

# *The Effectiveness of Different Corrective Feedback on College English Learners' Acquisition of Subjunctive Mood*

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**Abstract**—The study mainly investigates the effectiveness of explicit feedback and implicit feedback on college English learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood. In an experimental design (two treatment groups and one control group), 120 non-English major students completed four communicative activities during which they received either metalinguistic feedback (explicit feedback) or recasts (implicit feedback) or no feedback from the teacher in case of any erroneous utterance in the target grammar structure. Three paper tests (a pre-test, an immediate posttest and a delayed posttest) were employed to measure students' knowledge of subjunctive mood, which essentially reflected their acquisition. Results show that both explicit feedback and implicit feedback are effective in learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood and their effects can be retained for a relatively long time. Explicit feedback is proved to be even more beneficial than implicit feedback, as it can trigger more learners' noticing of the target linguistic features.

**Keywords**—*explicit feedback; implicit feedback; college English learners; acquisition of subjunctive mood; learners' noticing*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The past several years witnessed a remarkable shift from a simple focus on language forms to a great emphasis on the practical use of the target language (communication in particular) in second language classrooms. However, an increasing amount of research has demonstrated the fact that even though L2 learners in communicatively-oriented classrooms achieve relatively high standard of oral fluency, they are still prone to experience difficulties with grammar accuracy and error-free utterances, failing to develop a high degree of language proficiency (e.g. Harley & Swain, 1984; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Lightbown et.al, 2002). Consequently, a pedagogy that integrates corrective feedback and communicative teaching activities has been highly advocated in that it enables students to pay attention to and practice the linguistic forms within the communicative contexts and hence improve their accuracy.

Corrective feedback basically refers to "any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance".<sup>[1:31]</sup> It is basically divided into two categories: explicit feedback and implicit feedback. Explicit feedback generally involves a clear indicator of learners' errors, while implicit feedback only

provides the correct forms of the target language, hopefully leading students to realize their errors by themselves.<sup>[2]</sup> The comparative effects of these two forms of corrective feedback have attracted a lot of attention in the research field of second language acquisition (e.g. Carroll & Swain, 1993; Dekeyser, 1993; Kim & Mathes, 2001; Sanz, 2003; Leeman, 2003; Lyster, 2004; Sheen, 2007; Yilmaz, 2013); however, the relevant empirical studies based on Chinese ESL settings are still limited. Therefore, taking college English learners as the research subjects, the current study specifically investigates the effectiveness of explicit feedback and implicit feedback on learners' acquisition of a particular English grammar point-subjunctive mood. It is expected that this study can provide some guidelines for teachers to follow in carrying out oral corrective feedback in college English classrooms.

## II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

The research on corrective feedback can be traced back to 1970s in western countries. The early investigations mainly focused on the role of learner errors and teachers' treatments to them. Corder initially pointed out that learner errors were of great importance in language learning process, which were an excellent indicator suggesting to what extent learners had grasped the target language system and in what aspects they needed assistance.<sup>[3]</sup> Chenoweth later classified learner errors and came up with the conception and function of error correction (corrective feedback).<sup>[4]</sup> Afterwards, Schmidt<sup>[5]</sup> and Long<sup>[6]</sup>, the proponents of Noticing Hypothesis and Interaction Hypothesis, further declared that corrective feedback played a pivotal role in triggering learners' noticing of the discrepancies between their interlanguage and the target forms, making them immediately realize and correct the errors and eventually improve their L2 competency. Swain, in his Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, also suggested a beneficial role of corrective feedback in generating more pushed-output from learners during conversation and thus contributing to their language acquisition.<sup>[7]</sup>

As for the comparison of the effectiveness of different corrective feedback, Carroll and Swain initially conducted an experiment with 100 Spanish EFL students to investigate the effects of various types of corrective feedback on their

acquisition of dative alternation. It was indicated, from the results of both the immediate and delayed recall production tests, that all of the treatment groups performed better than the control group, while the group who received metalinguistic feedback outperformed all other groups in the delayed post-test.<sup>[8]</sup> Sheen made a specific attempt to study the effects of both explicit and implicit corrective feedback on 99 intermediate level students' acquisition of English articles. The results of the immediate posttest and delayed posttest basically demonstrated a robustly beneficial role of explicit feedback, as it could provide a higher transparency of linguistic errors and attract learners' attention.<sup>[9]</sup> The similar findings have also been revealed in plenty of other studies (e.g. Muranoi, 2000; Lyster, 2004; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Yilmaz, 2013). However, there have been also some researchers failing to find any advantage of explicit feedback over implicit feedback on the relevant tests (e.g. Dekeyser, 1993; Kim & Mathes, 2001; Sanz, 2003) on L2 learners' acquisition. Leeman, probing into the effects of diverse feedback on 74 first-year university learners' acquisition of Spanish non-adjective agreement, even discovered a relatively limited effect for explicit feedback and a more facilitative role of implicit feedback.<sup>[10]</sup> The mixed results of these previous studies call for further research into this area. Besides, as Russell and Spada have pointed out, the exploration of the effectiveness of different corrective feedback (explicit & implicit) over a long period is still insufficient.<sup>[11]</sup> This is closely related to the question that whether corrective feedback can result in consistently substantial changes in students' interlanguage systems and generate a long-term acquisition of the target linguistic features.<sup>[12]</sup> Therefore, studies that further examine the long-term effectiveness of diverse corrective feedback are highly in need. Last, according to Lyster and Mori, corrective feedback which proves effective in one instructional setting may not be so in another.<sup>[13]</sup> Therefore, it can be arguably assumed that the results of fruitful investigations into corrective feedback in other countries may not be applicable in Chinese ESL settings.

In China, several researchers have further analyzed the concept and roles of corrective feedback in second language acquisition based on the reviews or meta-analysis of western investigations (e.g. Zhang & Dai, 2001; Sun, 2005; Wang, 2016). However, Studies which have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of explicit and implicit corrective feedback in classrooms are relatively few and limited, most of which utilized learners or teachers' responses to the questionnaires (or interviews) and learner uptake as the measurements of the effectiveness of CF. Zhao Chen, based on the data of 30 English classes (from elementary to advanced), carried out a study to explore the patterns of corrective feedback teachers used in accordance with the types of errors the students made and the impact of diverse feedback on learners' uptake. It was discovered that negotiation of form (including explicit feedback) was more facilitative in eliciting learners' production of modified-output (uptake) than recasts, which implied a more beneficial role of explicit feedback in L2 learners' language development.<sup>[14]</sup> Fan Ying examined both teachers and students' view of corrective feedback and how different corrective feedback influenced students' uptake in English classrooms with 5 English teachers and 256 university

first-year students. Results showed that even though recasts was most frequently utilized by teachers in English classes, it led to less learner uptake than explicit feedback, thus performed less importance on L2 learners' language acquisition.<sup>[15]</sup> Identical results were also found in some other studies of the relationship between corrective feedback and learner uptake (e.g. Shi Guang, 2005; Liao Shuna, 2008; He Qing, 2010). However, according to Lyster, it is somewhat problematic to take immediate repair as the only yardstick of language learning, since it does not necessarily reflect learner's acquisition of new knowledge or their activation of hidden knowledge.<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, researches using more objective measures, such as tests, are still highly in need in China.

### III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address the previous research gaps, the current study seeks to explore, in more detail, the effectiveness of explicit corrective feedback (in the form of metalinguistic feedback) and implicit corrective feedback (in the form of recasts) on college English learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood. It also investigates learners' attitudes toward these two patterns of corrective feedback, since having a good idea of students' views can effectively eliminate the misunderstandings between teachers and learners, thus helping to foster better classroom communication and enhance learners' language development. The combination of CF effectiveness research and learners' attitudes study can provide more practical implications for further classroom teaching practice. The main research questions guiding our investigation are:

- (1) Is corrective feedback effective in facilitating college English learners' acquisition of English subjunctive mood?
- (2) If yes, which type of corrective feedback is more effective in the accuracy of college English learners' acquisition of English subjunctive mood?
- (3) Is such accuracy maintained for a long time (in the delayed posttest)?
- (4) What are college English learners' attitudes toward teachers' utilization of corrective feedback in classrooms?

### IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### A. Participants

The current study was conducted in a well-known college in Fujian Province of China. A total of 120 first-year non-English major students (51 females and 69 males, aged from 20-21) from three respective classes, as well as an experienced English teacher (aged 35, teaching English for 10 years), were involved in this study. According to the background questionnaire survey, the students were all native speakers of Chinese, with an average length of time learning English as a second language of 9.07 years (ranging from 7-11 years). Most of them (85%) started learning English as children at an average age of 11 as part of elementary school English education. None of them had the experience of studying English abroad or learning a second language apart from English. Additionally, most of the English instruction they had

received in school were a mixture of both formal (grammar-oriented) and informal (communication-oriented) instruction.

Having nearly the identical English proficiency of advanced level (based on their latest English achievement test scores), these students were randomly divided into three groups in the current study: group 1 (n=40) received explicit feedback (metalinguistic feedback); group 2 (n=40) received implicit feedback (recasts); group 3 (n=40) received no corrective feedback. The first two served as the treatment groups while the third group was regarded as the control group. The teacher was required to provide the relevant instruction and corrective feedback to each group. It was ensured that all the participants volunteered to take part in this research.

### B. Instructional materials

For the purpose of this study, the same amount of instruction about subjunctive mood was provided for each experimental group (a total of 1 hour during which the students were required to complete four communicative activities). The activities employed in this study contained a free-talking activity, an imagination activity, a role-play activity, and a speech activity.

#### 1) Free-talking activity

In the free-talking activity, students were assigned to talk about their "Fantastic Wishes" (which were unrealistic or extremely hard to achieve) at present, in the past and in the future. The teacher began the activity by illustrating his own wishes, deliberately using the target pattern of subjunctive mood "I wish/wished...". Then students were randomly divided into pairs, being required to exchange their ideas with partners for five minutes. After the pair-discussion, the teacher encouraged students to present their wishes in front of the class, giving corrective feedback (or none at all) whenever they made errors on the target structures.

#### 2) Imagination activity

For the imagination activity, the teacher initially presented 9 colorful pictures to students. These basically involved the drawings of some sports stars (e.g. Yao Ming, Sun Yang, Roger Federer etc.), fashion icons (e.g. Karl Lagerfeld etc.), luxurious jewelries, beautiful hot-air balloons, amazing wonderland and so on. Students were then asked to make an imagination about what they would do if they were the famous people in the pictures (or if they possessed the valuable things in the pictures); or if they were in the wonderful places in the pictures), and speak out their ideas using the target SM structure "if...". An example was set by the teacher first ("If I had an airplane, I would travel around the world"), and during students' production, corrective feedback was constantly provided (or not) on the occurrence of their grammatical errors.

#### 3) Role-play activity

Students were once again divided into pairs in the role-play activity. Each pair was given a card, which depicted a talking scene between two intimate friends (Allen & Alice) or two best colleagues (Helen & Sophia). Students in pairs were required to play the two specific roles in the card they received and generate a communication with their partners employing several types of subjunctive mood, including "I wish that...", "It is time that...", "It is important/essential that...", "I

suggest/advice that...", and "without/but for...". After five minutes' preparation, several pairs were asked to make a performance in front of the class, followed by the teachers' provision of corrective feedback (or none at all) on any error of the target grammar.

#### 4) Speech activity

In the speech activity, students were first divided into five groups, each of which selected a speech topic that required the use of subjunctive mood respectively. The five topics included: (1) If I were a millionaire; (2) I wish I could be the chairman of China; (3) If I were a teacher; (4) I wish I were a doctor; and (5) If I were a celebrity. Ten minutes were given to students to discuss the topics with their group members and make some notes of their ideas. Then, each group was asked to choose one representative to make a presentation of their discussion results in front of the class for five minutes. After the report of each group, the teacher subsequently corrected (or not) their errors concerning subjunctive mood.

### C. Instructional procedures

For the sake of the current study, the same instructor was responsible for conducting the above communicative activities for three diverse groups (two treatment groups and one control group). An observer (the researcher) sat in the back of the classroom to observe the interaction between the teacher and students and manually record the instances of learners' use of subjunctive mood and teacher's employment of corrective feedback on their errors. The whole instructional procedures in three groups were also video-recorded for the sake of validity and reliability.

Learners received intensive corrective feedback (or none at all) when they participated in the classroom activities. To be specific, Group 1 received explicit corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback, which involved either questions, comments, or information related to the accuracy of learners' production. For instance:

(1) Student: I wish I can fly to the moon.

→Teacher: Could—you need to use the past tense here.

Student: Oh, yes. I could...

(2) Student: I wish I am a millionaire and can buy a big villa for my family.

→Teacher: Can you find some mistakes in your sentence? Are you sure "am" and "can" can be used here?

Student: Oh, no. I am sorry. I wish I were a millionaire and could buy a big villa.

Contrarily, group 2 received implicit feedback in the form of recasts, which contained the teacher's reformulation of part or all of a learner's language production, in order to eliminate the error. For example:

(1) Student: I wish I am a superman and can defeat all the bad guys.

→Teacher: You wish you were a superman and could defeat the bad guys?

Student: Yes.

(2) Student: If I am Sun Yang, I could swim very well.

→Teacher: If you were

Student: Oh, yes, if I were...



The above examples clearly demonstrated the difference between explicit corrective feedback and implicit corrective feedback. The teacher made explicit corrections by first repeating learners' errors and then providing the metalinguistic information, or directly giving a metalinguistic clue (an indication to the student that he had made a mistake) in group 1. However, in group 2, the teacher simply repeated learners' utterances in the correct forms, which seemed less salient. Group 3 took part in the same communicative activities but received no corrective feedback at all.

TABLE I. NUMBER OF ERRONEOUS PRODUCTION & CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK GIVEN & STUDENTS' IMMEDIATE REFORMULATION

Group	Erroneous production	Corrective feedback given	Students' immediate reformulation (repair)
Metalinguistic	62	55	48
recasts	58	50	35
group	47	0	0

#### D. Test instruments and procedure

In this study, every participating learner was required to complete three testing sessions: the pre-test, the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, as well as a questionnaire.

Prior to all the sessions, the paper tests as well as the questionnaire were piloted with five additional students, who were at the same English proficiency level as the participating students. Two days prior to the beginning of the instructional treatments, each student participated in this study was required to sign a consent form, complete a background questionnaire and take the pre-test. The immediate post-test was conducted one day after the treatment sessions, followed by the completion of the questionnaire of corrective feedback, and the delayed post-test was finished 4 weeks later.

##### 1) Paper tests

The questions in the paper tests were extracted from Zhang Daozhen's Exercise Book of Practical English Grammar (2004). It was divided into four parts, each of which started with a clear direction and an example. The first part was multiple choices, containing 20 items overall. Students were required to choose the appropriate option for each item and could get one mark if they were right; The second part was blank filling. It involved 30 blanks (21 items), each of which deserved one mark as well. To fill these blanks, students had to think about the correct forms of the verbs in brackets and write them down; The third part was sentence correction. It presented 15 mistaken sentences of subjunctive mood. For each sentence, students were able to get one mark if they pointed out (identified) the mistake and another mark if they did the right correction; The forth part was translation, which included 15 items. As for this part, students needed to translate the sentences from Chinese to English, using the correct structures of subjunctive mood. The marking criteria were as follows: for sentences which contained only one clause, students could get one mark each if they translated the main verb correctly; for the sentences which comprised two clauses, students' marks depended on the number of clauses they did right (one mark for each clause). Moreover, as this study mainly concerned about grammar, any other mistakes, such as the use of wrong lexical items, were ignored in the marking process. The total score for

the paper tests was 100 with 60 as the passing score. From easy to difficult (complex), the tests could serve as an effective tool to examine students' grasp of the target forms of English subjunctive mood comprehensively.

##### 2) Questionnaire

The questionnaire was intentionally designed to measure students' attitudes toward the use of different corrective feedback in college English classrooms. It basically included 10 items, each of which utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strong disagree". Students were given ten minutes to complete the questionnaire and were allowed to ask any question related to the expressions in it. Prior to the collection, specific care was taken to ensure that students did not omit any item in the questionnaire.

#### E. Data Analyses

The statistic tool of SPSS 17.0 was utilized to examine the results of the three tests (pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test), making them more scientific and convincing. Descriptive statistics, repeated-measures ANOVA and post hoc comparison were clearly displayed to indicate the overall development of different groups over the time and the influence of different corrective feedback on learners' acquisition of English subjunctive mood (the comparison of accuracy among different groups in the immediate post-test and delayed post-test).

Students' responses to the 10 Likert-scale questions in the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed with the descriptive statistics to calculate the frequency of answers to each question. During the process of data analyses, the options "strongly agree" and "agree" are both categorized into the column "agree", and the choices "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are both put into the column "disagree". In this way, students' attitudes toward the utilization of different corrective feedback were clearly shown.

## II. RESULTS

#### A. Results of paper tests

TABLE II displays the test results of the three groups in the pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest. It's shown that the students in the three groups obtained the similar scores in the pre-test, ranging from 61.35 to 62.68. The results of One-Way ANOVA also reveal that there was no statistical significance among the three groups on the pre-test results ( $\text{Sig.}=0.298>0.05$ ), thus the three groups were more comparable in terms of the use of English subjunctive mood in the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, with the influence of different corrective feedback. After the four communicative activities, the mean scores of all the three groups increased on both posttests, among which the metalinguistic feedback group ascended from 62.68 on the pretest to 74.05 on the immediate posttest and 72.95 on the delayed posttest, the recasts group rose from 61.85 on the pretest to 67.13 on the immediate posttest and 66.73 on the delayed posttest and the control group varied from 61.35 on the pretest to 63.43 on the immediate posttest and 62.55 on the delayed posttest.

TABLE II. TEST RESULTS OF THE THREE GROUPS

Groups	Pretest		Intermediate post-test		Delayed post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Metalinguistic (40)	62.68		4.196		74.05	
Recasts (40)	61.85		3.570		67.13	
Control (40)	61.35		3.690		63.43	
Total (120)	61.96		3.836		68.20	

The results of repeated-measures ANOVA (see TABLE III) further indicate that the scores of the three groups ascended considerably from the pre-test to both posttests ( $F=239.108$ ,  $Sig.<0.0001$ ). However, the post hoc comparison (see TABLE IV) shows that the students involved in metalinguistic feedback group and recasts group achieved a higher accuracy on the immediate post-test ( $Sig. <0.05$ ) and such accuracy could be retained on the delayed post-test, while the control group only outperformed on the immediate posttest ( $Sig.=0.000$ ), not on the delayed posttest ( $Sig.=0.144$ ).

TABLE III. RESULTS OF REPEATED-MEASURES ANOVA

Source	Sum Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Time	2771.506	1.437	1928.164	239.108	.000
Time*group	1154.344	2.875	401.544	49.795	.000
Error (time)	1356.150	168.174	8.064	239.108	.000

The repeated-measures ANOVA also discovers a great interaction between test time and group formation, which means that there was a significant difference between groups on their immediate posttest and delayed post test ( $F=49.795$ ,  $Sig<0.05$ ). In addition, the results of post hoc within-group comparison reveal that the metalinguistic group performed better than the recasts group and the control group on both posttests ( $Sig. <0.05$ ), and the recasts group had a better performance than the control group as well ( $Sig <0.05$ ) (see TABLE V) .

TABLE IV. POST HOC COMPARISON OF THE THREE GROUPS ON THE THREE TESTS

Paired Condition		Paired Difference		Sig.
		Mean Difference	Std. Error	
Metalinguistic	Pretest-Immediate posttest	-11.375*	.419	.000
	Immediate posttest-Delayed posttest	1.100	.620	.084
	Pretest-Delayed posttest	-10.275*	.675	.000
Recasts	Pretest-Immediate posttest	-5.275*	.203	.000
	Immediate posttest-Delayed posttest	.400	.512	.440
	Pretest-Delayed posttest	-4.875*	.571	.000
Control	Pretest-Immediate posttest	-2.075*	.331	.000
	Immediate post-test-Delayed posttest	.875	.714	.682
	Pretest-Delayed posttest	-1.200*	.587	.144

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

## B. Results of questionnaire

The results of questionnaire indicate a positive attitude toward English teachers' employment of corrective feedback in college English classrooms from students. A high percentage (85%) of students agreed that teachers' corrective feedback should be utilized in their English classes. Approximately 64 percent of learners responded that they favor teachers' correction and most of them (83%) believed that teachers' corrective feedback may help to improve their grammar accuracy.

However, as to the attitudes toward explicit corrective feedback and implicit feedback respectively, students held different perspectives. On the one hand, even though a large number of students (89%) confessed the facilitating role of explicit corrective feedback on assisting them to notice and correct their errors, only a few learners (35%) would like to be explicitly corrected by teachers. A majority of students (65%) considered that explicit corrective feedback might make them feel embarrassed and lost face in front of the class and more than half (53%) of them thought that teachers' explicit correction might interrupt their thinking and oral production. On the other hand, 62% of students held that implicit corrective feedback, which did not point out students' errors directly, might seem less face-threatening and make them feel much more comfortable.

The overall results actually demonstrate a high preference for implicit corrective feedback over explicit feedback among students. Nonetheless, since only 38% students were able to clearly notice their errors when receiving implicit corrective feedback and nearly 45% of them were confused about the corrective intention of implicit feedback sometimes, a doubt should be thrown on the real effectiveness of implicit corrective feedback on enhancing learners' acquisition.

TABLE V. POST HOC COMPARISON OF THE THREE GROUPS ON THE THREE TESTS

Paired Condition		Paired Difference		Sig.
		Mean Difference	Std. Error	
Pre-test	Metalinguistic-Recasts	.825	.856	.337
	Recasts-Control	.500	.856	.560
	Metalinguistic-Control	1.325	.856	.124
Immediate post-test	Metalinguistic-Recasts	6.925*	.873	.000
	Recasts-Control	3.700*	.873	.000
	Metalinguistic-Control	10.625*	.873	.000
Delayed post-test	Metalinguistic-Recasts	6.225*	.213	.000
	Recasts-Control	4.175*	.213	.000
	Metalinguistic-Control	10.400*	.213	.000

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

### III. DISCUSSION

#### A. *The effectiveness of corrective feedback on college English learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood*

It is clear that in any of the posttests, learners from both the feedback groups performed better than those from the control group who were involved in the communicative activities but did not receive any corrective feedback. It essentially proves that either explicit feedback (metalinguistic feedback) or implicit feedback (recasts) has beneficial effects in facilitating college English learners' acquisition of English subjunctive mood.

The result actually supports some previous studies that have found positive effects of learner errors and corrective feedback on L2 development (e.g. Lightbown & Spada, 1990; White, 1991; Lyster, 1998), further suggesting that the provision of comprehensible input alone, without any error correction, is insufficient for second language learning within the communicative contexts. This could be because corrective feedback provides an opportunity for learners to attend to linguistic forms specifically and helps them to notice the discrepancies between their erroneous utterances and the target language, as indicated by Schmidt<sup>[5]</sup> and Long<sup>[6]</sup>. Moreover, the result also reflects the general findings that the integration of corrective feedback and communicative tasks is pedagogically effective for second language teaching (e.g. Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Spada, 1986).

#### B. *The effectiveness of different corrective feedback on college English learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood*

The metalinguistic feedback group was superior to the recasts group and the control group in both the immediate posttest and the delayed posttest, which essentially points to a distinct advantage for explicit corrective feedback (metalinguistic feedback) over implicit corrective feedback (recasts) in improving the accuracy of college English learners' learning of English subjunctive mood.

The result of the current study is in accordance with most of the previous studies which have suggested that learners gain more from explicit feedback than implicit feedback. In some of their research (e.g. Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006), however, the strong effect for the metalinguistic feedback was only salient in the delayed post-test, while in this study a beneficial effect was discovered in the improvement of both the immediate and delayed test scores. All the studies involved a short treatment (1 hour), and the target linguistic features were all morphological in nature in them. However, the language proficiency level of students differed. Whereas the students in the present study were at advanced level, possessing a relatively proficient ability to use the information in the feedback quickly, the learners involved in Carroll & Swain<sup>[8]</sup> and Ellis et.al.<sup>[2]</sup> study were all lower-immediate level students, who needed more time to absorb the explicit information they obtained from the feedback and use the target structures correctly.

The superiority of explicit feedback (metalinguistic feedback) over implicit feedback (recasts) reported in the study

can be explained in terms of Schmidt's distinction of two levels of awareness: noticing and understanding.<sup>[5]</sup> According to Schmidt, learners' 'noticing (awareness)' is fundamentally the consequence of encoding in short-term memory and is necessary for second language learning, because what is encoded in working memory may be subsequently transferred to long-term memory and in turn cause the creation of new knowledge or restructure of old knowledge. And 'understanding', though unnecessary, also plays an essential role in generating greater and deeper language learning.<sup>[5]</sup> Metalinguistic feedback (explicit feedback) is likely to have promoted not only noticing, through increasing the saliency of language forms and drawing learners' attention to them, but also understanding, through raising learners' consciousness about the underlying rule of the target grammar structures.<sup>[9]</sup> Also, explicit corrective feedback constantly affords longer time-outs from communicating, which may result in more time for the noticing and understanding of the target linguistic features by learners.<sup>[17]</sup> These are further confirmed in students' responses to the questionnaire, as 89% of them agreed to the statement "The explicit corrective feedback highlights the key structures. It can make me notice my errors and correct them immediately, which is beneficial for my English acquisition." On the contrary, implicit feedback (recasts) seems less noticeable, as only a few students (38%) clearly indicated their ability to attend to their errors when receiving implicit corrective feedback in the questionnaire. The reasons of this can be illustrated as follows: First, implicit feedback, especially recasts, is generally ambiguous in its functional properties. It can serve as both negative feedback and positive feedback,<sup>[18]</sup> constantly leading to a difficulty for students to realize its real intention and find out the errors. This is revealed in some empirical studies. For example, Lyster<sup>[16]</sup> and Mackey et.al.<sup>[19]</sup> all reported that students often failed to perceive the corrective intention of recasts, but constantly considered it as either non-corrective repetitions or alternative ways of expressing the same meaning; in this study, plenty of students (48%) also expressed their confusion about the corrective features of implicit feedback. Therefore, implicit feedback is less efficient in triggering learner's awareness and facilitating their acquisition due to its inherent indirectness to a large extent; Second, the choice of the target linguistic structure (English subjunctive mood) probably does not make up an ideal target feature for recasts (implicit feedback) in communicative activities. A large amount of research has demonstrated that the noticing of the corrected language forms in implicit feedback depends chiefly on the linguistic features that are being target (e.g. Egi, 2004; Mackey et.al 2000) and Philp<sup>[20]</sup> has found that recasts are noticed more when the linguistic features contained in them are not too complicated. However, English subjunctive mood is complex in itself, involving a variety of forms and rules. Even though implicit feedback offers the single correct forms for learners, it remains difficult for them to notice the complicated underlying rules and draw inferences from them, which might impede learners' acquisition.

Moreover, metalinguistic feedback can not only serve as a pattern of explicit feedback, but it can also act as an out-



pushing device, which withholds the correct reformulation and instead encourages students to repair by themselves; recasts, on the other hand, are not only a type of implicit feedback, but also a kind of input-providing feedback, which provide the correct target structures.<sup>[16]</sup> As indicated in TABLE I, students in the metalinguistic feedback actually produce more immediate reformulation than those in the recasts group in the current study. Given Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, the opportunity for self-repair is essential for language acquisition, apart from the sufficient provision of comprehensible input.<sup>[17]</sup> Also, according to De Bot, learners are prone to benefit more from being pushed to produce the target language forms by themselves than from merely hear the forms in the input.<sup>[21]</sup> Therefore, in this study, recasts (implicit feedback) might be less beneficial than metalinguistic feedback (explicit feedback) due to the reason that the teacher solved all the problems for the students and the students were under no pressure to produce "pushed output" and modify their erroneous utterances.

#### *C. The maintenance of grammar accuracy caused by corrective feedback*

Results show that although the mean scores of the metalinguistic feedback group and recasts group in the delayed post-test were a little lower than those in the immediate post-test, they were still much higher than those of the pre-test. They suggest that the influence of corrective feedback is somewhat enduring and the accuracy achieved in the immediate post-test can last for a long time, though with a slight drop.

The results are different to those in previous studies where the positive effects of corrective feedback were not only retained but also became more robust in the delayed posttest (e.g. Carroll & Swain 1993; Ellis et.al 2006; Sheen, 2007). Again, it could be possible that the choice of the target grammar structures (English subjunctive mood) affects the long-lasting effectiveness of corrective feedback. For instances, Sheen<sup>[9]</sup> chose English article as the linguistic feature and Ellis et.al<sup>[2]</sup> selected regular past tense- ed. They are both simple in their structures and rules and are relatively easy for learners to keep in mind. However, the inherent complexity of English subjunctive mood in its rules and forms generally makes learners have difficulty in remembering them effectively and use them correctly after a long time. Moreover, although corrective feedback is beneficial for acquisition, its effect might largely depend on the frequency of appropriate follow-up instruction and exercises. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, McLaughlin also claims that the complicated skills, such as second language acquisition, are learned though the initial attention but consolidated though repeated practice.<sup>[22]</sup> Therefore, the lack of subsequent revision (including instruction and practice) of subjunctive mood might contribute to the decreasing impact of corrective feedback in this study as well.

#### *D. Students' attitude toward teachers' use of corrective feedback in college English classrooms*

A large number of students agreed on the necessity and significance of error correction on their second language

learning and would like to be corrected in class. It is identical to some previous findings (e.g. Schulz, 1996; Lin, 2006; Fan, 2008) where most participating learners expressed their high preference for receiving corrective feedback rather than having their errors ignored by teachers. It is clear that corrective feedback of linguistic errors may leave a deep impression on learners and help them to consolidate the target language forms (or rules).

However, when discussing the opinions about different patterns of corrective feedback, learners actually indicated a more favorable attitude toward implicit feedback (62%) than explicit one (35%). This may be due to two reasons: First, it is claimed that "the least face-threatening feedback strategies are most likely to be accepted by learners"<sup>[23:7]</sup>, however, explicit feedback may largely damage learners' 'positive face' as it generally points out their errors directly and overtly (an expression of disapproval). The directness may generate more 'communication apprehension (anxiety)' from students, making them feel doubtful about their expressive ability; Second, explicit feedback is constantly more interruptive than implicit feedback in second language classrooms, which may hinder students' learning motivation to a large extent. The overt indication and correction of the errors are highly likely to disrupt learners' natural thinking and communication, which may result in a shortened expressive performance of students and a reluctant attitude toward next oral production. In comparison, implicit feedback (e.g. recasts) is generally much more effective than explicit feedback in scaffolding a supportive classroom atmosphere, in which students were unimpeded to express their ideas while noticing the target linguistic features. Therefore, students may be more positive about implicit feedback.

### IV. CONCLUSION

#### *A. Findings and pedagogical implications*

Although there have been plenty of studies exploring the effectiveness of corrective feedback on learners' second language acquisition in foreign countries, the relevant empirical investigations are rare in Chinese ESL settings. Therefore, the study has specifically probed into this field and discovered that both explicit feedback and implicit feedback are effective in college English learners' acquisition of subjunctive mood and their effectiveness can be retained for a relatively long time. Explicit feedback is proved to be even more beneficial than implicit feedback, as it can trigger more learners' noticing of the target linguistic features.

A number of pedagogical implications may be inferred from the current study. First, results of this study show that explicit feedback and implicit feedback are beneficial to college English learners' grammar acquisition; nonetheless, both of them might possess some disadvantages. On the one hand, even though explicit feedback can attract more attention from students, resulting in more development of target language acquisition than implicit feedback, it might be less preferred by learners due to its attributes of being obtrusive and interruptive sometimes. Therefore, when using explicit feedback in class, teachers should employ more mild expressions, such as "please pay attention to", "Do you think

“××× is right here” and so on, rather than some explicitly rejecting expressions like “No” or “You are wrong”. In this way, students may feel less face-threatened by teachers’ disapproval. Besides, it is better for teachers to provide explicit feedback after students’ overall performance, especially in some interactive situations. It may keep the flow of communication and provide students with more opportunities to generate complex thinking and oral production. On the other hand, implicit feedback is less able to trigger students’ noticing of the target linguistic features sometimes and may lead to less acquisition because of its inherent indirectness. Therefore, teachers should make use of some extrinsic enhancement to increase the saliency of implicit feedback and make it more noticeable to L2 learners. The possible ways may include the employment of heightened intonation or some paralinguistic cues, such as a funny face, hand signals and raised eyebrows and so on. Moreover, what should be noticed is that the flexible combined use of different corrective feedback (explicit & implicit) in accordance with diverse linguistic targets, students’ second language proficiencies and communicative contexts, may generate an even better teaching effect than the rigid utilization of a single pattern of them, as it can take the best advantage of each corrective feedback; Second, results of the present study also demonstrate a slightly decreasing impact of corrective feedback on learners’ grammar acquisition after a long period. It actually reveals that language learning is a consistent process, which cannot be accomplished once and for all. As a consequence, it is important for second language teachers to provide sufficient subsequent instructions (including corrective feedback) and exercises for students to consolidate their language acquisition, especially in regard of some complicated grammar points.

### *B. Limitations*

Despite the major findings and pedagogical implications, it is also important to point out certain limitations of the present study and provide some suggestions for further studies. First, the sample size of participants for this study is relatively small (overall 120 learners with only 40 in each group). There is a high possibility that this study cannot cover all the learning situations of all college English learners. Therefore, more care should be taken in generalizing its findings and some further studies which involve a larger sample of participants are needed. Second, the grammar structure (subjunctive mood) chosen for this study is a structure students have already learned before. It has got both merit and demerit. On the one hand, it can help the researcher to examine which pattern of corrective feedback is more effective in students’ enhancement of partially acquired knowledge. But on the other hand, it plays no roles in the exploration of whether corrective feedback (or what kind of corrective feedback) is facilitative in establishing brand-new linguistic knowledge of learners or not. As a result, more research focusing on how corrective feedback influences the acquisition of new language structures can be conducted. Third, the testing method in this is a little bit simple, which is less effective in measuring students’ implicit knowledge of the target linguistic features. According to Ellis et al.<sup>[2]</sup>, the written tests (e.g. sentence judgments, translation etc.) generally favor the employment of explicit knowledge rather than implicit knowledge, which may result in a biased preference for explicit

feedback. Therefore, studies containing more effective measurements of learners’ implicit feedback (e.g. oral test) are further demanded in this research field as well.

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