

Kwansei Gakuin University
Humanities Review
Vol.20, 2015
Nishinomiya, Japan

Corrective Feedback Clarifications in Second Language Acquisition

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I. Introduction

Corrective feedback is regarded as a crucial element in the process of developing second language acquisition (SLA). It is argued that supplying comprehensible samples of target language is particularly necessary for SLA (Long, 1988). This paper will focus on corrective feedback in language classrooms relating to oral production. Corrective feedback as an instructional device is when a teacher corrects the utterance of a learner's error; corrective feedback has both explicit and implicit modes. Recasts, as a form of implicit corrective feedback is both an efficient and effective corrective tool in the language classroom. However, recasts are often misunderstood in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context as lazy teaching.

II. Explicit and Implicit Feedback

Explicit feedback overtly identifies the error and provides a metalanguage explanation (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Metalanguage is language that describes language, and metalanguage corrective feedback is an example of what is unacceptable in the target language referred to as negative evidence (Sheen & Ellis, 2006). An example of metalinguistic instruction could be if the learner utters 'there are only 3 orange' and the practitioner could explain that because there is more than one orange a plural form is needed, for example 'There are only 3 oranges'. Metalanguage information can be classified as form focused instruction which, as Long (1988) claimed, has a beneficial effect on the SLA process, through the rate, and on their ultimate level of language attainment. Furthermore, Long (1988) states that it is impossible for a second language learner (SLL) to achieve full native speaker competence without instruction.

Whereas implicit feedback does not overtly identify the error, rather it implicitly suggests an error has been committed. The most popular form of implicit feedback is a 'recast', which is a reformulation of the incorrect utterance in the correct target structure, providing the SLL with valuable target language input (Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013). An example of a recast is if the learner omits the plural -s marker as in 'there are only 3 orange' and the practitioner corrects it by saying 'there are only 3 oranges'. This indirect form of feedback contains positive evidence, which is an example of what is acceptable in the target language (Sheen & Ellis, 2006).

III. Communicative Classrooms

Implicit feedback is more suited to communicative classrooms to facilitate the communicative flow. The application of corrective feedback is most conducive to SLA in meaningful communication, according to Spada & Lightbrown (cited in Lyster et al., 2013); and Swain (cited in Leeman, 2003) adds that this application facilitates the actual meaning of the linguistic input. Furthermore, corrective feedback is claimed to assist SLL scaffolding, which means learning from a more knowledgeable person, in this case a teacher, who provides input and corrective feedback to the less knowledgeable student to facilitate second language learning (Spolsky & Hult, 2010)

Implicit feedback such as recasts also are sensitive to learners mistakes, where teachers do not draw overt attention to the learners mistake which might induce language anxiety (Lasagabaster & Sierra cited in Lyster et al. 2013). Sensitive modes of corrective feedback are particularly useful in Japan because of the English language anxiety that Japanese students exhibit. They seem to fear making mistakes in speaking English and this can make students remain silent in the classroom, therefore, implicit feedback can ease this language anxiety. It is possible that language teachers feel the need to do as much as possible to reduce students' communicative stress in the classroom, and implicit feedback which is sensitive to learners' mistakes plays an important part in this.

Classroom activities that require students to produce a long utterance would warrant recasts where the native speaker could provide corrective feedback that contained the central meaning, but also would not hinder the communication flow. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of recasts would encourage the student to try future activities and would not diminish their confidence. The sensitive nature of recasts prescribes to Krashen's (cited in Leeman, 2003) input hypothesis, which advocates that exposure to communicative input should be in a setting that

promotes comprehension and reduces anxiety, stating that it is the “sole requirement for second language acquisition” (pg. 43).

IV. Student vs Teacher Preference in Corrective Feedback

Most teachers prefer providing implicit feedback, in the form of ‘recasts’ (Carpenter, Seon-Jeon & MacGregor, 2006). In a comparative corrective feedback study, recasts accounted for 60% (Sheen & Ellis, 2006) and 55% (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) of the entire feedback types recorded; this highlights their prevalence amongst teachers and their relevance to SLA.

Their popularity stems from their suitability to communicative language teaching (CLT): they are “target-like reformulations that maintain the central meaning of the original utterance” (Long, cited in Leeman, 2003). The teachers can capture the learners’ meaning whilst maintaining the language classroom momentum or, as Brown (cited in Lyster et al., 2013) says, the ‘communicative flow’.

One downside to recasts is their unpopularity among EFL students, according to Schulz (cited in Lyster et al., 2013) EFL learners expressed a preference to have their errors corrected more explicitly. EFL is usually learned in environments where the language of the community and the school is not English; Japan is an example of EFL pedagogy. This preference is due to the traditional way in which foreign languages are taught, which extols the importance of grammar instruction, according to Lyster et al. (2013). This approach seems to place reading and writing ahead of dissemination and reflects a traditional EFL pedagogy, which lacks emphasis on oral communication. It seems that students who are accustomed to a teacher-centered environment, with less classroom conversation, express a preference for having their errors corrected, and place grammar before transmission perhaps because they are not exposed to communicative demands.

Whereas, according to Lyster (2013), EFL learners, irrespective of their foreign language learning history, expressed a higher emphasis on communication as to opposed grammar, this reflects second language learners’ exposure to communicative demands. Usually, ESL teaching happens in an English-speaking country, the students are people who came to live in an English-speaking country, and are learning English.

V. Importance of Noticing

It is important for students to notice that they are receiving correction and the implicit nature of recasts are claimed to lack saliency; according to Carpenter

(2006) second language learners can fail to notice the corrective nature of corrective feedback. Some researchers in the field of SLA consider recasts as providing only positive evidence and do not classify recasts as corrective feedback, however, if recasts are only provided after an error has been committed then the process could be considered to be corrective feedback. The notion of this corrective procedure is a problem if the learner fails to see the recasts as corrective, then perhaps it could be considered as a separate and unrelated to the topic in discussion.

In addition to second language learners' failure to notice the corrective nature of recasts, they also might fail to notice the unacceptable linguistic aspect of their utterance (McDonough, 2005). Ellis et al. (2000) went on to explain that the learner needs to identify the linguistic dissimilarity between their statement and the utterance provided, whether it is pronunciation, morphology, syntax, or semantics that are deviant. If learners can identify this dissimilarity and alter their utterance, then uptake has occurred. Learner uptake is used here to define learner responses to corrective feedback, such as an altered remark (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Levels of uptake following recasts were recorded in the research conducted by Lyster (cited in Goo & Mackey, 2012) to be much lower than those compared with explicit forms of feedback. The comparative figures recorded by Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that recasts resulted in uptake 31% of the time, and explicit correction led to an uptake 50% of the time.

VI. Language Classroom

An important consideration offered by Sheen and Ellis (2006) is that uptake was most likely to occur in contexts where language is treated as an object, for example adult EFL classrooms and laboratory studies. According to Ellis (2008), explicit error correction and metalinguistic explanation is an example of treating language as an object. It seems that in language classrooms where language is treated as a tool for communication, uptake levels would not be as prevalent. Recasts have been evaluated from a cognitive perspective and the socio-cognitive element has not been considered (Sheen & Ellis, 2006). Sheen and Ellis explained that recasts have a 'multifunction' quality that allows second language learners to either focus on the linguistic form or the communicative message. Whereas explicit metalinguistic explanation requires single participatory demands on the learners' attention to the linguistic content only, with recasts the second language learners have more flexibility to choose which aspect to focus on the message or the content. Having cognitive flexibility could be advantageous, especially for

beginner learners who cannot comprehend both meaning and form of the native speakers' utterance, according to Iwashita (2006).

VII. Longevity of Recasts

In addition to uptake evidence favoring non-communicative contexts, the absence of an overt audio response should not disqualify the effectiveness of recasts, according to Long (cited in Carpenter, 2006), who proposed that recasts could have a delayed effect. Recasts might be more effective in the long term than explicit feedback. Cross sectional research findings confirm such short-term gains, such as uptake according to Goo & Mackey (2012). Whereas, longitudinal studies might reveal the effectiveness of implicit feedback.

Lightbrown (cited in Ellis, 2008) also supported this line of argument, stating that explicit feedback in the form of form focused instruction does not have a long-term effect when it is “divorced from the communicative needs and activities of the students” so that only short-term gains are achieved. Treating language as an object could possibly constitute a situation that is removed from the communicative needs and activities of the students and only result in short-term acquisition. The durability of form-focused instruction has been recorded separately by Lightbrown, Pienemann and White (as cited in Ellis, 2012) to last as little as one week to as long as six months.

VIII. Linguistic Structure and Motivation

Long also notes that recasts may be more effective for linguistic structures or forms that are difficult to learn and thus require long-term treatments, whereas explicit feedback may be sufficient for relatively easy structures or forms requiring short-term treatments (Goo & Mackey, 2012). Also, the repetition of recast models might result in long-term development, according to Iwashita (2006); the learners could develop in terms of gaining both the linguistic and meaning form of the recast.

Another factor according to retaining corrective feedback content is motivation, according to Pienemann (cited in Ellis, 2008): “If learners are motivated by a communicative need they will retain only those features that they perceive to be important for communication” (pg. 157). Students in my classroom have become proud and motivated in discussing their personal interests and show a genuine intrinsic need to convey this message.

IX. Conclusion

It seems that the crucial factor in these hypotheses is communication. Conveyance produced in laboratory research settings seems more contrived than classroom based research which perhaps effects how transferable the knowledge is and how it can be stored in the learners' interlanguage. If long-term memory is stimulated by the usefulness of the communication input then normal promulgation is advantageous. Furthermore, if the communication flow is interrupted by an unnatural explicit metalinguistic instruction this could be a problem in the knowledge transfer process.

Corrective feedback features predominately in the role of instruction in SLA. Implicit recasts and prompts have been shown by researchers to be of benefit in certain contexts and explicit error correction and metalinguistic explanation in other contexts. Perhaps devotion to a single instructional mode is not effective as a combination of these instructional moves. This paper has analyzed and argued how recasts provide positive information and can be sensitive to second language learners' needs and keep the communication flow going in a language classroom. This quality makes it the most popular instructional move by teachers, but it is also criticized for its saliency. However, if the research contexts are taken outside of its application place then this questions the validity of the findings. This is because corrective feedback is the most effective tool in meaningful communication, and this meaningful interchange has, in turn, proven to assist the retention of the target language. It provides a transmission need amongst the learners and is possibly registered as important for expression.

Meaningful communication is another way of saying normal communication. Normal correspondence is not an object of learning; it is something to be acquired through meaning. Learners are motivated by recasts because it is their message and meaning which is being recast; it would be reasonable to assume that they want to successfully convey that message. There are many socio-cognitive advantages to the use of recasts.

X. References

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