Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of feedback in the learning process. It focuses particularly on the relation between different types of feedback and language development. The definition of feedback is given in the introductory part, and the importance of differentiation between error, mistake and attempt is highlighted. The roles of input and output are being argued in the chapter that follows, with emphasis on the significance of output. The theory of corrective feedback focuses on the types of negative feedback, the role of implicit and explicit negative feedback in the second language classroom, and the importance of interaction in order to increase the knowledge and acquisition of the target language. The aim of this paper is to review different approaches and provide a conclusion accordingly.

1. INTRODUCTION

After different approaches to the role of output in various theories of second language acquisition, it has become evident that in addition to input output is necessary to develop language skills and gain proficiency in the target language. This is largely attributed to the benefits of the teachers' or other students' feedback following the output production. Feedback generally refers to the response that students receive about the language they produce (Vanpatten & Benati, 2015). Students can receive positive as well as negative feedback. Positive evidence or positive feedback is useful if the learner's reaction to an activity is correct. However, the response to students' inaccuracies and errors is considered to be negative evidence or negative feedback (Vanpatten & Benati, 2015), or other times referred to as corrective feedback. Corrective feedback on the part of teachers is a reactive pedagogical strategy that emerges when they identify an error (Campillo, 2003, p. 209). Chaudron (1977, p. 31) specifies different ways of correcting errors learners make, defining corrective feedback as "any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance". Thus, the first step in providing corrective feedback is the identification of the incorrect language use referred to by different terms, error and mistake being the most commonly used among them.

Errors are defined as deviations from the norms of the target language. The lack of knowledge is the reason why errors, which often represent a gap in competence, occur (Ellis, 2009). Still, there is a controversy regarding the perception of errors that are part of the process of acquiring a language (Perdormo, 2014). One needs to be able to distinguish between an error, a mistake and an attempt. According to Chaudron (1977), an error is associated with competence, a mistake is associated with performance, and an attempt is different from an error because it is a failure that occurs when students try to use unknown structures and take them from their L1 instead. Teachers need to clearly differentiate between these terms, in order to be able to decide if they should provide negative feedback. The decision about what to correct is also connected to the focus of teaching, such as communication and accuracy, and specific language aspects, such as pronunciation and grammar. Furthermore, it depends on the task the student is performing and the students' proficiency level. It makes not much sense to correct a student's error that is beyond their proficiency level because they might not realize that they are being corrected (Gomez, 2006). Similarly, Lyster (1998c, p. 72) suggests that not all errors are amenable to corrective feedback, citing Calve (1992) who lists errors that should be treated as follows: 1. errors that reappear frequently; 2. errors that are the current focus of the lesson; 3. errors that a learner could have avoided or at least appear ready to acquire; 4. errors that either impede communication or bother the interlocutor.

However, once the error is to be treated, teachers should be aware of the benefits of corrective feedback. It is a learning situation that fosters an opportunity for every learner to be evaluated and judged, since it presents a useful tool to alter, modify and adjust behavior. The significance of providing feedback is to offer learners the opportunity to correct their language during the interaction, which effectively contributes to the acquisition of second language skills (Mashrah, 2017), since feedback cannot take place if learning has not occurred. It is a means by which a teacher assesses the learning of students. Moreover, as part of the teaching experience, after the basic learning has been acquired, it tends to have a powerful effect on the performance of students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

2. INPUT VS. OUTPUT

Throughout history the exposure to language input has received considerable support in the theory of language acquisition, and its role in the overall process of developing language competence, both first and second, has not been questioned so much. Thus, input was given the primacy, whereas the role of output was often underestimated, being looked on primarily as the outcome or product of language acquisition (Swain, 2005). A new concept of output as a part of the learning process was introduced only after it was suggested (Swain & Harley, 1978; Swain, 1981, 1985) that what learners exposed to massive target language input missed most to achieve native-like proficiency was the production of output.

Not as an opposition but as a complement to the Input Hypothesis, Swain (1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) formulated the Output Hypothesis. Output is not all learners need to acquire a language, but output, besides input, is necessary for acquisition to take place. It has been demonstrated (Trahey & White, 1993) that positive input can reveal to learners the presence of information in L2 that is different from their L1, but negative evidence may be necessary to show what is not possible in L2 in those instances in which it is possible in L1. Presenting output as an important factor in the overall process of language learning, Swain (1995, 1998) assigned it three main functions. Firstly the author names the function of noticing the gap between learners' language and the target language system. As the following role of output, Swain names that it allows the use of language to reflect on the language itself, which could lead to more effective language acquisition. Finally, as one of the benefits of output production the scholar sees preventing the development of fossilized mistakes, since producing output learners try out some language forms and appropriate feedback may play a crucial role. This seems to be noted by other linguists who emphasized the function of output in developing accuracy (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty, 2004; Ellis, 1994, 1997; Gass, 1997; Tomasello & Herron, 1988, 1989) by promoting noticing (Izumi, 2002; Ellis et al., 2002; Leeman, 2007).

3. DIFFERENT TYPES OF CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

A major question in SLA is to what extent feedback of any kind is either useful or necessary for language acquisition. It cannot be disregarded that negative feedback may play a part in aiding students to memorize and apply the aspects of language that they did not acquire solely through positive feedback (Oliver, 1995). Negative feedback represents an optimal aspect of practice in which language teachers need to make choices about if correction should occur, how it should be done, and when it should be provided; depending on the overall theory of teaching and learning they follow (Ellis, 2009).

Corrective feedback for learners is deemed negative evidence and has two different kinds: explicit feedback and implicit feedback, the former involving the explanation of a formal aspect after an error has been made, and the latter referring to indicating that the learner's output is somehow erroneous and needs to be reformulated (Chaudron, 1977). In other words, explicit feedback includes outright corrections (e.g., No. Say went, not goed) or even comments about what the learner does in general (e.g., I notice that when you try to say… you often…). Unlike explicit, implicit feedback usually happens during communication and often takes the form of recasts or rephrasing of the utterance of the speaker, repetition, or requests for clarification like "sorry?" (Vanpatten & Benati, 2015). Lyster and Ranta (1997, pp. 46-49) offer a detailed description of different feedback types focusing on the distinction between explicit and implicit ways of reacting to students' erroneous structures. The most explicit feedback technique is the explicit correction in which a learner is provided with the correct form after producing an erroneous one. Learners can also be provided with a comment, information or question related to the well-formedness of the structure produced rather than with the correct form. This is referred to as metalinguistic feedback. Less explicit techniques include clarification requests, elicitation, repetition and recasts. By using clarification requests (see example 1a) a teacher indicates that something is wrong with a learner's utterance, and that it has been misunderstood. Trying to elicit the correct form without producing it, a teacher can use elicitation techniques such as the elicit completion: a teacher starts and then pauses, waiting for learners to complete the utterance. Repetition is even more implicit, as a teacher only repeats the ill-formed utterance in isolation, but also can use intonation to make learners notice the error. The most common type of feedback are recasts (see example 1b), i.e. the teacher's reformulation of a learner's utterance, but without the error. They are implicit since they are not introduced with the phrases such as: 'You mean', 'You should say', to name a few. Usually a mixture of two or more techniques is used in classrooms, and which of them are the most effective is a question of controversy.

Example 1a

S: I'm go sleep early.

T: *I'm sorry. You will do what?*

Example 1b

S: He play football.

T: *He plays football!*

S: Yes, he plays football.

T: That's very nice to hear.

When students change their output, in accordance with corrective feedback, they reprocess and present the output in a different way. This allows students to acquire more accurate knowledge while learning a second language because it requires them to use their memory.

Depending on the kind of negative feedback and the teaching focus, it should be decided when correction is necessary and beneficial. In that sense, when communication is the goal, immediate implicit negative feedback would prove itself useful at any time of the conversation. However, if the goal is grammatical accuracy, immediate explicit negative feedback is recommended. The following chapter offers an overview of studies exploring and comparing the effectiveness of different feedback types.

4. REVIEW OF STUDIES

The studies on the effectiveness of explicit/implicit feedback have indicated the advantage of more explicit over more implicit treatments. The nonexperimental, observational studies (Lyster, 1998a; 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen, 2004; Slimani, 1992) have shown that recasts are the most common way in which teachers react to learners' errors, especially those made in the areas of grammar and phonology (Lyster, 1998a). Sheen (2004) found that although there is some difference in their occurrence across different contexts (French Immersion, Canada ESL, New Zealand ESL and Korean EFL) recasts are still the most commonly used technique of corrective feedback, although it is, compared to more explicit ways of correcting mistakes (elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests) the least effective in making learners repair their mistakes (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Slimani, 1992). This might

be caused by the fact that due to their implicit characteristics learners usually fail to notice recasts as corrective (Sheen, 2006; Slimani, 1992), since teachers also very often use positive feedback to express the approval of the content of learners' message (Lyster, 1998b).

The experimental and quasi-experimental studies on the effects of different feedback techniques (Ammar, 2008; Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis et. al., 2006) have reached similar conclusions. Carroll and Swain (1993) conducted a study involving a hundred ESL Spanish native speakers. They studied the acquisition of dative alternation under five different conditions: in the first group the learners were just told they were wrong; in the second besides being told they were wrong they were also given the explicit explanation how the rule works; in the third group learners were given a reformulated correct response after a mistake; in the fourth they were asked if they were sure in the correctness of their response, and the fifth group served as a control group, in which there was no reaction to learners' mistakes. During the final test the learners were asked to state whether a certain verb alternates, and to produce the correct sentential structure. The analysis of the results showed that although any kind of feedback (implicit or explicit) leads to better results than none, the most explicit treatment of mistakes (explicit correction plus metalinguistic feedback) proves to be the most effective. The effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback and recasts was also compared by Ellis et al. (2006), who investigated the acquisition of regular past tense –ed by thirty four learners. The superiority of explicit reaction to mistakes was demonstrated on both an oral imitation test and a grammaticality judgment test (GJT), being even greater on the first test.

Less explicit techniques were involved in the study by Ammar (2008) whose participants were sixty four French-speaking learners from three intact intensive ESL classes. During the treatment the learners were involved in eleven communicative activities, in which teachers' reaction to the mistakes in the use of third person possessive determiners differed between three groups: in the first group recasts were used, in the second prompts, and in the third no corrective feedback was offered. Again the analyses of individual subjects' data from the oral picture description task revealed that the more explicit technique, i.e. prompts, was more effective, especially for low-proficiency learners.

5. CONCLUSION

From the previous chapters we can conclude that negative feedback has a great influence on the understanding and acquisition of a second language through communication. Interaction aids the improvement of students' comprehension by providing a modified input, in order to enable them to control the input they receive and solve comprehension problems that are beneficial for second

language acquisition. Students begin to produce a more coherent output in the interaction with others accordingly. Therefore, the significance of output lies in the development and improvement of accuracy. When considering feedback, it is clear that while any type of feedback is useful, different studies have shown that explicit correction tends to be the most effective approach to correcting students' errors in the second language classroom.

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