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Exploring Potential Problems of Corrective Feedback

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1. Introduction

Many scholars and researchers have challenged the long-held anti- and pro-feedback attitudes that have dominated for quite some time as regards the role of error corrections in second language acquisition (SLA). The difference in attitudes can be particularly seen between Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada (1999) and Truscott (1999, 2005), where Lyster et al. believe that feedback is effective and Truscott clearly feels that "oral grammar correction is a bad idea" (2005, p. 21). Although I take a firm stance that teachers should explicitly give form-feedback (i.e., grammar correction), there are some merit in Truscott's line of reasoning that there are overwhelming problems and "harmful side effects" (1999, p. 37) with this practice.

In general, the teacher is "the primary source of target language input and is therefore responsible for maximizing use in the classroom" (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008, p. 100). According to Truscott (2001) feedback is "a very specialized tool" (p. 94), which teachers must handle wisely in any situation in the classroom. Teachers must understand the process of using feedback by connecting it with instruction in which students not only have the opportunity to notice their interlanguage gap, but at the same time attend to meaning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In order to deal with the issues of feedback, there are questions that need to be answered: What is an inappropriate feedback? What are the negative effects of feedback? Can teachers overuse feedback? The purpose of this paper is to investigate feedback practices empirically to answer these questions. In the next section, I will briefly describe two types of form-feedback (recasts and prompts) use in the classroom.

2. Recasts

Lyster and Ranta (1997) found recasts to be the most frequently used

feedback in the classroom and they viewed recasts as an immediate reformulation of students' errors in their utterances. The following example illustrates this:

Teacher: How did you feel during this time?
Student: I feel happy. [Error: Grammatical-tense]
Teacher: Oh you felt, felt happy.

Students could benefit from the implicit nature of this feedback, because recasts do not interrupt the communication flow between teacher and student (Long, 2007). With this implicitness, students are able to focus on form, notice their errors easily, and manage their language problems without feeling forced to correct their errors (Mackey, 2007). In addition, recasts are considered as non-threatening and time-saving devices so the students do not feel intimidated or embarrassed when receiving this kind of feedback from the teacher (Yoshida, 2008).

Demerits of recasts have been discussed in numerous past studies with some empirical evidence supporting them. Egi (2007) found that students considered recasts as confirmation, since recasts are ambiguous in nature (Lyster, 2007). There may be some confusion for students about teachers' intentions and expectations when using recasts (Lyster, 1998, 2007). In other words, recasts "do not overtly signal that an error has been made" (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006, p. 342). In addition, recasts are difficult for beginners and lower level students to recognize as a form of feedback (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006).

3. Prompts

Prompts provide hints and signals that withhold correct forms in order to assist students to reformulate their utterances and thus self-repair (Lyster, 2004). Lyster (2007) claims that prompts enable students to remember the target language better by letting them actively produce their own utterance rather than passively receiving correct form directly from their teacher.

Prompts are realized in several linguistic patterns, and Lyster (2004) listed the following four, shown with examples:

1) *Clarification request* - The teacher uses phrases such as "Excuse me?" or "I don't understand."

Student: Nearly nature? Near nature.

Teacher: Near nature? I don't understand "near nature"?

Student: *Chikai shizen* [Near nature] *nan ka* [or something].

2) *Repetition* - The teacher repeats the student's incorrect utterance with a rising intonation.

Student: By foot.

Teacher: By foot?

Student: On foot.

3) *Metalinguistic cues* - The teacher gives some linguistic hints or asks questions relating to the student's utterance.

Teacher: How did she get to work the next day in the heavy snow?

Student: She will drive.

Teacher: So it's past tense.

Student: Ah! She drove her car.

4) *Elicitation* - The teacher explicitly asks for corrections of the student's forms.

Student: They ride in the car.

Teacher: Sorry? One more time? They···

Student: Rode.

As shown above, prompts give the teacher and student the opportunity to negotiate form and meaning, and to draw students to their own linguistic resources (Lyster, 2007). In this study we will identify some of the potential problems of feedback.

4. Method

4.1 Research objectives

This study was designed to provide insight into how teachers gave feedback to students in integrated grammar instruction. The two objectives that this study aimed to show were:

1) To identify the problems of recasts given by the teachers;

2) To identify the problems of prompts given by the teachers.

According to these objectives, the study will present qualitatively analyzed excerpts from the oral data collected by the author.

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Participants

Data was collected in February 2009. Four teachers (two native-English speaking teachers and two Japanese English teachers), and sixteen Japanese university English students were asked to take part in the research project (four students per teacher).

All teachers had more than five years of EFL/ESL teaching experience. The pseudonyms John and Mary are used for the native-English speaking teachers, and Taro and Hana for the Japanese English teachers.

4.2.2 Materials and procedures

Two task-based activities requiring teacher-student interaction were used for data collection: describing a photograph and producing a narrative. These tasks were chosen to induce students to speak sufficiently in terms of time and amount. Each student gave a one-minute presentation, after which the teacher asked questions. All of the teacher-student interactions were audio-recorded.

The teachers participated in three different 80-minute sessions individually, for a total of 240 minutes for each teacher. Each session consisted of two different 40-minute tasks.

Once oral data was collected, it was transcribed verbatim. In accordance with Kawamoto and Iwai's (2009) encoding system, dots (. . .) are used for silent pauses with each dot representing approximately one second; vertical parallel lines (| |) are used for overlaps between speakers. Additions to the transcription conventions from Kawamoto (2010) are a pair of double parentheses (( )) used for back channeling, interjections, and italicized words for Japanese words.

5. Findings

Through the data examination, the researcher attempted to identify how recasts and prompts were a hindrance for students in noticing their errors. As mentioned above, recasts could sometimes be ambiguous or seem to be meaning-

oriented (confirmation check). The problems can also be classified as follows: 1) recasts may be perceived as confirmation checks; 2) students failed to notice the focus of the form; and 3) students' misunderstanding the pronunciation of the word.

5.1 Recasts
5.1.1 Confirmation checks

The problem with recasts is that they may be perceived as confirmation checks by students rather than implicit hints to correct grammatical errors. Excerpt 1 represents a typical case for this in that the teacher was not consistent in providing feedback on the student's utterance in the conversation. In it, we can see that Mary provided a recast on the past tense, and repeated the student's error in the translated English form. The student thought that the teacher's recast was for the teacher's benefit to understand Japanese words.

Excerpt 1 (*Recast #1*)
1 S: Um in our school, each grade have . . have some kind of perform.
2 TM: Ah, each grade has···
3 S: Yeah. And we···uh We are we were in senior year, in this year. Um? This year, and we wear *yukata* [a traditional Japanese summer dress] and dance Japanese dance. (L) And wearing *yukata*, a, in in sports festival is kind special because only senior can wear *yukata*.
4 TM: Oh, is that right?
5 S: Yeah. So is, this is special for us. . And this *uchiwa* [a fan] is we we belong to fourth class.
6 TM: Fourth class?
7 S: Fourth class, and so we have same *uchiwa*.
8 TM: Fan, (Yeah.) fan.
9 S: That's it.

In line 2 above, Mary pointed out to the student the proper conjugated form of "have" with a recast. The student indicated that she interpreted Mary's feedback as a confirmation by saying "Yeah" in line 3 and continued with her story. Then in line 7, when the student used the word "*uchiwa*," Mary interrupted to

give the English word "fan" to the student. Rather than repeating the given English word after the teacher, the student only completed her presentation.

5.1.2 Unaware of focus on form

Another problem with recasts is students failing to understand the focus on the form. Although the teacher attempts to draw students to notice the target language, students would not recognize the feedback, which we can see in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2 (Recast #2)

1 TH: Uh how did Paul feel when he looked outside?
2 S: Oh maybe he thought . . the day is so sunny day.
3 TH: Ah, the, the day was so sunny?
4 S: |So sunny|
5 TH: |It was so| sunny? Um.
6 S: Um. They feel so good.
7 TH: Ah, they felt so good.
8 S: Good.
9 TH: He felt so good. Oh, I see. Uh, why was he putting on his robe?.. Why was he wearing his robe?

At first, Hana gave feedback on the past tense by using recasts in lines 3, 5, and 7, which were typical examples of recast feedback. Then the student made an error with "they" in line 6, which was repeated by the teacher in line 7. Here the teacher attempted to draw the student's attention to the error, but apparently failed. However, as line 9 indicated, Hana realized that the subject of the sentence had to be "he". She then quickly continued with the next question. This could possibly hinder the student's ability to notice her error which in the end would confuse her.

5.1.3 Phonological misunderstanding

Some researchers (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2006; Lyster, 1998) suggest phonological errors are supposed to be more noticeable in recasts; however; this is not always the case. The next excerpt illustrates recasts in which the student

did not notice her pronunciation error.

Excerpt 3 (Recast #3)

1 S: Um, yes, hashimaki. *eto* My friends···my friends···um···my friends taught how to cook hashimaki. Um···*tsu to···ki ki kiji, ki ki kiji?*

2 TM: Batter? Batter?

3 S: Um, butter. On the *n* ~ *to* chopsticks.

4 TM: Oh roll the uh batter?

5 S: The ba ba on the chopsticks.

6 TM: Oh, but first you have to cook it, right? Do you have to cook the ···

7 S: The butter.

8 TM: Oh, the crepe···

9 S: The butter, yeah. Like··· *okonomiyaki* [a Japanese version of a pizza].

Although Mary gave a recast (translation of the Japanese word) explicitly in line 2, the student mispronounced the word "batter" in the next line, possibly she had misunderstood Mary's pronunciation. In line 4, Mary tried to help the student with this problem, but the student did not properly pronounce the word. After the student finished explaining her photograph, Mary had to state explicitly how to pronounce the word "batter" accurately without having the student to repeat it.

5.2 Problems with Prompts

In general, prompts are considered to be effective in stopping students temporarily and drawing their attention to specific errors they have made. However, prompts are not necessarily without problems. The types of problems which can occur are: 1) over-prompting; 2) over-emphasizing accuracy; 3) introducing new vocabulary; and 4) being over-selective about expressions or terminology.

5.2.1 Over-prompting

Lyster states that prompts are used to provide hints or "cues to draw on their [the students'] own linguistic resource" (Lyster, 2007, p. 108). When the teacher over-prompts students' errors, he/she may not give students enough thinking time

to finish their utterances or to engage in self-repair. In such cases, there is the risk that students may not know specifically what their errors are. The excerpt below revealed that Taro was eager to check all the students' grammar errors. As a result, the student recognized the specific error, but the process took too long as illustrated in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 (Prompt #1)

 1 Tᴛ: How did the bald man light his cigarette?
 2 S: Light. light. he (Uh huh) <u>light</u> by match.
 3 Tᴛ: Light is a. say it again?
 4 S: Match
 5 Tᴛ: He?
 6 S: Um, eh?
 7 Tᴛ: Match yeah. . what's the verb?
 8 S: He he light light, he <u>light</u>
 9 Tᴛ: What is. what is. he light? Is it light? light?
 10 S: . . . Match.
 11 Tᴛ: Match is correct. What's the verb past tense of light?
 12 S: Light light light. . <u>lit</u>.
 13 Tᴛ: Lit!! Well done!! Yep, so he?
 14 S: He lit (Uh huh) by match.
 15 Tᴛ: Okay, he lit by match . he lit his cigarette by match, right, question number 2.

In line 2, the student made a tense error, then Taro interrupted the student repeating her utterance (Prompt - repetition) asking her to repeat (elicitation) her utterance in line 3. In line 4, the student continued with her presentation, and in line 5, Taro induced the student to repeat the original sentence (elicitation). The student was confused and Taro asked her the verb in line 7. In line 8, the student attempted to repair her utterance; however, in the next line, Taro provided another prompt. The student thought Taro was asking her what the man was lighting. In line 11, Taro provided another prompt (metalinguistic clue) by asking her for the past tense of 'light'. Finally, the student realized the past tense of light in line 12 and in line 14 gave the full sentence. Taro was satisfied with the answer in

line 15.

5.2.2 Over-emphasizing accuracy

When teachers strongly emphasize accuracy by using prompts, students have less chance of communicating freely. In Excerpt 5, Taro corrected every grammatical inaccuracy in each of the student's utterances, which appeared to confuse the student regarding precisely the number of errors she was making. This overuse of prompts could hinder not only the ability of students to notice their errors, but also their ability to articulate grammatically correct sentences.

Excerpt 5 (Prompt #2)

   1 S: And. . they shook hands (Uh huh) and (Uh huh) I think (Uh huh) they are <u>talk</u>

   2 T⊤: They are talk? <u>talk</u>

   3 S: They are eto

   4 T⊤: They are? Or they would?

   5 S: They are. they are. talk. <u>get</u>

   6 T⊤: Ah their talk?

   7 S: G . got well <u>got</u> well?

   8 T⊤: |Got got well.| <u>Got</u> well.

   9 S: |Got well.|

  10 T⊤: Good well? Got well? Can you say it |again?|

  11 S: |Got got| <u>got</u> well?

  12 T⊤: |Ah <u>got</u> well.|

  13 S: Got got well.| <u>Got</u> well.

  14 T⊤: So can you. can you make a full sentence, once more?

  15 S: I think they are they are. talk <u>got</u> well.

  16 T⊤: They they, I think they, can you say it again?

In line 2, Taro provided a prompt in order for the student to notice the tense error. Taro did not give the student time to think in line 3, immediately giving her a prompt, and then soon after providing a recast. She made another attempt to make a repair in the next line. Taro interrupted using another prompt (clarification request) in line 6. Instead of letting her continue making a self-repair,

Taro gave her another prompt in line 8. The student was puzzled as to what exactly the error was; Taro immediately asked the student to repeat the sentence again in line 10. The student made another attempt, but, in line 12, Taro confused the student by repeating her utterance. Taro insisted on using another prompt in line 14, which interfered with the students' ability to use the correct sentence in line 15. Taro kept insisting that the student needed to make another correction.

5.2.3 Introducing new vocabulary

Giving prompts may not be an effective way to introduce new vocabulary because students could become confused and focused on the meaning of words while the teachers are giving them grammatical hints. In the next excerpt, Taro provided a new word for the student using prompts.

Excerpt 6 (Prompt #3)

1 S: Put off her apron
2 Tt: The she, you mean, you mean she undid
3 S: Undid?
4 Tt: Undid.
5 S: Undid. (Um-huh.) Undid? (Um.) The . .
6 Tt: The past form of "undo".
7 S: Undo?
8 Tt: Undid. Undone.
9 S: Undone.
10 Tt: I'm just telling you the inflection.
11 S: Um?
12 Tt: So the past tense is "undid".
13 S: Um?
14 Tt: U-N-D-I-D.
15 S: U?
16 Tt: Um. Do, did, done.
17 S: Um?
18 Tt: Undo, undid, undone

From line 2 of this excerpt, we notice that Taro used a simple yet unfamiliar word "undid" to the student. Although Taro explained the present tense of "undid", the student was only confused by the word. Throughout the excerpt, we can see that Taro was giving her explicit feedback on the verb conjugation of "undo", even though the student was still struggling with its meaning. Taro's use of prompts to introduce new vocabulary seemed to confuse the student.

5.2.4 Over-selection

Providing prompts may also not be an effective way to be selective on specific expressions or terminology, since the focus of the conversation is on meaning. If the teacher is too choosy, then the student could become confused about what the teacher wants, as shown in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7 (Prompt #4)

1 Tᴛ: Why did Mr. Johnson look at the paper?

2 S: Ah because . the paper (Uh huh) said the . address.

3 Tᴛ: The paper said ad|dress?|

4 S: |Address|

6 Tᴛ: Paper said?

7 S: Said. |Said

8 Tᴛ: |Said| Said?

9 S: Paper the paper (Uh huh) was written.

10 Tᴛ: Paper was written?

11 S: But paper

12 Tᴛ: Take time, |try it again.|

13 S: |Becau|

14 Tᴛ: Try it again.

15 S: Because the paper (Uh huh) um written.

16 Tᴛ: Written?

17 S: Typed?

18 Tᴛ: Do you mean printed?

Taro was not satisfied with the student's answer and gave her a prompt in line 3. The student thought that the answer was 'address'; however, Taro simply

provided another prompt in line 6. Taro then gave her another prompt in line 8 to induce her to use a different term. The student made a self-repair, but Taro thought that the answer was unsatisfactory using another prompt in line 10. In line 15, the student made another attempt, but we can see that Taro was unhappy with her answer in the next line. The student used 'typed' instead, after that Taro gave her an alternative expression.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrated that when teachers did not provide recasts and prompts effectively, students seemed confused as to what their errors were, or why the teachers were providing feedback. The excerpts above revealed that when providing feedback, teachers should stress the feedback, get the students to repeat the correction, give students enough thinking time, allow the students to communicate freely, and focus on the knowledge the students already know.

Concerning the first objective of this study that focused on the potential problems with recasts, several cases have been/were shown. The excerpts indicated that students considered recasts as confirmation checks and non-corrective feedback. In Mary's case, the student assumed that the recasts were for the teacher's benefit rather than for her as shown in Excerpt 1. At other times students regarded recasts as a simple comment from the teacher, as we saw in Excerpt 2, when Hana attempted to draw the student's attention to the verb tense. Finally, the other problem is when teachers do not overtly stress the error, as shown in Excerpt 3, students would have difficulty noticing their errors.

Regarding the second objective that addressed the potential problems of prompts, the excerpts revealed that there are at least four concerns involved. First, as has been seen in Excerpt 4, teachers should not continuously correct every error that students make; otherwise students would feel rushed without having the time to think and self-repair. Second, teachers should not be overly concerned about accuracy. This can be seen in Excerpt 5 where Taro focused on every single grammatical error the students were making in their utterances, which did not give the students any leeway to experiment the target language. Third, when Taro used prompts to introduce new vocabulary in Excerpt 6, the student focused on the meaning of "undo", whereas Taro was concentrating on the form "undid." Finally, when Taro provided a selection of expressions, students became

confused as to what the teacher wanted, as seen in Excerpt 7.

Because the number of participants was small, it was difficult to generalize about teachers providing recasts and prompts. Nevertheless, this study has illustrated the importance of teachers' awareness of feedback so that they are able to understand how to effectively provide feedback in the classroom.

Acknowledgement

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