self-correction'. T2 highlights the importance of promoting self-correction using body language and non-verbal cues:

Because these words had been taught at lower levels, and for this reason, with a change in posture and raised eyebrows, the pupils themselves understood that the sentence was wrong somewhere, and this was better than me repeating the sentence for them. (T2, Interview)

T2's approach indicates the use of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, as cognitive tools to signal errors to the learners. Learners' self-correction and cognitive awareness of language structures can be facilitated through leveraging these cues. In addition to T2, T9 also employs body language to encourage the learners to correct their wrong grammatical tenses. She used her hand to indicate the past tense when one of the students expressed 'my sister has a cat when she was 5'. The dialogue between T9 and the student is as follows:

S: My sister has a cat when she was 5.

T9: (Using her hand to show the past): My sister

S: Oh sorry. Had a cat.

T9: Excellent! (T9, Observation)

This interaction highlights the effectiveness of non-verbal cues in facilitating learner self-correction. By using body language, T9 subtly prompts the student to reflect on their grammatical mistake, guiding them to correct it without direct instruction. This not only reinforces the correct use of tenses, but also encourages learner autonomy and active engagement in the learning process. Another example of using non-verbal cues to promote self-correction is T6's lip-reading strategy, which helps learners pronounce a word correctly through visual and kinaesthetic cues:

By repeating without sound, just lip reading, they quickly said the correct word themselves. (T6, Interview)

By engaging learners in lip reading and silent repetitions, T6 promoted word recognition and encouraged learners to activate phonological representations and self-monitor their speech

production. The other psychological mediator used by the participants is ‘using language strategically to guide learning and scaffolding’. We observed that six of the participants utilised language strategically to scaffold learning and grow cognitively, whether through explanations of grammatical concepts or reassurance about making mistakes. T3 strategically used language to explain the concept of tenses to emphasise the importance of using present simple to talk about routines after a student used present continuous to mention the activities he does every day:

T3: What do you usually do in the morning?

S: I’m washing my face, I’m helping my brother, I’m doing my homework . . .

T3: Are you washing your face right now or you wash your face every day?

S: Every day, teacher.

T3: So, I wash my face every day. (T3, Observation)

By explaining that ‘I’m washing my face’ is used to talk about an ongoing action and providing the student with the correct tense, T3 guided the student’s understanding of grammar and usage in context. Another instance of this can be seen in T8’s use of language when she wanted to correct the learner’s pronunciation error. She shrewdly used language and memory to highlight the silent/d/in the word ‘judge’.

S: My uncle is a judge/dʒʌddʒ/.

T8: Great! Do you remember the word ‘badge’?

S: Yes.

T8: Which letter was silent?

S: (Along with other students)/d/.

T8: Good! So is it /dʒʌdʒ/ or /dʒʌddʒ/?

S: /dʒʌdʒ/. (T8, Observation)

T8’s decision to correct the pronunciation error immediately demonstrates the strategic use of language to guide learning. She addressed the mistake promptly and made sure that the learner received real-time feedback:

I think that we have to help the students realize their errors and correct them. Saying the correct pronunciation or tense immediately after making a mistake is not useful. We have to explain to them why this is incorrect. (T8, Interview)

Psychological mediators shape how teachers address errors and guide learners towards self-correction. The use of non-verbal strategies, such as facial expressions and body language, serves as a powerful cognitive tool, fostering students’ awareness and self-monitoring abilities. These cues not only help learners identify their errors but also

enhance their cognitive engagement with the language. Additionally, the strategic use of language by teachers to clarify concepts and correct errors reinforces understanding and supports cognitive development. By blending both non-verbal and verbal techniques, teachers create a learning environment that encourages reflective thinking and effective self-correction, which is crucial for language acquisition and development.

Material mediators

Material mediators, including physical objects and audiovisual aids, are considered important tools for supporting problem-solving and cognitive processes in the classroom. Through data analysis, the theme of material mediation emerged, encompassing several subthemes. The first audiovisual tool used to utilise the process of CF in language learning was T1's mini-board. T1 used his mini-board to make notes of the errors he heard when monitoring the students during the speaking tasks.

Interviewer: I saw from the beginning of the class that you had a mini whiteboard, and at first, the students had to use it for error correction tasks . . .

T1: Depending on the nature of the task, I sometimes correct the students on the spot and sometimes use delayed error correction techniques. During the photo description task, I didn't want to interrupt the students so I wrote the errors on my mini-board. (T1, Interview)

Visual aids, such as mini-boards and whiteboards, can play a crucial role in CF by providing a clear representation of language concepts. Incorrect sentences and words can be written down to allow students to see their mistakes and understand the correct forms visually. In addition to visual aids, auditory aids were another tool the teachers used to facilitate CF. Incorporating audio files into language learning materials is a beneficial strategy for correcting students' errors and providing them with the correct pronunciation. T3 mentioned that she sometimes encouraged the learners to pay attention to the correct pronunciation of the words by listening to the coursebook audio tracks:

I think it's a good idea to expose the students to the correct pronunciation when they mispronounce a word. Actually, not always because it's time-consuming but I usually try to teach the correct pronunciation using audio tracks. (T3, Interview)

T3's approach underscores the value of using authentic audio resources to model correct pronunciation, though she also acknowledges the practical challenge of time constraints. This selective use of audio tracks reflects a balanced strategy, ensuring students receive pronunciation support without disrupting the flow of the lesson. Another instance of exploiting audio tracks to help the students correct their pronunciation errors was the time T11 noticed a common pronunciation error and decided to play the audio track and facilitate the process of CF:

Let's practice pronunciation. Listen to this audio file and repeat after me. Pay attention to how the words are pronounced. (T11, Observation)

Then she gave the following instructions:

After listening to the audio recording, compare your pronunciation with the model to identify any errors. (T11, Observation)

During the interview, T11 stated that this pronunciation practice is very beneficial because it helps the students focus on mimicking the correct pronunciation and intonation patterns. Moreover, it allows learners to develop self-awareness of their pronunciation when they are asked to compare their pronunciation with the authentic one.

Material mediators, including visual and auditory aids, play a pivotal role in facilitating CF and enhancing language learning. Tools such as mini-boards and audio tracks provide tangible and auditory support, making language concepts more accessible and comprehensible for students. Visual aids allow learners to see and understand their mistakes directly, while auditory aids offer accurate pronunciation models and support self-assessment. The integration of these materials into the classroom practice helps create a more interactive and supportive learning environment, demonstrating the importance of incorporating diverse resources to address errors and reinforce language skills effectively.

Peer mediators

Material mediators, including peer intervention in CF, yielded mixed results in this study. In the conversation between the interviewer and T1, he mentioned that the nature of his classroom is collaborative and students are comfortable seeking assistance from their peers:

T1: When a student makes a mistake, their classmates correct them.

Interviewer: Do they get embarrassed after the peer correction?

T1: No, I've created an intimate atmosphere in my classes where students feel free to make mistakes and have no problem getting corrected by their classmates. In fact, I remember the first days of the class you observed, they weren't like this. Actually, they were afraid of making mistakes but little by little, I talked to them and created a safe atmosphere (T1, Interview).

According to T1, peer correction is risky, but it can be possible by building a good rapport among learners. Interestingly, according to T7, learners sometimes help their classmates to correct themselves. In other words, teacher is not the only mediator when it comes to promoting self-correction. Below is an instance of a situation in which peers encourage self-correction:

T7: What's your brother doing right now?

S1: He plays computer games.

S2: The teacher said right now. Be careful!

S1: Ok Ok. He plays video games right now.

S2: Ghalateh! (that's incorrect). Use -ing

S1: Ohhh, sorry. He is playing computer games right now. (T7, Observation)

Examples from T1 and T7's lessons highlight how peer mediation can contribute to the CF process by which they can take the agency. This contribution happens when peers provide feedback and support to each other. However, according to five participants, peer mediation is not as popular as psychological and material mediation for several reasons. Firstly, some teachers do not trust the accuracy of the corrections provided by other students. Therefore, they do not tend to encourage peer correction in their lessons:

Interviewer: I noticed that when a student was talking, her friends were trying to correct her but you said please be quiet and let her talk. Why did you make that decision?

T9: There were times when one student made a mistake and her peers provided incorrect explanations which led to further confusion. So, I don't usually encourage peer correction to reduce the risk of confusion. (T9, Interview)

Apart from the risk of further confusion, T8 and T5 mentioned that peer correction may cause embarrassment and discomfort. They stated that students might get uncomfortable when they get corrected by their peers and this will hinder the learning process.

T8: When I was a language learner, I hated to be corrected by my classmates and I believe this is also true for my students. I don't let the students correct their classmates' errors. (T8, Interview)

T5 also believes that being constantly corrected by peers may traumatise the weaker students, which will create barriers to effective communication and learning as learners might hesitate to engage in the process of language practice.

Peer mediators contribute a unique dimension to the process of CF by fostering collaborative learning and mutual support. When implemented in a supportive and well-managed classroom environment, peer correction can enhance learners' self-awareness and engagement. However, the effectiveness of peer mediation is contingent upon the trust and rapport among students, as well as the teacher's guidance, in managing peer interactions. While some teachers express concerns about the accuracy of peer corrections and the potential for embarrassment, creating a safe and collaborative atmosphere can mitigate these issues. Thus, peer mediation, when carefully managed, can complement psychological and material mediators, providing a holistic approach to CF and language development.

All in all, the identified themes illuminate the interactions involved in correcting errors by the participants, emphasising three essential mediators: psychological; material; and peer. Psychological mediators like using body language and providing language support demonstrate how teachers guide students to correct themselves and become more aware of language. Material mediators, such as visual and auditory aids, offer assistance in recognising errors and improving pronunciation. Furthermore, peer mediators are seen as intricate elements influenced by classroom dynamics and individual comfort levels.

Discussion

Awareness of the critical role of CF and its various types is not a neglected area in the EFL context (e.g. Ha & Murray, 2021; Housen et al., 2011; Roothoof & Breeze, 2016) and understanding the link between teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards selecting CF is vital in aiding students' learning (Lavasani, 2010). This connection is crucial because teachers' perceptions of CF influence how they choose strategies that align with their understanding of students' developmental needs, thereby optimising the learning experience. Thus far, previous studies have confirmed the importance of MLE associated with the SCT perspective (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995) in assessing students during their learning experience, whether internally (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) or externally (Li et al., 2022). In this study, researchers explored 12 Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives regarding the influence of various CF strategies and their underlying purposes in the EFL context to identify different types of CF used by those teachers and the reasons behind selecting preferred types of feedback. The findings of this study added to the existing literature on CF by demonstrating three main themes as core key mediators influencing EFL teachers' beliefs to address students' errors, namely the *Psychological mediator*, *Material mediator* and *Peer mediator*, and some specific reasons for each of them (Table 2).

From the SCT perspective, the first theme, which is psychological mediators, revealed two primary reasons for CF (see Table 2). First, Non-verbal Strategies (NVS), such as facial expressions and body language, emerged prominently in both interviews and observations. These strategies serve as vital tools for creating a supportive learning environment that connects students' prior knowledge and schema with new language input. This finding aligns with a number of recent studies (e.g. Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020; Tan et al., 2024; Wang & Loewen, 2016) which highlight the scaffolding role of NVS in guiding learners towards better understanding and performance. Moreover, Vidiella and Garcia (2015) emphasised the integration of effective feedback practices into teacher training, which this study extends by illustrating how NVS can be operationalised in real teaching contexts. However, while NVS appear to enhance feedback effectiveness, the extent to which these strategies can be universally adopted raises questions about their transferability across cultural and linguistic contexts. Second, CF was employed to foster cognitive development, primarily through explicit instruction (Lantolf, 2024). Teachers explained the reasons behind learners' mistakes, drawing on strategies identified in prior research as effective for enhancing cognitive learning processes (Ha & Murray, 2023; Walsh, 2002). By confirming the utility

Table 2. Sociocultural mediators in teachers' CF, their reasons and examples.

Sociocultural Mediators	Reason	Example
Psychological	To promote self-correction through NVS	The pupils themselves understood that the sentence was wrong somewhere, and this was better than me repeating the sentence for them. (T2, Interview)
	To scaffold learning and cognitive growth	I think that we have to help the students realize their errors and correct them. Saying the correct pronunciation or tense immediately after making a mistake is not useful. We have to explain to them why this is incorrect. (T8, Interview)
Material	To delay the feedback and not interrupt students	During the photo description task, I didn't want to interrupt the students so I wrote the errors on my mini-board. (T1, Interview)
	To enhance noticing and exposure	I think it's a good idea to expose the students to the correct pronunciation when they mispronounce a word ... I usually try to teach the correct pronunciation using audio tracks. (T3, Interview)
	To reinforce correct forms	Let's practice pronunciation. Listen to this audio file and repeat after me. Pay attention to how the words are pronounced. (T11, Observation)
Peer	To foster learners' agency	In fact, I remember the first days of the class you observed. They weren't like this ... but little by little, I talked to them and created a safe atmosphere. (T1, Interview)
	To establish a positive environment of trust	No, I've created an intimate atmosphere in my classes where students feel free to make mistakes and have no problem getting corrected by their classmates. (T1, Interview)
	To avoid confusion by restricting peer correction	There were times when one student made a mistake and her peers provided incorrect explanations which led to further confusion. So, I don't usually encourage peer correction to reduce the risk of confusion. (T9, Interview)

of explicit instruction in CF, this study reinforces its value in contexts where learners require detailed guidance to overcome specific language challenges. However, the reliance on explicit instruction may also indicate a gap in the teachers' use of other scaffolding techniques, suggesting the need for balanced training that integrates explicit and implicit methods of CF. This finding prompts a critical reflection on the role of teacher beliefs and their alignment with evidence-based practices. Taken together, the findings in this sociocultural mediator theme underscore the multifaceted role of psychological mediators in shaping CF practices.

In the second theme, material mediator, researchers could identify the influential role of external supports, so-called 'pedagogical aids', in assisting students in their learning. From one perspective, visual aids, such as mini-boards and whiteboards, facilitate the process of error correction in CF through a safe atmosphere in the classroom, while students are not only able to listen to audio tracks but also receive enough enhancement input (Abadikhah & Shahriyarpour, 2012), as well as extra explanation to see and understand what is the exact error. Auditory aids are also another extra support through coursebook audios to focus on pronunciation and getting corrected through opportunities provided by a teacher as feedback in CF. Our results are in line with Banning and Gam (2020), who underscored the benefits of pedagogical aids in supporting students' learning through external resources. It has also emerged in this theme that noticing has an influential role in implementing CF in language classrooms. This is also in line with Kao (2023), who found that students who recognised the targeted errors demonstrated significant improvements in their writing accuracy, suggesting that awareness plays a crucial role in the efficacy of corrective feedback. We have found that they avoid

unnecessary interruptions in the classroom, enhance noticing and exposure, and reinforce correct forms, which highlights their usefulness in the CF.

The last theme that emerged in this study is peer mediators. In this theme, the significant roles of interactional competence (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2023) and agency become evident when learners feel comfortable correcting their peers, as presented by Lantolf and Poehner (2008). Among the 12 participants, five prioritised psychological and material mediators over peer mediators, as they could not trust the accuracy and efficiency of the corrections and believed that it created a barrier during students' learning experiences, as well as increased the risk of conflicts and confusion. This finding highlights a critical tension between the theoretical benefits of peer mediation and its practical challenges in classroom settings (Seroussi et al., 2019). While peer mediators can foster collaboration and autonomy, their effectiveness is undermined by issues of trust and perceived unreliability. Furthermore, although peer correction promotes self-awareness and active engagement, it can inadvertently lead to overcorrection, creating discomfort among students. This may discourage participation, as learners might fear losing face or being judged for making mistakes, ultimately diminishing their motivation to engage in classroom discussions (Campbell & Batista, 2023). The findings of this study are associated with the three stages of self-regulation presented by (Cruz & Pardo, 2014; Harris, 2023; Jang & DaSilva Iddings, 2010). Object-regulation refers to mediation through objects; other-regulation refers to assistance from informed individuals, an informative signal in the first stage from the teacher through NVS as feedback; and self-regulation, which pertains to the peer mediation, refers to students supporting one another in a stress-free environment independently and autonomously. This study underscores the role of CF in promoting self-regulation across its different stages. Also, in contrast to a study conducted by Atai and Shafiee (2017), who reported significant differences in pedagogical thoughts among the participants in terms of academic backgrounds, the participants of the present study with degrees in Psychology, TEFL and English Translation considered the power of mental abilities and empathy the same.

Conclusions and implications

In sum, researchers utilised the sociocultural perspective and the mediation theory (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995) to explore reasons for providing different types of CF among 12 EFL teachers in two different language schools in Iran. The emergent themes demonstrated that teachers used three themes of mediated learning in CF which again emphasised the impact of SCT on language learning and teaching. SCT helps teachers consider the significant role of interaction in the process of mediation and students' ZPD, which was reflected in peer mediation in this study. The results from psychological mediators also aid teachers in considering their reactions to their students' mistakes through NVSs, enabling them to select clear and simple feedback that avoids potential conflicts. As the instructional tool should facilitate the learning process, the significant role of selecting adequate tools in correcting learners was highlighted in material mediators.

The findings of this study hold important implications for EFL teachers and teacher educators, emphasising the need to consider sociocultural peculiarities, enhance their literacy in CF, and employ metacognitive strategies to critically assess their rationale for providing feedback. Practically, the findings suggest that EFL teachers should incorporate



a blend of psychological, material and peer-mediated CF strategies to cater to diverse student needs.

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. One significant limitation is the potential influence of gendered differences and unequal opportunities among EFL teachers, which may affect their beliefs about different types of feedback. Future research should aim to use purposive sampling or similar strategies to ensure balanced gender representation, providing a more comprehensive understanding of feedback practices. In addition, to enhance the generalisability of the findings across various EFL contexts, future studies should broaden their focus beyond the current sample. Furthermore, future research should explore the application of these findings in different cultural and educational settings to further generalise the results. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long-term impact of different corrective feedback (CF) strategies on language acquisition and learner development.

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