Correction of the negative feedback in teaching Italian Language at the University of Banja Luka (BiH)

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Abstract

Focusing on three types of corrective feedback strategies in the acquisition of Italian language as L2, namely explicit corrections, recasts, and prompts, the current paper's aim is to demonstrate how these strategies improve the acquisition of L2 in learners whose level is B1/B2/C1. Which gives the best effects in the correction techniques? Which strategy is mostly accepted by the learners? Can these strategies be used in the written feedback? It is very important to note how students react to the corrective feedback strategies. University students are used to being corrected according to the strategies used at school. In this case, school and university strategies are not the same. This fact affects the students' approach to the L2. University teachers of L2 should always consider the school corrective strategies to which students are accustomed. Some answers demonstrate that the effects of explicit corrections, recasts, and prompts have rarely been examined from students' own perspectives and more studies in this direction are needed.

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The purpose of this study is to show the application of implicit and explicit techniques in order to correct the negative feedback in oral and written outputs in Italian. L1 Serbian students enrolled at the 2nd and 3rd year of Italian language (University of Banja Luka , BiH) were asked to

take part in this case study. The 2nd year students – 30 people, B1 level – have been divided in three sub-groups consisting of 10 students. The same divisions were made for the 3rd year students -30 people, B2-C1 levels. The first group has been involved in the application of oral techniques, the second one in the application of written techniques.

Method

Oral test

The oral test was based on three methods:

1. explicit: metalinguistic information (Ellis, Loewen, Erlam, 2006),
2. implicit: reformulation or recast (Long, 2007),
3. implicit: solicitation or prompt (Lyster, 2004).

The test was focused on a specific skill of the students: the use of the past tense (passato prossimo). The initial question of the teacher, *cosa hai fatto ieri*, starts the conversation - dialogue. The test was held in a classroom of the Faculty of Philology and the available time was 90 minutes.

Written test

The written testing was based on three methods:

1. explicit: error report and grammar indication,
2. explicit: error report and grammar categorization,
3. implicit: error report.

The test was conducted in the form of a composition of a literary text that students have read: "Una questione privata" by Beppe Fenoglio. The theme of the work was: "The plot of the book, try to outline the main issues." The test was held in a classroom of the Faculty of Philology and the available time was 90 minutes. The teacher and students controlled the texts during the office hours together.

Oral test

The first sub-group was tested using the explicit method. Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S[1]: ieri ho **[*]** andato al cinema con i miei amici

T: no, hai sbagliato con il verbo andare, verbo di movimento si usa l'ausiliare essere

S[1]: # # ieri # sono andato al cinema.

Sample 2

S[2]: mi ho **[*]** svegliato tardi perché la sera prima sono andato a letto tardi

T: no, hai sbagliato, con i verbi riflessivi, svegliarsi, l'ausiliare è sempre essere

S[2]: mi # # # sono # # # svegliato tardi.

Sample 3

S[3]: io e le mie amiche siamo **[*]** passeggiate **[*]** in centro

T: no, hai sbagliato, con passeggiare va l'ausiliare avere

S[3]: io e le mie amiche # # # abbiamo # passeggiato.

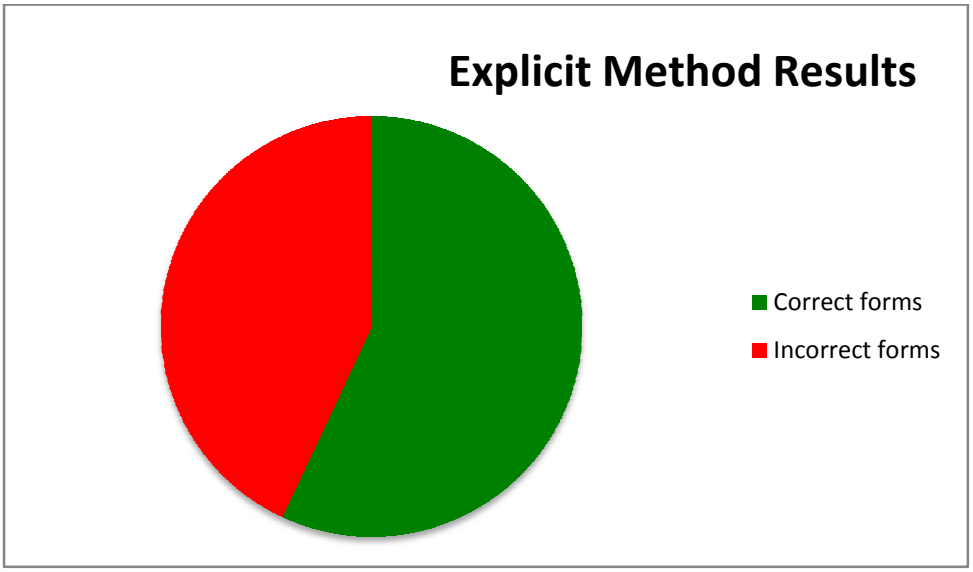
Sample 4

S[4]: la partita ha **[*]** iniziato **[*]** alle 8

T: no, hai sbagliato, iniziare, in questo caso, non è transitivo, devi usare l'ausiliare essere

S[4]: allora # # # è # # iniziata alle 8.

Figure 1. Explicit method – Correct and incorrect forms as a result of the explicit method applied.



The most evident problem concerns the affective filter. We have shown, in the examples, the opening sentences of oral outputs. Although most of students have corrected their speech after a brief pause for reflection, the communication of error report was so stressed (Grassi, 2010, p. 108) that it instilled insecurity in the students and made them feel less confident in continuing the dialogue because of a feeling of discomfort in the presence of other learners. The learner feels oneself in the spot light because of the error. He fears that other students will ridicule him and make him feel ashamed. This discomfort consequently brings out tension which hinders the student's output. The student waits, at any moment, for the stressed error report by the teacher (Mezzadri, 2002, p.4). Even if the mark report is followed by a grammar indication, the student does not feel confident in his skills anymore. The result of this tension is a slower oral output and an over-reflective pause, which damages the communication.

The second sub group was tested using the implicit method (recast). Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S^1: ieri? Ho legguto **[*]** un libro e…

T: ah ieri hai letto un libro?

S^1: sì, ma non mi ha **[*]** piacuto **[*]** molto.

T: non ti è piaciuto molto? E perché?

S^1: perché? Così, non so esattamente.

Sample 2

S^2: ieri finalmente mi ho **[*]** alzata tardi!

T: ieri ti sei alzata tardi? Veramente?

S^2: sì alle 10 e sono andata subito in bagno.

Sample 3

S^3: siamo andati in centro, siamo entrati in un bar e siamo **[*]** bevuti **[*]** molto.

T: e che cosa avete bevuto?

S^3: almeno dieci birre in tre, è stato divertente.

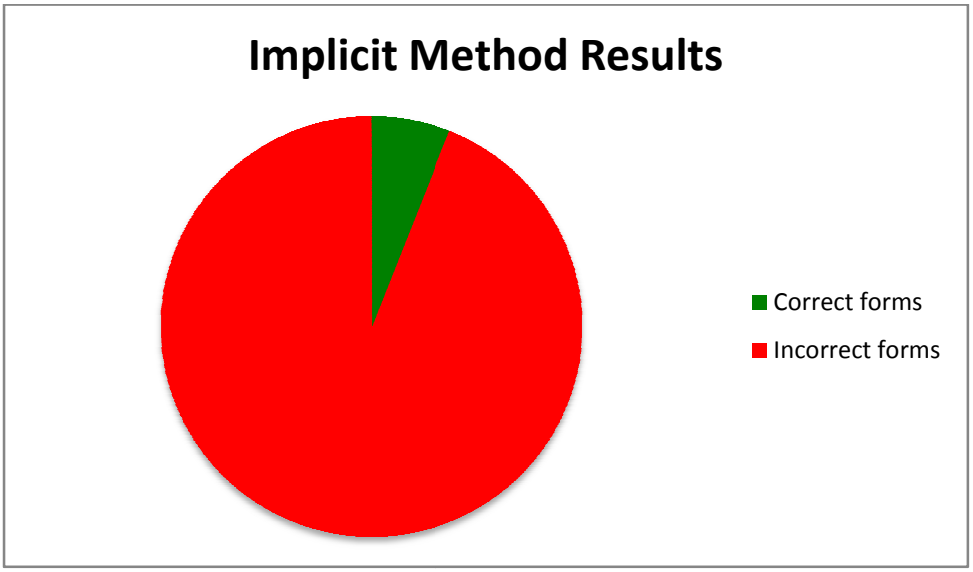
Sample 4

S^4: cosa ho fatto ieri? Niente! Mi ho **[*]** annoiata!

T: perché ti sei annoiata?

S^4: sì, mi sono annoiata, è piovuto tutto il giorno!

Figure 2. Implicit method – Correct and incorrect forms as a result of the implicit method applied.



The most evident problem of the feedback is the absolute lack of noticing the error. In 99% of cases, the students did not frame the reformulation of the teacher as a correction. The only corrected case reported in the sample four. The students most likely did not notice their mistakes because they did not understand the reformulation of the teacher as a correction (Tooresan, 2011). Students are used to receiving an explicit correction, so the recast was interpreted as the teacher's random participation in the dialogue, as the teacher's sentence purpose is to animate students' speech. The student is aware that the teacher's recast points out the problem, but he does not stop the communication. Even if some problems are evident, the teacher understands students' speeches, so it means that those problems are not so important as to warrant a correction.

The third sub-group was tested using the implicit method (prompt). Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S^1: sono stata al cinema, la **[*]** film è stata **[*]** bella **[*]**

T: scusa # non capisco

S^1: ieri # # sono stata al # # # cinema

T: va bene e allora?

S^1: il film è stato # # # bella **[*]**

T: scusami, ma ancora non capisco

S^1: # # sì, mi scusi, il film # # è stato # bello

Sample 2

S^2: sono uscita con i miei amici e ho spento **[*]** tutti i soldi…

T: scusami ma non capisco!

S^2: cosa # non capisce?

T: quello che hai detto!

S^2: tutto?

T: no, solo una parte

S^2: allora # # # ieri sono uscita con i miei amici e # #, sì è vero scusi, e # # ho speso tutti i soldi

Sample 3

S^3: mi ha chiamato un amico, sono andato a casa sua e gli **[*]** ho aiutato a…

T: un attimo per favore, non ti capisco!

S^3: # # sì sì è vero, l'ho aiutato, # # mi scusi

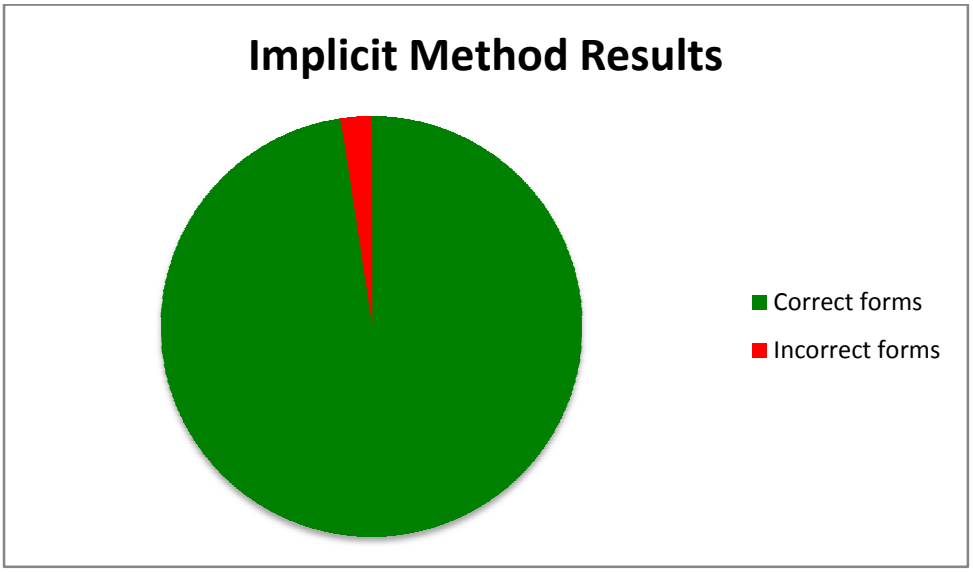
Sample 4

S^4: ieri cosa ho fatto? Beh niente di speciale, ho chiamato al **[*]** mio ragazzo…

T: scusa, non capisco!

S^4: oddio # # # che stupida, # ho chiamato il mio ragazzo.

Figure 3. Implicit method – Correct and incorrect forms as a result of the implicit method applied.



The most evident problem is the surprise of students, because of the teacher's reply expressed in a lower register. The reactions of the students are divided in the following order:

1) surprise
2) request for an explanation
3) error detection
4) correct reformulation

It is interesting to note that despite the implicitness of the method, at the detection of the error, students tend to apologize in a very clear manner and, in some cases, in a dramatic way. The prompt is recognized as an explicit warning error. However, in this case, the affective filter does not react in the same way as in the explicit method, because students continue their speech without stressed or reflective pauses. After the first reaction of surprise, students feel confident to decode the intervention of the teacher as an invitation to reconsider the sentence and correct it. This

method does not create tension or discomfort; it looks like a Pavlovian response. The students react to a determined oral sign of the teacher and automatically review their speech, solve the problem, and continue to finish what they want to say.

The written output

The first explicit correction
This correction method is composed of four parts:

1) error report: teacher underlines the error or marks it with a circle;
2) grammar indication: teacher writes the grammar corrective indication near the error.
3) correction: students try to correct grammatical errors as shown in the indication and return the compositions to the teacher.
4) verification: during the office hours the teacher analyzes with each student the corrections and explains the problems, if some corrections are not precise.

The first sub-group was tested using the explicit method. Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S^1: Mi sono ringraziato ai miei amici perché mi hanno dato tanti regali

Sample 2

S^2: Ieri si sono successe tante cose una dietro l'altra

Sample 3

S^3: Non sono potuto telefonarla perché non avevo più credito

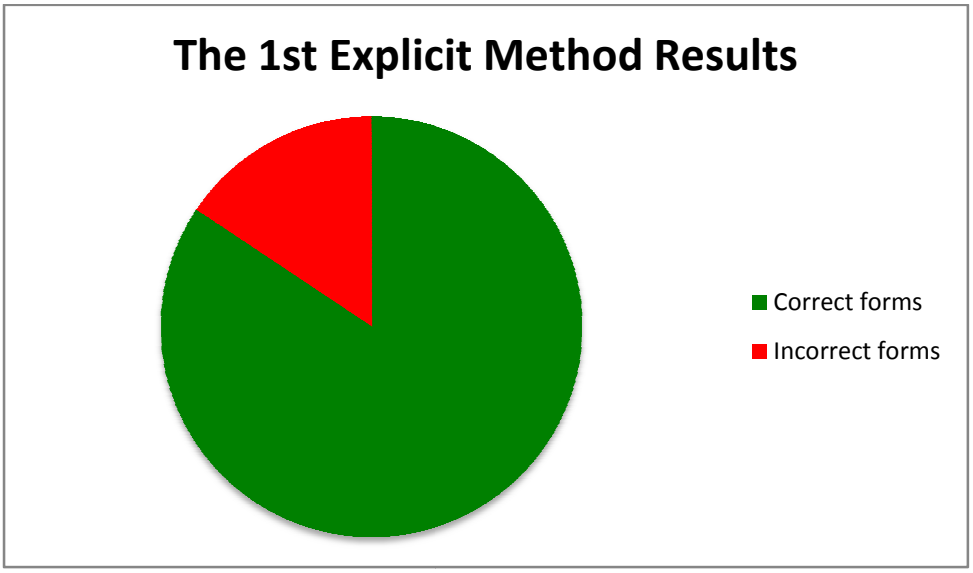
Sample 4

S^4: Dopo la festa siamo camminati a lungo

If in the explicit method of the oral test, the main problem is the emotional impact of the error; in the written test this phenomenon is irrelevant. Students have enough time to think, to apply the grammatical

indications, and to correct the error. The percentage of correction is very high. The errors not corrected or not exactly corrected denote some gaps at the monitor level.

Figure 4. The 1st explicit method – correct and incorrect forms as a result of the explicit method applied.



The second explicit correction

This correction method is composed of three parts:

1) warning (before the exercise): students are told that their errors will be reported (underlined or put in a circle) by three colors:
    a. red, indicating a problem with the spelling (double, accents, etc.),
    b. green, indicating a problem in morphology, or
    c. blue, indicating a syntactic problem (tense agreement);
2) Correction: according to the color, students try to fix the reported errors by writing the correction above or next to the error. After the correction, students return their compositions to the teacher.

3) verification: during the office hours, the teacher analyzes the corrections with each student, and explains the problems if some corrections are not precise.

The second sub-group was tested using the explicit method. Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S[1]: l'atenzione dello scrittore verso i personaggi è particolare

Sample 2

S[2]: Milton è un personaggio buio, cupo, certo la vita, l'amore non gli hanno reso felice

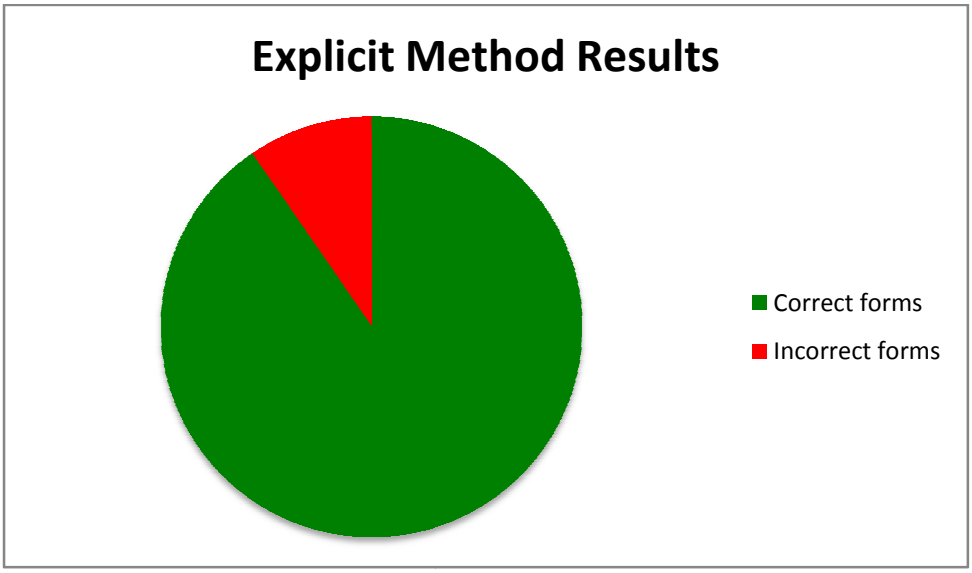
Sample 3

S[3]: lui credeva che Fulvia non lo ami abbastanza, mentre lui l'amava disperatamente

Sample 4

S[4]: se Milton fosse stato sicuro della storia dell'amore tra Fulvia e Giorgio, la sua "questione privata" non avrebbe mai cominciata.

Figure 5. Second explicit method – correct and incorrect forms as a result of the explicit method applied.



This method shows the highest level of noticing by the students, because of the

1) warning. Students are already aware of the type of errors they could make. Their attention is already being alert before they start to write;
2) focusing. The students' correction is focused on the word colored and, therefore, the level of concentration and monitoring are activated on a limited field of action.
3) feedback. The proper level of the corrections is very high;
4) personal verification. During the office hours, the one-to-one relationship between the teacher and a student is ideal for confirmation of the already established level of noticing;
5) intake. Later exercises confirm the acquisition of the correct items.

Implicit correction.

This correction method is composed of four parts:

1) warning (before the exercise): students are told that their errors would be counted and marked by the corresponding number at the end of the line;
2) Detection: students have to search for the errors according to the number indicated at the end of the line;
3) Correction: students are asked to write the correct composition again, then they return the composition to the teacher;
4) verification: during the office hours, the teacher analyzes the corrections with each student, and explains the problems if some corrections are not precise.

The third sub-group was tested using the implicit method. Some samples of students' responses are reported below:

Sample 1

S[1]: la trama del libro è particolare perchè nara le vicende private di Milton con lo sfondo della seconda guerra mondiale in Italia. 4

Sample 2

S[2]: Milton è sulla continua ricerca a Giorgio, lo vuole trovare, deve assolutamente parlare con lui a causa di quello che si è successo. 3

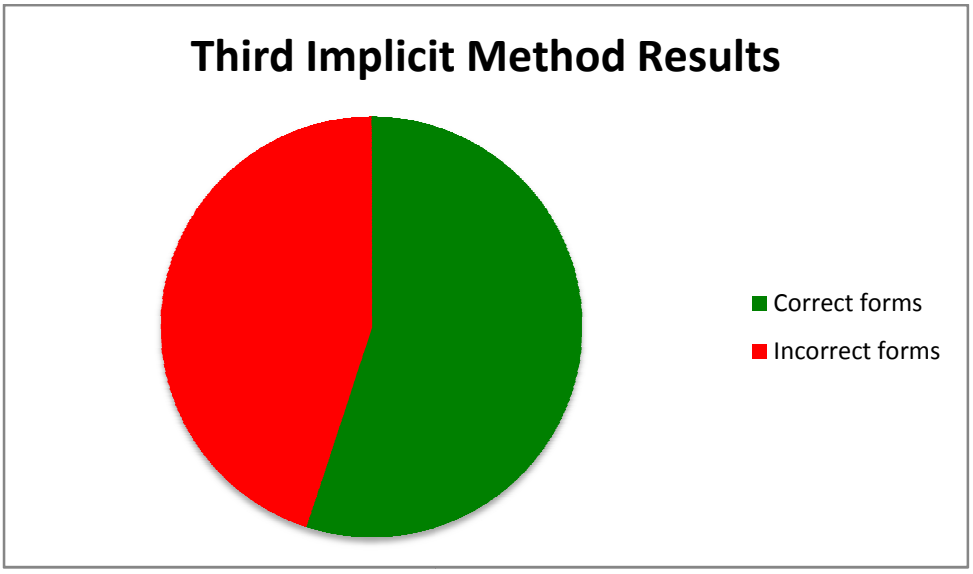
Sample 3

S[3]: Milton pensa continuamente a Fulvia, è la sua osessione, nonostante non è sicuro dell'amore di Fulvia a lui, le pensa sempre, la vuole rivedere perché… 4

Sample 4

S[4]: Milton e Giorgio sono due partigiani, Giorgio catturano i fascisti e Milton è disperato perché vuole liberare l'amico … 1.

Figure 6. The third implicit method – correct and incorrect forms as a result of the implicit method applied.



Some issues with the third implicit method are that even if the attention of learners is alerted to the problem, it collides with the number of errors shown at the end of the line. At the end, the attention cannot handle the procedure of correction and in some case it generates hypercorrections. The attention of the students is focused on the number of errors to be found rather than on the errors themselves. Students are mostly

focused on searching for the determined number of errors. If they do not recognize that number of errors, then they alter some correct forms just to achieve the number prescribed.

Conclusions

The experimentation on correcting feedback in Italian as L2 (foreign language) is a kind of empirical science which consists of several tests and analyses of the tests' results. In our case, before pointing out the conclusions, it is important to highlight the following assumptions:

1. 1. in primary and secondary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the approach to L2 is essentially formalistic (grammar and translation). The communicative approach is applied only in rare cases. If we exclude English, whose teaching takes place in the school curriculum but whose acquisition is dominant in an environment where English is the main media language, other foreign languages such as German, Italian, French, and Russian, are essentially taught solely to make students competent in doing some exercises and in translating.
2. According to the formalistic approach to L2, the correction of negative feedback of the oral outputs is carried out as follows: the teacher asks the students to apply the rule through the exercises in the book (mainly cloze and multiple choice). The teacher reports the errors in a very stressed explicit manner: "no, it is wrong" – "no, you can not say this ", then immediately provides the correction orally: "the correct answer is ..." and, at the end, confirms the correct form by writing it on the board, in most cases without further explanation. The correction of written outputs is done in a similar way: the teacher underlines the error, writes down the correct form, then evaluates the test with a mark written at the end of the text. In this case, students are so focused on their final mark, that they rarely notice the teacher's corrections on the test. If their score is good enough to pass the

test, they will completely ignore the corrections. Even if the mark is insufficient, they will hardly ask the teacher for an explanation. In this last case, students will mostly try to understand the corrections by themselves, thus achieving dubitable results.

The consequences of these assumptions can be found in the students' approach to Italian as L2 at the courses of Italian language at the University of Banja Luka. In these courses, the approach to the L2 is primarily based on the communication. During the two semesters of the first year, teachers try to manage the change from a formalistic to a communicative method. In other words, the teachers' effort is focused on making students feel the need for the communication, so the students will gradually understand that studying a L2 does not involve only one competence (doing exercises and translating), but others, such as communication, as well. This transition is built step by step during the two semesters of the first year, and even if results are encouraging, after the first year, the students lose sight of the importance of corrections. Our experiment found the following:

1. the correction of the negative feedback with the explicit method. The error report increases the affective filter, damaging the not still solid communication skills. Students are not completely familiar with their own power to communicate, because they have not completely acquired it yet. Students understand the error report of the teacher as a proof of their immaturity in the language. They feel untrained not in applying the grammar rules, but in expressing themselves. This feeling does really stop the confidence on the possibility of communication;
2. the implicit method of the recast points out the problem of noticing - almost zero – and recalls the second assumption. The teacher's interruption does not belong to the classic error report used in school, so, in most cases, the reformulation is accepted as an "intercommunication", which communicates to the

student that his formulation, even if it has some problems, is still acceptable;

3. the prompt technique is for students something initially unclassifiable: it is not as clear and divisive, but it is understood as a challenge. The prompt key words are "sorry - I beg your pardon - excuse me". These polite forms mitigate the following "I cannot understand-I do not understand." During the output, students are at first surprised by the teacher's words. Then, thanks to the polite forms, students do not look at the teacher as a strict judge of their speech, but they consider him as an interlocutor to whom some expressions simply are not clear. In this atmosphere of an atypical role-play, students rise to the challenge and review their last sentence to make it clear, to correct it. The challenge consists of the fact that students really want to provide clear and correct communication. In other words, in this case not only does the necessity of communication emerge, but it also advisedly manifests itself. This attitude is confirmed by the emphasis students use to anticipate the phrase correctly reworded. The formulas markedly emphasized by surprise at the lack of understanding, of excuses and blame, reveal a condition of informality that is one of the causes leads to the success of the method, clearly shown in the graph.
4. correction techniques of the negative feedback of written output show two new approaches, of which they are partially aware during the first year: a) the correction is entirely committed to the students and, more importantly, b) the verification of the corrections represents a one-to-one relationship between a student and a teacher. It is obvious that the correction by the student depends on the intensity of the error report: when it is higher, as in the first and the second case, the corrective feedback is very positive. In the third case, the very low intensity leaves the students with the responsibility to recognize

the error and to handle its correction. The second component turns out to be important, because it strengthens the teacher-student relationship, and the students feel more empowered to seek further explanation during office hours. During this time, the students are provided with a longer time in a more relaxed atmosphere then at the end the lesson, where the time is limited.

The teaching of Italian as L2 is an empirical field of research, consisting of experiments and results (Bettoni, 2010, p. 179), which must be subjected to continuous testing. In our case, the tests carried out on techniques of correction of negative feedback in oral and written outputs, demonstrate that teachers must pay attention to the L2 techniques used previously. If, as in our case, the L2 teaching methods are not the same in schools as at university, university teachers must be aware that the previous methods will conflict with the new ones. This evident incompatibility represents a demanding challenge for the L2 teacher, who should be able to manage the change of competences and skills according to the new method. In other words, L2 teachers should use a kind of *filosofia del giusto mezzo* (Torresan, 2011) to correct the negative feedback.

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