Oral Corrective Feedback And Learning Of English Modals

Faqeih, Haifaa, Marsden, Emma

Abstract

The study examines the effects of interactional corrective feedback (CF) in the form of recasts (i.e. teacher’s reformulation) and metalinguistic information (i.e. provision of some grammatical information) in response to any erroneous utterance in English modals. Evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of these types is mixed (reviewed by Li [1]), and only few studies have isolated metalinguistic feedback from recasts. The current classroom study aims to address these issues, and focuses on learning of English modals, a structure which has been neglected in corrective feedback studies and is considered to be difficult for EFL/ESL learners (Celce-Murcia and Freeman [2]). Pre-intermediate L1 Arabic learners (n=36) in an ESL context were randomly assigned into two experimental groups; metalinguistic information (MI) and recast (R), and one task only (TO) group. Three hour oral communicative tasks were held in four consecutive weeks. Learning was measured via pre-, post-, and delayed post- picture description test (PD), gap fill test (GF), and timed grammaticality judgment test (TGJT). An exit questionnaire, (e.g., Sheen [3]) to check awareness of the target feature and an attitudinal questionnaire to measure participants’ attitude towards error correction and grammatical accuracy were administered. The results demonstrate that metalinguistic information and recasts were beneficial for learning of English modals and learners’ preference for recast was more than that for metalinguistic information feedback.

Introduction

In the early sixties, language errors began to be viewed by language experts in a more positive way; as being...
indicative of progression. Corder [4] pointed out that learner’s errors are important for teachers as they indicate the amount of information that the learner has acquired, and teachers can then modify their instruction according to their students’ needs. Similarly, Hendrickson [5] stated that language errors are a natural part of learning and the systematic analysis of errors can help researchers and teachers to understand better the process of language acquisition. Along the same lines, Van Lier [6] noted that in the late sixties and early seventies, teachers began to realize that errors might be more an indication of learners' efforts to form a new linguistic system rather than linguistic failure. Hendrickson [5] emphasized five critical questions concerning the type of errors to be corrected, the people who should do the corrections, and the ways of correction. Educators and researchers have investigated the questions stated by Hendrickson for many years, but Lyster and Ranta [7] pointed out in their review that researchers were far from finding answers to these questions. Accordingly, the types of CF that are most effective in terms of student learning have been debated (e.g. Carroll and Swain [8]; Ellis et al [9]; Sheen [3]; Lyster and Ranta [7].

Given that the ways of correction were of researchers’ concerns, there has been some divergence of thought regarding the effectiveness of corrective feedback. For example, Krashen [10] suggested that students do not need any feedback to progress. Contrarily, Lightbown and Spada [11]; Carroll et al [12]; Long [13]; Lyster and Ranta [7]; Sheen [14]; and Ellis [15] suggested that feedback plays a crucial role in language learning as it pushes learners to notice and attempt to say the targeted form, and therefore students may be more likely to repair their erroneous utterances. In addition, the meaning-focused instruction has been questioned with regard to its effectiveness and research suggests its benefits to language learners regardless of context.

The effectiveness of CF and subsequent learning outcomes might be different in laboratory and classroom settings (e.g., Li [1]; Spada & Lightbown [16]). Ellis et al [9], however, argued that ecological validity of the CF can only be achieved through classroom-based research.

To gauge the effectiveness of CF, learners’ reactions to feedback have often been used as indicators, such as intake, uptake, and repair(e.g., Lyster & Ranta [7]) or comparing pre and post-test scores (e.g., Carroll & Swain [8]; Ellis et al [9]; Loewen & Nabei [17]; Révész [18]). It is sometimes assumed that these reactions indicate that the learner has noticed the non-target form. However, a learner may not have noticed the error, but simply repeat the teacher’s or a learner may not respond even though s/he does understand the error (Lochtman [19]).

1.1. The scope of the study

Three recent meta-analysed data on the effectiveness of the types of CF are considered in this research. For example, Norris and Ortega’s [20] meta-analysis found a larger effect size for explicit instructions (0.96) than implicit instructions (0.81). In contrary, Mackey and Goo [21] meta-analysed the effect of different feedback types on immediate post-tests and have found the mean effect size was 0.96 for recasts, 0.47 for metalinguistic feedback, and 0.52 for negotiation. Although Li[1] pointed out, in the meta-analysed data, that recasts have tended to receive considerable attention in SLA research, whilst explicit feedback such as explicit correction and metalinguistic information have had much less interest, Mackey and Goo [21] stated that it was premature to make conclusive arguments for the superior effects of recasts based on their analysed data.

As research findings seem to be mixed of whether metalinguistic is equal to or more effective than recast, more research concerning the effectiveness of CF emphasising on the explicit type, metalinguistic information in particular, is needed.

The provision of outcome measures that may tap into implicit as well explicit knowledge is projected for the purpose of the current study, for Ellis [22] indicated that several studies used tests that favour the use of explicit knowledge to examine the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit feedback.

Testing session is another focus of the study, Li [1], however, stated that few studies did not provide learners’
pretest scores and Mackey&Goo [21] indicated the need for additional studies that included delayed post tests.

The evidence in favour of the relative effectiveness of oral interaction alone versus oral interaction with CF is also mixed, and the nature of the control group has varied in CF studies to date. Only few published studies used a control group that engaged in the same activities as the experimental groups but no feedback was provided (i.e. Erlam & Loewen [23]; Révész [18]; Mackey & Oliver [24]; Yang & Lyster [25]).

It has been suggested that teachers should be sensitive to students’ attitudes to language, particularly to error correction although it might be argued that learners’ preference may not be what is actually best for acquisition (Truscott [26]). A number of research has examined learners’ preference and attitudes towards the type of CF and the role of grammar instruction and error correction (e.g., Amador [27]; Egi [28]; Sheen [3]).

Drawing on the above research findings, the current classroom study sought to increase our understanding of the effectiveness of two types of CF and the provision of interactional tasks alone, on a grammatical structure (English Modals) that is considered difficult for Arab learners of English in an ESL context, in relation to learners’ attitudes.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the effectiveness of these three intervention types relative to each other? RQ2: Are any gains maintained after a delay of about 7 weeks? RQ3: Are gains observed differentially on different outcome measures?

Based on the previous literature reviews and the scope of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

2. Method

2.1. Target Structure

Acquiring English modals, form and function, is “one of the most difficult structures that an ESL/EFL teacher has to deal with” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman [2], p.80). The following wrong production was taken from the participants for the purpose of the current study:

*You must to ask him. *She can’t rode a horse.

*She will cuts mark. *She is canning. Abunowara [29] suggested two reasons behind the difficulty Arab learners of English encounters: 1)

modality in Arabic has not yet attracted much attention from either Arab or western linguists, 2) Arabic modal forms do not have distinctive syntactic characteristics that the modal verbs have in English for Arabic modalities have verbal meaning and, therefore, tend to become similar to verbs. The treatment of modals in EFL contexts as the focus on forms approach rather than on functions and meanings in most of the EFL contexts are thought to present a challenge even for advanced learners (Saeed [30]).

2.2. Design of Study and Group Sizes

The study involved three treatment conditions; recast only (n=13), metalinguistic information only (n=13), and task only (n=10) groups. A battery of pre-, post-, and delayed post-tests were used to assess participants’ acquisition of English modals. In an English language Centre in York, a consent form was signed in the first week followed by pre-intervention tests and four consecutive weeks of classroom interactional sessions. A six week interval was followed by delayed post-tests. (For further details on the design of the study and the biographical information about the participants, see Faqeih [31])
2.3. Interventional Materials and Testing Instruments

The major objective of the interventional sessions was to provide interactional opportunities for the students to make rules, give instructions, make suggestions, give advice, and propose a future plan by using can, must, will, and should. Each session lasted forty-five minutes totalling three hours. This amount of time was based on Ellis et al [9]; and Sheen [3] who suggest that longer treatment than one or two hour/s might be required for a significant improvement evident in the implicit instruction, such as recast. (See Faqeih [31] for more information on these sessions)

Following some of the criteria established by Ellis [32], a total of three instruments were designed for the purpose of this research; PD, timed GJT, and GF tests. Discussion on piloting, scoring and reliability, and implementation of these measures can be found in Faqeih [31].

2.4. Exit and attitudinal Questionnaires

Each test was followed by an exit questionnaire to investigate whether the test had raised learners’ awareness about the target structure. A five point Likert Scale attitudinal questionnaire, unlike Sheen’s [3], was designed to measure learners’ attitudes towards three constructs: content of the activities, learners’ opinions about error correction, and learners’ opinions about the CF techniques used during the interventional sessions. Details on the design, the validity and the administration of the questionnaires can be found in Faqeih [31].

3. Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for the mean and the standard deviations were calculated for percentage scores from pre, post- and delayed post-tests for the three groups in all measures as can be seen in Figure 3.1. A range of statistical tests was used to assess changes over time and between conditions. The normality of the distributions and the baselines were verified using Shapiro-Wilk test to decide on whether Parametric or non-parametric tests should be used. The descriptive results of the study indicated that learners in the three groups have improved their knowledge of English modals over time on all outcome measures. It also provided empirical support for the benefits of both implicit (recast) and explicit (metalinguistic information) CF techniques in L2 development. Comprehensible descriptive results on the different outcome measures could be found in Faqeih [31].

![Figure 3.1 Summary results of the mean scores on all tests](image)

Statistically speaking, although there were mixed statistical results in the different outcome measures (broadly more implicit and more explicit), a clear summary of the statistical significant over time changes for all groups on all
outcome measures reported in Tables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3. The results suggested that the provision of recasts and metalinguistic information feedback with interactional activities helped learning of English modals, whereas the interactional tasks alone did not.

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Table 3.1 Statistical results of over time changes in the metalinguistic information group

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Table 3.2 Statistical results of over time changes in the recast group

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<td>Timed GJT Cor</td>
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Table 3.3 Statistical results of over time changes in the task only group

The results of the Free Oral PD test suggested a pre-post and pre-delayed post significant development for the target forms in the metalinguistic information group, whereas for the recast group pre-delayed post and post-delayed post significant gains were observed as well as a trend to significant pre-post gains.

Planned contrast of the overall scores on TGJT suggested a significant difference between metalinguistic information group and the recast group (the metalinguistic information group scoring higher) on the post-testing
The results of the correct items of TGJT suggested no significant gains on the immediate post-test for all groups, but gains were evident in the longer term for task only group. In contrary, the incorrect items of TGJT test showed internal significant overtime changes for the metalinguistic information group in pre-post and pre-delayed post whereas significant internal overtime change for the recast group on pre-delayed post time only.

The results on GF test suggested a significant development for the recast group in pre-post and pre-delayed post-tests, whereas significant gains for the metalinguistic information group in pre-delayed post-test but a trend to significant in short term test for task only group.

In terms of learners' attitudes towards the type of CF and error correction, a preference (92%) was evident for recasts over metalinguistic information, whereas 89% of the participants indicated the needs for their errors to be corrected. As for the interactional tasks, 73% of the participants showed their preference for these activities. This can be attributed to practicing and using the language in a native environment may have made the tasks familiar to learners.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The results of the study might be in line or different from those of the reviewed studies. Of course, the results from these studies cannot be directly compared to those of the current study because of a fundamental difference in the way the studies were operationalized. More specifically, there are differences in terms of population, the type of measures, and the interventional feedback and materials.

The findings in the current classroom study provided concrete support for the significant roles of recast and metalinguistic information CF techniques in L2 development. However, the significant effects of the two CF types lend support [23]; Loewen and Nabei [17]; Sheen [3]). The finding of non-significant gains for the task only group on most of the outcome measures is at odd with Erlam and Loewen [23] who found significant effects for oral interactional tasks.

5. Implications and Limitations

Based on the theoretical reviewed studies, Long [33] argued that recasts facilitate acquisition by drawing learners' attention to form throughout a conversational exchange that keeps learners focused on meaning. The gains made by the recast group are in line with this notion. The recast group’s gains, however, could be because recasts CF provided implicit positive evidence and/or because the learners' construed their own explicit grammatical rules.

The beneficial role of metalinguistic information feedback in certain tasks for both implicit and explicit knowledge in pre-post and pre-delayed post-tests is different from Krashen’s claim which suggests that explicit correction of grammar would only improve explicit knowledge, but it is in line with Schmidt’s [34] noticing hypothesis.

The developmental benefits of pushed output proposed by (Swain[35]) can be supported in this study via learners' gains observed in the CF groups indicating that learners' productions and the CF may have helped them to reformulate their initial utterances, monitor their production and hence produce accurate output. The opportunities provided during the interventional sessions might have been enough to convert some explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. This might be compatible with skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser [36].

Pedagogically, it has been argued (e.g., Carpenter et al [37]) that recast might not be of value when learners fail to recognize it as a correction of an error. Moreover, metalinguistic CF technique might be of some teachers' dis-preference for direct and overt negative feedback as explicit feedback may result in embarrassment and demotivation of the learners (e.g., Seedhouse [38]. The current classroom experiment suggests that recasts and metalinguistic information proved to be effective for ESL learners and that language teachers could use these types
of CF in language classes where meaningful interactive activities are carried out.

In regards to learners' preference, the positive attitudes toward the materials created for this project suggest that meaningful activities that suit the students' needs can be more effective. Although the study might contribute to our understanding of the effectiveness of the types of CF and the provision of interactional tasks alone in relation to learners’ attitudes, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size. Free oral picture description test should have been time constrained. The repetition of the same outcome measures in three different testing sessions is another limitation to this study. It is regrettable that a test only group was not used, as this would have helped to confirm the effectiveness of the interactional activities. Finally, more activities could have been included to elicit more productions.

6. Future Direction

Some directions for future research could include analyzing learners' uptake, inclusion of a test only group, and analysis of oral and written modes of production and correction.

References

[26] Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing class. Language Learning, 46, 327-


