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Focus on form and negotiation of meaning in synchronous voice-based computer mediated communication: Effect of dyad

M. C. Bueno Alastuey*

Public University of Navarre, Philology and Didactics of Languages, Campus de Arrosadía s/n, 31006 Pamplona (Navarre), Spain

Abstract

Communicative competence is the ultimate goal of most learners of a second language, and interaction beneficial to acquire it as interactional feedback may force learners to produce modified output, which contributes notably to language acquisition. Neither interactional feedback nor modified output in synchronous voice-based CMC have been researched, and the effect different kinds of dyad may produce in them has also not been observed. Our study tries to fill this gap by focusing on whether the kind of dyad has any significant effect on the quantity and type of language-related episode triggers, LRE responses and modified output in SVCMC.

Keywords: interactionist approaches; speaking; synchronous voice-based CMC; LREs; modified output

1. Introduction

Communicative competence is the ultimate goal of most learners of a second language, and interaction seems to be an essential part of acquiring that competence, as interactional feedback may force learners to produce modified output, which contributes notably to language acquisition (Long, 1981).

Language related episodes (LREs), which are parts of a conversation in which learners talk about language, or implicitly or explicitly question their language (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Williams, 1999), have been used to study interactional feedback.

* M. C. Bueno Alastuey. Tel.: +34 948 169 506; Fax: +34 948 169 463
camino.bueno@unavarra.es
LREs have been classified depending on:

- **a. the kind of trigger which begins the episode:**
  1. lexical: regarding the meaning of open-class lexical items (Shekary & Tahririan, 2006),
  2. morphosyntactic: regarding aspects of English morphology and syntax,
  3. phonetic: regarding non-target phonetic realizations;

- **b. the response:**
  1. communication breakdown: instances when interlocutors signal their non-understanding or misunderstanding by using indicators such as questions, or by partially or completely repeating a previous utterance with rising intonation (Lai & Zhao, 2006),
  2. negative feedback: reactive negative evidence which highlights differences between the target language and learner output (Oliver, 2000) without non-understanding or misunderstanding;

- **c. the existence of modified or unmodified output.**

LREs have been considered fundamental for SLA because of their contribution to noticing, which is the first step to interlanguage development (Schmidt, 1990), and to modified output (Swain, 1995), the strongest predictor of immediate and delayed correct test responses (Loewen, 2005; McDonough, 2005).

The aim of our research was to analyse interaction among three different kinds of dyads using synchronous voice-based computer mediated communication (SVCMC) in a real classroom, and more concretely to study the effect of dyad in both quantity and type of a. LRE triggers, b. LRE responses, and c. modified output.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 42 dyads: 14 dyads of NNS-NNS Same L1 (Spanish-Spanish), 14 of NNS-NNS Different L1 (Spanish-Turkish), and 14 NNS-NS dyads (Spanish-American).

The Spanish learners were FL learners of English with mixed levels of proficiency ranging from low-intermediate to advanced. The Turkish NNSs were pre-service teachers of English at advanced proficiency level, and the American NSs were FL learners of Spanish. All were university students.

Mixed proficiency pairs were arranged in the NNS-NNS Same L1 dyads to stimulate negotiation (Iwashita, 2001; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). The pairing was random in the other two groups.

#### 2.2. Procedure

The students carried out two two-way information exchange tasks using Skype. The first took place in the third week of the course and the second in the tenth week. The pairings were different in both tasks as the second conversation was only used to confirm data.

Students connected with their partners in class, completed their tasks and stored the conversation in a server, which was later analysed by the researcher. A set of the data (15%) was also analysed by an independent rater; an inter-rater agreement rate of 91% was reached.

The stored conversations were analysed for LREs trigger (general, lexical, morphosyntactic and phonetic), LRE response (communication breakdown and negative feedback – NF), and type of modified output (lexical, morphosyntactic and phonetic).

All the data were introduced in SSPS and significant differences studied at $p<.05$ significance level.
3. Results and discussion

3.1. LRE triggers

Although the number of episodes were different in each kind of dyad (NNS-NNS Different L1 had more episodes of all kinds of LREs), percentages were quite similar (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of LREs / percentage in each kind of pairing and in each conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Lexical</th>
<th>Morphosyntactic</th>
<th>Phonetic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Focus on meaning</th>
<th>Focus on form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS-NNS</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>52/43%</td>
<td>32/26%</td>
<td>14/12%</td>
<td>22/18%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same L1</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>9/13%</td>
<td>16/23%</td>
<td>17/24%</td>
<td>28/40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61/32%</td>
<td>48/25%</td>
<td>31/16%</td>
<td>50/26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS-NNS</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>22/11%</td>
<td>65/33%</td>
<td>42/21%</td>
<td>70/35%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different L1</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>19/12%</td>
<td>47/30%</td>
<td>35/23%</td>
<td>54/35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41/11%</td>
<td>112/32%</td>
<td>77/22%</td>
<td>124/35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS-NS</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>3/4%</td>
<td>30/39%</td>
<td>14/18%</td>
<td>30/39%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>2/2%</td>
<td>25/29%</td>
<td>16/19%</td>
<td>42/49%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5/3%</td>
<td>55/34%</td>
<td>30/18%</td>
<td>72/44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line with previous findings, there were more lexical than morphosyntactic LREs in all dyads (Tudini, 2003), but as many or more phonetic than lexical LREs (Jepson, 2005). If phonetic LREs are considered focus on form, there were more focus on form LREs than negotiation of meaning LREs in all dyads. Our results also confirm those of Leeser (2004), as there were about 20% of LREs triggered by morphosyntactic items as proficiency increased in the second task.

Regarding differences among dyads, NNS-NNS Different L1 dyads had significantly more LREs of all types in the first task, and significantly more lexical and morphosyntactic LREs in the second one. Consequently, NNS-NNS Different L1 dyads gave more opportunities for modified output than the other two kinds of dyad, confirming previous findings (Varonis & Gass, 1985).

Although more LREs suggest more possibilities for the students to focus on their non-target forms and more opportunities for modified output, this also points to more communicative difficulties; this should be expected where NNSs had no knowledge of the L1 of their partners, and thus any deviation from the target language would have been incomprehensible. On the other hand, both NNS-NNS Same L1 and NNS-NSs were familiar with L1 deviations, and thus fewer communicative difficulties should be expected.

3.2. LRE responses

Lexical and phonetic triggers caused more breakdowns in communication than negative feedback in all dyads, while morphosyntactic triggers caused more negative feedback in all dyads in both tasks (see Table 2). This confirms previous findings that lexical and phonetic deviations cause the biggest problems in communication (Tudini, 2003), while morphosyntactic non-target forms do not cause communication problems.
Group 2 had significantly more phonetic breakdowns than the other two groups in the first task, and more lexical breakdowns than group 1 in the second task. However, group 2 had a significantly higher amount of negative feedback than group 1 for the three kinds of triggers and a significantly higher amount of morphosyntactic and phonetic negative feedback than group 3 in the first task, and a significantly higher amount of lexical and morphosyntactic NF than the other two in the second task.

Studying the kinds of response to LREs gives us a clearer picture of negotiation moves in SVCMC as the main significant differences are not in breakdowns in communication but in the amount of negative feedback. A possible explanation for this high occurrence of negative feedback in group 2 may be that, as future teachers, they are prepared to focus more on form and thus to correct their partners’ non-target forms. Group 2 also had the highest number of phonetic breakdowns in task 1, probably because of lack of familiarity with the L1 of their interlocutors and thus with the phonetic deviations produced by L1 interference.

### 3.3. Modified output

Group 2 had the most instances of modified output in both tasks (see Table 3), so interlocutors seemed to have been forced to modify their output more with partners from a different L1. Group 2 produced significantly more morphosyntactic output than group 3 and significantly more phonetic output than group 1 in the first task, and also significantly more morphosyntactic output than the other two groups in the second task. Group 3 had significantly more lexical output than group 1, and both groups 2 and 3 significantly more phonetic output than group 1 in the second task.

A plausible explanation could be the high quantity of negative feedback group 2 experienced, especially explicit morphosyntactic negative feedback which probably contributed to interlocutors producing more modified output. More phonetic output in groups 2 and 3 should also be expected as different L1 partners could not understand deviations due to L1 interference and interlocutors tended to pay more attention to the pronunciation of native speakers, and thus corrected their own pronunciation more in group 3.
Table 3. Instances of modified output / percentage with respect to LREs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lexical</th>
<th>Morphosyntactic</th>
<th>Phonetic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NNS-NNS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same L1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>21/65%</td>
<td>11/78%</td>
<td>44/37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>1/6%</td>
<td>2/12%</td>
<td>5/7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>22/46%</td>
<td>13/42%</td>
<td>49/26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NNS-NNS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different L1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>13/20%</td>
<td>27/64%</td>
<td>85/43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>7/15%</td>
<td>21/60%</td>
<td>70/36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>20/18%</td>
<td>48/62%</td>
<td>155/44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NNS-NS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>12/40%</td>
<td>6/43%</td>
<td>28/93%</td>
<td>46/60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>13/52%</td>
<td>5/31%</td>
<td>29/69%</td>
<td>47/55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>25/45%</td>
<td>11/37%</td>
<td>57/79%</td>
<td>123/76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conclusion

Using SVCMC in the classroom seems to be beneficial for SLA because of the high quantity of negotiation work it provokes. The type of dyad also affects quantity and type of a) LRE triggers, b) LRE responses, and c) modified output. NNS-NNS Different or Same L1 are also significantly different regarding all these aspects of interaction.

Dyads of NNSs with different L1 seem to be the most beneficial partners for language work as they produce significantly higher levels of LRE triggers and responses and more modified output than dyads of NNSs with a common L1 and, in some cases, even than NSs, and can consequently contribute more to SLA.

Knowledge of the L1 of the interlocutors and being a future teacher of the L2 seem plausible explanations for the differences but need to be confirmed by further research, which should also explore ways to increase NNS-NNS Same L1 noticing and the quantity of modified output they produce.

From our results, we might conclude that the typical arrangement in foreign language contexts (NNS-NNS Same L1) seems to contribute the least to language acquisition as this kind of dyad shows the lowest rate both of LRE triggers and responses and of modified output. At the same time, our results challenge the myth of the native speaker being the most beneficial partner. At least as far as LREs and modified output are concerned, NNS-NNS Different L1 dyads seem equally or more beneficial, and may help mitigate the anxiety talking to native speakers can cause for quite a few language learners.

References


