



Researching Oral Feedback in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Oral feedback to learners in foreign language learning has been in the focus of attention of researchers for a long time. While research in second language acquisition (SLA) has classified various types of oral corrective feedback and explored their perceptions by learners (e.g. Ellis & Sheen, 2006) as well as their effectiveness (e.g. Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster & Saito, 2010), the role of oral feedback has also been discussed in the context of general pedagogy, where it has been promoted as an integral part of formative assessment, or assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2006, 2007). According to the latter view, oral feedback is regarded as a form of assessment of learner performance, which can be characterised by a collaborative and interaction-based approach and is expected to be meaningful, constructive and motivating for learners. In this paper, an attempt is made to relate the SLA findings to general pedagogy in order to make recommendations for the use of oral corrective feedback in the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: feedback, prompts, foreign language, oral corrective feedback, assessment feedback, recasts

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I. Introduction

The central role of oral feedback as part of classroom-based language assessment has been long recognised since it is seen as a key influence in enhancing students' developing language competence. Davison and Leung (2009) suggested a number of important skills that teachers pursuing classroom-based assessment should possess, such as, for instance, involving students more actively in the assessment process (self- and peer assessment), and giving immediate and constructive feedback to students. In its simplest form feedback can take the form of praise to represent the quality of the work, but students may not benefit from it so much as the information on what has been mastered and what needs improvement may not be transparent for the learner. By the same token, grades alone are not likely to result in learning gains either as suggestions on how to attend to problems and what to strengthen about the student's work are not evident. Furthermore, according to Butler (as cited in Sadler, 2010, p. 537), there is a major difference between the effects of praise of the student-self as a person (labelled as "ego-involving feedback"), and praise directed towards how well a task was accomplished (labelled as "task-involving feedback"). Sadler (*ibid.*) points out that feedback, if it is intended to fulfil its formative purpose, "has to be both specific (referring to the work just appraised) and general (identifying a broader principle that could be applied to later works)", which means that it should have a prospective orientation and should be constructive and supportive as well. This suggestion was highlighted by Black and Wiliam (1998), who found that the giving of marks and the grading function were overemphasized in schools, while the giving of useful advice and the learning function were underemphasized. They argued that grading enhanced student comparison, which was harmful as it strengthened competition rather than personal involvement in learning. Thus, they concluded that "assessment feedback [i.e. grades] teaches low-achieving pupils that they lack 'ability', causing them to come to believe that they are not able to learn" (*ibid.* p. 4). Black and Wiliam claimed that instead of giving students rewards in the form of grades, they should be encouraged to look for ways to improve their learning rather than how to climb higher in the class ranking. The teacher's main job, thus, seems to be to facilitate students' learning by giving them feedback that will guide them further on the way to achieve their goals.

According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), good feedback practice helps, among other things, to clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards); it delivers high quality information to students about their learning; it encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem, and it provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. These recommendations apply to general pedagogy rather than specific assessment principles relevant to language pedagogy. In this paper, first I review how assessment feedback has been conceptualised in general pedagogy and then examine what aspects of oral feedback have been taken up in second language acquisition research in order to find the common concerns.

II. Assessment feedback in general pedagogy

Assessment feedback can be overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received), drawing from a range of sources (Evans, 2013). According to Evans (*ibid.*), a distinction needs to be made between a cognitivist and a socio-constructivist view of feedback. The former is closely associated with a directive telling approach where feedback functions as corrective, since an expert provides information to a passive recipient. The socio-constructivist feedback, however, is regarded as facilitative because it provides the students with suggestions to enable them to make their own revisions. This reflects a dynamic learning environment where the informant also learns from the students through dialogue and participation in shared experiences (*cf.* Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011). Carless et al. go on to propose that students can benefit fully from feedback processes only when they are self-monitoring their own work at increasingly higher levels. They term this development of self-regulative capacities as sustainable feedback (*ibid.*).

It is assumed that individual differences, variables such as personality, gender, culture, previous experiences of learning, motivation, beliefs about learning and expectations of the learning environment cognitive styles impact on access to and perceptions of feedback (Evans, 2013). Furthermore, feedback exchanges are mediated by a range of contextual variables (e.g., subject-specific requirements of feedback), and awareness of subject-specific knowledge and communication skills are also important in feedback exchanges. The great number of variables that seem to shape feedback, enhance its efficiency are important to identify as any investigation into feedback giving and feedback receiving must take those variable into account.

The learner undoubtedly has a central role in utilizing feedback. Evans (2013) has proposed a number personal qualities or traits that are considered to be critical, for instance, whether the student (a) can focus on meaning making, (b) can demonstrate perspective (is able to make sense of feedback through effective filtering), (c) possesses resilience (self-awareness and self-monitoring), (d) can demonstrate personal responsibility in the feedback and feed-forward process. Although these individual learner characteristics are important, they seem to be difficult to control or influence. Nevertheless, research should take into account their potential role in the process of feedback giving and getting.

Feedback can have different functions, depending on whom or what it is targeted at. Hattie and Timperley (2007), propose four types of feedback: task feedback is intended as information and activities with the purpose of clarifying and reinforcing aspects of the learning task; process feedback is aimed at helping the student to proceed with a learning task; self-regulation feedback comprises metacognitive elements that the students can activate to monitor and evaluate the strategies they use; and self-feedback is targeted at personal attributes, for instance, how well the student has performed. While these feedback types seem to be fully legitimate across different contexts, the

learner in the foreign language classroom also needs another type of feedback, which is closely linked to the special characteristic of the learning context: corrective feedback (CF) that handles erroneous second language (L2) production (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). This type of feedback, because of its central role in students' developing language mastery, has been the focus of investigation in a number of SLA studies (Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001; Carpenter, Jeon, MacGregor & MacKey, 2006; Ellis & Sheen, 2006; Nassaji 2007, 2009; Li, 2010; Goo & MacKey, 2013), all of them trying to explore CF from different perspectives. In this paper, we will focus on oral corrective feedback research only.

III. Oral corrective feedback in SLA

Experimental studies to date have demonstrated that oral corrective feedback can facilitate L2 development but at the same time, it has also been shown that its effects may be constrained by contextual factors and individual learner differences (Li, 2014; Lyster & Saito, 2010). Lyster and Ranta (1997) identify six types of corrective strategy, providing the following examples in response to the erroneous utterance 'He has dog':

1. reformulating it (recast). 'A dog';
2. alerting the learner to the error and providing the correct form (explicit correction). 'No, you should say "a dog"';
3. asking for clarification (clarification request). 'Sorry?';
4. making a metalinguistic comment (metalinguistic feedback). 'You need an indefinite article';
5. eliciting the correct form (elicitation). 'He has ...?';
6. repeating the wrong sentence (repetition). 'He has dog?'

Lyster and Ranta (1997) distinguish between recasts (1) and explicit correction (2) and the other four feedback types (3-6) in that the former provide the correct form and do not encourage a response from the learner ('uptake'). The latter (types 3-6) can be referred to as prompts, which withhold the correct form and are more likely to result in learner uptake. Corrective feedback types listed above, however, can also be categorised as direct CF (1, 2, 4) vs. indirect CF (3, 5, 6). Lyster and Ranta suggest that the latter should be favoured over direct CF because excessive feedback can damage learner autonomy.

Kartchava and Ammar (2014) elaborated on CF types building on the work by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Sheen (2004). Recasts were further distinguished into 4 subcategories as full, partial, interrogative and integrated reformulation (2014, p. 90). The following utterances illustrate the CF subtypes of recasts:

Erroneous student utterance: *He go to the movies yesterday.

- Full reformulation: Okay. He went to the movies yesterday.
- Partial reformulation: (He) Went.
- Interrogative reformulation: Where did you say he went yesterday?
- Integrated reformulation: He went to the movies yesterday. Did he go alone or with someone?

Prompts that aim to elicit the correct form from the learner were also further distinguished by Kartchava and Ammar (2014) as full or partial repetition, elicitation and metalinguistic information. In response to *He go to the movies yesterday, the teacher may choose any of the 4 subtypes of prompts:

- Full repetition: He go to the movies yesterday?
- Partial repetition: Go yesterday? Go?
- Elicitation: He what [stressed] yesterday?
- Metalinguistic information: It happened yesterday. So what should we say? (How do we form the past in English?)

As can be seen above, corrective feedback can be offered in the form of addition, deletion, substitution or reordering (Ellis & Sheen, 2006). However, the role of recasts can also vary: the student/teacher orientation will determine whether CF is treated as an object or to convey a message. In other words, corrective feedback can be didactically or communicatively motivated. In SLA studies, the research focus has been twofold: on the one hand, researchers have investigated the learner's perception of CF, on the other hand, they have tried to explore the effectiveness of various CF types. In the following, these two lines of investigations will be reviewed in order to have an overview of how oral corrective feedback is regarded by learners and how it impacts on learners' performance, i.e. their language output.

3.1 Learners' perceptions of oral corrective feedback

SLA research has focused on only some types of CF, primarily recasts and prompts. For instance, lower proficiency learners claimed to favour prompts over recasts (Yoshida, 2008), but more advanced proficiency learners preferred recasts to prompts (Brown, 2009). Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada (2001, p.751) found that there is uncertainty as to what learners make of recasts, "whether they perceive them as negative evidence or as further input showing how to say the same thing in a different way or whether they simply look upon recasts as an acknowledgement that their message has been understood". This view is reinforced by Gass (2003), who suggested that learners may simply repeat a reformulation (recast) without true understanding just to show compliance.

Concerning learners' perceptions of CF, Ellis and Sheen (2006) propose the most detailed interpretation for recasts, according to which they are complex discourse

structures that can provide implicit negative feedback (rephrasing one or more sentence components correctly) and sometimes explicit, transparent correction, as well as positive evidence (samples of what is acceptable in L2). However, not all types of recasts have the same impact on learners, who may fail to perceive recasts as corrective in purpose in the first place. Lack of noticing the corrective force of recasts may be explained by the learner orientation (recasts can be considered as positive or negative feedback), individual learner differences, or the learner's developmental readiness.

Carpenter et al. (2006) set out to investigate recasts as to what extent learners identify them as corrective in nature or as a semantic repetition to express meaning in an alternative way. Based on previous research findings, the authors also selected nonlinguistic information embedded in the interactional context as a main research variable because learners were believed to make use of the paralinguistic and extralinguistic cues to infer the teacher's intention correctly. According to the findings from 14 think-aloud protocols, nonlinguistic information (manual and facial gestures) was hardly noticed by the respondents as opposed to the linguistic information that they were able to identify in the recasts. It was concluded that the learners' perceptions of recasts were minimally influenced by the nonverbal clues in contrast to the explicit linguistic information embedded in the recasts. On the other hand, in the context of the interaction learners seemed to be guided in their identification of recasts as such primarily by the negative evidence (learners' original utterance) that was immediately followed by the teacher's recast. However, it seems that in order to make recasts efficient, they need to be followed by learner response. Recasts followed by immediate repetition or primed production by the learner (i.e. productively using a form in one's own way a short time after hearing it) are believed to be a more effective type of interactional feedback (McDonough & Mackey, 2006). In the next section, I will review some findings in relation to interactional feedback that elicits learner responses.

3.2 The effectiveness of oral corrective feedback

Effectiveness of corrective feedback is related to the rate of accurate repair (correction by the learner). Although the list of CF types is quite extensive, as was shown above, researchers seem to have been most interested in recasts. Nassaji (2007) examined the role of reformulations (recasts) and compared it to that of elicitation. The former functions both as positive evidence (correct model of the target language is provided) and as negative feedback, as a result of which the feedback can help the learner to notice the gap between his/her original output and the teacher's output. Elicitation, on the other hand, refers to "feedback that does not reformulate the learner's erroneous utterance; rather, it pushes the learner, implicitly or explicitly, to reformulate it into a correct form" (p. 514). These two types of CF were chosen by Nassaji for investigation because of the conflicting research findings by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis et al. (2001 as cited in Nassaji, 2007). Lyster and Ranta found that although recasts were the most frequent type of feedback, they generated only a limited amount of repair of the learners' erroneous utterances. In contrast, elicitation, although used considerable less

frequently, led to larger amounts of learner repair. According to Ellis et al., however, the success rate of repairs was considerable higher than in the study by Lyster and Ranta. In order to account for the differences in the research findings, Nassaji mentions the following variables that may have influenced the outcome: the type of form targeted, learners' cognitive orientation, the learner's developmental readiness, the types of task used, and learners' memory, aptitude and motivation. Furthermore, Nassaji also points out that when a specific type of feedback is enhanced with additional features such as added stress, rising intonation, or other verbal phrases, its effectiveness may improve.

The analysis of recasts by Nassaji helped to produce the most detailed classification of recasts. There are six different types identified (Nassaji 2007, p.527-528).

1. Isolated recast, without prompt: The feedback isolated the error and reformulated it with a falling intonation outside of the context with no other additional prompts to highlight the error or push the learner to respond to feedback.

Example 1

Student: and a girl behind the woman is rob, rob her.

Teacher: Robbing her.

2. Isolated recast, with prompt: The feedback isolated the error and reformulated it outside of the context with a rising intonation and/or added stress, thus prompting the learner to respond to the feedback.

Example 2

Student: The woman who stole the purse realized the situation and she ran away more fast.

Teacher: More quickly?

3. Embedded recast, without prompt: The feedback reformulated the error with a falling intonation within the context without highlighting the error or prompting the learner to respond to feedback.

Example 3

Student: Her friend pointed . . . pointed . . . another woman and said to her friend said to his friend . . .

Teacher: Ok, another man pointed to the woman.

4. Embedded recast, with prompt: The feedback reformulated the error within the context with a rising intonation and/or added stress, thus prompting the learner to respond to feedback.

Example 4

Student: The woman found a police on the street.

Teacher: The woman found a police officer?

5. Recast, with enhanced prompts: The feedback reformulated the erroneous utterance with a rising intonation and/or added stress as well as with other additional verbal prompts such as, "Do you mean . . .?"

Example 5

Student: At this time the wallet, the wallet fall, um, fall to the ground.

Teacher: Do you mean it FELL to the ground?

6. Recast, with expansion: The feedback reformulated the erroneous utterance but at the same time expanded on it by adding new information to it. This feedback occurred mostly with a confirmatory tone with no additional prompts.

Example 6

Student: He steal the purse.

Teacher: Oh, he stole the purse and ran away.

Nassaji (2007, p. 528) also managed to distinguish five types of elicitation, proposing the following:

1. Unmarked elicitation: The feedback elicited a reformulation without marking the error or making any reference to the error. This kind of feedback was mainly in the form of simple clarification requests.

Example 7

Student: There was an old woman who runt some material before.

Teacher: Sorry, what?

2. Marked elicitation: The feedback elicited a reformulation by marking the error or making reference to it in the form of interrogative repetition.

Example 8

Student: So and she, she get, get the wallet.

Teacher: Get, get the wallet?

3. Marked elicitation, with prompt: The feedback elicited a reformulation by marking or making reference to the error by repeating the error with rising intonation and also by adding some extra verbal prompts (e.g., "Could you say that again?") to prompt the learner further to respond to the feedback.

Example 9

Student: She easily caught the girl.

Teacher: She caught the girl? I'm sorry, say that again?

4. Marked elicitation, with enhanced prompt: The feedback elicited a reformulation by marking or repeating the error with a rising intonation and with additional more explicit metalinguistic or other verbal prompts that indicated more explicitly to the learner that something was wrong with the utterance.

Example 10

Student: A man who are walking with the woman.

Teacher: A man who ARE walking? Is that correct?

5. Elliptical elicitation: The feedback elicited the correct form by repeating the utterance up to the error and waiting for the learner to supply the correct form.

Example 11

Student: And when the young girl arrive, ah, beside the old woman.

Teacher: When the young girl . . . ?

The frequency of occurrence was checked by Nassaji (2007) for all the above types of recasts and elicitation forms. The findings revealed that the teachers used type 4 (embedded recasts with prompt) the most frequently (59%), while among the elicitation types, type 3 (marked elicitation, with prompt) was used the most often (48%). As for the effectiveness of these CF types, Nassaji's findings are somewhat disappointing. There was a relatively low level of success reported for both reformulations and elicitations in general. When the two selected feedback types resulted in accurate repair by the learner, however, both recasts and elicitation were used in combination with some kind of feedback enhancement prompt. In other words, more explicit verbal prompts were needed to generate higher rates of repair in both cases. This finding underscores the role of salience and explicitness as important characteristics of effective feedback in dyadic student-teacher interaction. Nassaji (2009) in a subsequent study also examined whether recasts or elicitation were more effective. According to his findings, when learners managed to provide appropriate repair after receiving elicitation, they seemed more likely to remember their own corrections than the corrections provided by the

teacher in the form of recasts. Nassaji suggested that when “learners are pushed to self-correct, they may become aware of the gap in their knowledge and their attention may be directed to subsequent input” (2009, p. 438). Nevertheless, elicitation appeared to work only when the learner had latent knowledge of the required form, while the effectiveness of recasts was primarily influenced by the explicitness or enhancement of the recast.

The effectiveness of oral corrective feedback has also been explored through two meta-analyses (Li, 2014; Lyster & Saito, 2010). Li called attention to some significant moderating variables such as research context and setting; task type; treatment length and interlocutor type. Other potentially important moderating variables were also mentioned, for instance, the learner’s age, gender, proficiency; L1 transfer and complexity of the target structure. The meta-analysis by Li revealed that explicit feedback was more effective than implicit feedback over a short term, and implicit feedback was remembered over a long period of time. In addition to examining the size effect of many of the aforementioned significant moderating variables, Lyster and Saito’s meta-analysis also focused on age and whether the instructional setting was a second or a foreign language classroom. They found that younger learners benefited from CF more than older learners, and that studies carried out in foreign language contexts produced larger effect sizes than those in second language contexts, but irrespective of instructional settings, CF was facilitative of L2 development.

4. Discussion

As has been shown above, oral corrective feedback plays an important role in learners’ L2 development and can be provided for them in a variety of forms that range from explicit to implicit, direct to indirect, isolated to embedded, simple to enhanced, marked to unmarked, complete to elliptical, and are provided with or without further prompt. The effectiveness of the different forms, however, are mostly judged on the basis of evidence for learner repair. Given the complex interplay among a great number of variables that shape interaction in L2 in the foreign language classroom, there is sometimes straightforward, sometimes conflicting evidence in relation to the efficiency of some CF types. While recast, elicitation and prompt have been extensively researched, there are a number of other CF forms that have received little attention from SLA researchers until now. Furthermore, assessment feedback, especially if it is in the form of recast, seems to be difficult for some learners to discern as corrective in nature because CF is part of the dyadic exchange between the teacher and the learner where meaning negotiation may override pedagogical intentions, i.e. learners may fail to notice the corrective function of the teacher’s feedback.

5. Conclusion

Corrective feedback clearly represents formative assessment or assessment for learning because it is intended to facilitate students’ learning by giving them feedback that will

guide them further in their L2 development. Furthermore, CF can represent both the cognitivist and the socio-constructivist view of feedback because some types of feedback (i.e. recast, explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback) provide straightforward information as to what needs correction in the learner output, while other types (clarification request, elicitation and repetition) seem to be more facilitative, therefore closer to the socio-constructivist view of feedback, because they encourage learners to make their own revisions without direct teacher intervention. All corrective feedback types, however, aim to activate the learner, involving him/her in self-correction. Based on the review of SLA research findings above, there seems to be no one single most effective form of corrective feedback, therefore, L2 teachers are advised to employ a variety of CF forms that have been outlined above. When it comes to recast, however, research evidence suggests that the efficiency of recast is dependent upon its explicitness or enhancement. Future research is warranted in order to explore factors that may positively impact on the use of other corrective feedback forms.

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