

EFL teachers' corrective feedback and its effect ON LEARNERS' ERROR REPAIR IN SPEAKING

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RESUMEN

Este estudio exploratorio se realizó en un curso de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) en una Institución de Educación Superior en Ecuador. El objetivo fue investigar si la retroalimentación correctiva (CF) puede mejorar la precisión gramatical en las interacciones orales de los estudiantes y qué tipo de CF es más efectiva para producir enunciados correctamente contruidos. El estudio de 18 semanas involucró a veintiocho participantes distribuidos en dos clases. Cada clase recibió un CF específico; así, el grupo 1 metalingüístico y el grupo 2 reformulación. Los resultados de una serie de pruebas consecutivas (9) revelaron que la provisión de los dos tipos de CF condujo a corregir significativamente los enunciados producidos por los estudiantes en estructuras lingüísticas específicas. El notable desempeño del grupo de estudiantes con los que se practicó el CF metalingüístico indicó la efectividad de éste sobre el CF de reformulación. Los hallazgos de este estudio sugieren que los profesores de idiomas deben utilizar más la retroalimentación metalingüística para el tratamiento de los errores de los estudiantes de EFL cuando se interactúa oralmente.

Palabras clave: retroalimentación correctiva, metalingüística, reformulación, errores de los estudiantes, interacciones orales

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study was carried out in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at a Higher Education Institution in Ecuador. The objective was to investigate whether corrective feedback (CF) can improve grammatical accuracy in students' oral interactions and what type of CF is most effective in producing correctly constructed statements. The 18-week study involved twenty-eight participants in two classes. Each class received a

specific CF, thus, the group 1 metalinguistic and the group 2 reformulation. The results of a series of consecutive tests (9) revealed that the provision of the two types of CF led to a significant correction of statements produced by students in specific linguistic structures. The remarkable performance of the group of students with whom the metalinguistic CF was practiced indicated the effectiveness of this one on the CF of reformulation. The findings of this study suggest that language teachers should use more metalinguistic feedback for the treatment of EFL students' errors when interacting orally.

Key words: corrective feedback, metalinguistic, recast, students' errors, oral interactions

INTRODUCTION

One major issue that has concerned teachers is how to provide students with appropriate feedback, so that it could bring a positive effect on students' language development (Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Long, 1990; Lyster & Saito, 2010b). Feedback provides a great potential to draw learners' attention to mismatches between their production and the target-like norm. Feedback refers to "an intervention in which information is provided to a learner that a prior utterance is correct or incorrect" (Gass & Selinker 2008, p. 517). During the course of communicative in EFL contexts, learner errors may occur naturally and spontaneously. As Soori et al. (2012) state, EFL teachers are responsible for aiding students to cope with speaking problems by providing helpful feedback on their speech.

One of the aims of this study is to compare the effect of metalinguistic and recast feedback on students' self repair in speaking. Several experimental studies have tried to investigate the effectiveness of these two feedback strategies (Ferreira et.al, 2007; Tabatabaei, 2011; Vahdani Sanavi & Nemati, 2014). However, the results of these investigations have not shown the type of corrective feedback that could be more effective during oral interactions. Thus, this research seeks to shed light on a deeper understanding of how two types of corrective feedback yield different levels of effectiveness in language learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the importance of classroom interaction during foreign language learning, it is believed that comprehensible input is a necessary factor to negotiate for meaning and to produce modified output (Swain, 1995). Meanwhile, research shows that exposing learners to input alone is not sufficient to attain a high level of language proficiency. Corrective feedback is one strategy which is thought to facilitate language development by providing learners with both positive and negative evidence (Long & Robinson, 1998). Gass (2003) defines corrective feedback as "implicit or explicit information that informed learners regarding their erroneous utterances. The information provided is either directly or indirectly stating that something is wrong with the learner's utterance" (p. 226). Based on research results, it is stated that corrective feedback is beneficial for learners' interlanguage (Bitchener, 2008; Evan et al., 2011). According to Naeini (2008), in classes where there is repetition of tasks only without the provision of feedback, no significant results are obtained. He claims that learning occurs when there is an exchange of information between

learners and teachers and sufficient feedback is given to learners as well as opportunities to reflect on the feedback provided.

Lyster et al. (2013) consider corrective feedback as “responses to learner utterance containing an error”. Feedback can help shape students’ learning and performance. Learners who work hard and perform well on a task are likely to benefit from feedback and are motivated to maintain their effort. Lewis (2002) highlights other aspects regarding oral feedback: (1) students’ support in acquiring language input as they learn vocabulary and structures in context. (2) information for both teachers and students as it describes how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what elements still need to be covered. (3) students’ motivation to improve their performance, and (4) students’ self-reliance, as they start identifying and correcting their own mistakes. In his analysis of teacher-student interaction, Nassaji (2015) found that pushing the students towards modifying the output through feedback is beneficial to them in developing their interlanguage. Another effect of corrective feedback may be the improvement of learners’ metalinguistic awareness (Swain, 1995).

Lyster & Ranta (1997) have provided the most complete taxonomy of corrective feedback. “Recast refers to the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance, minus the error” (p. 46). This reformulation can also be considered as “paraphrase”. The teacher implicitly reformulates the student’s error, or provides the correct answer without directly showing that the student’s utterance was not correct. (Lyster & Ranta 1997). Another type of feedback is called metalinguistic feedback. For Ellis (2009), “Metalinguistic CF involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment about the nature of the errors they have made” (p. 100); but it is defined by Lyster & Ranta (1997) as comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the learner’s utterance.

METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to answer the following research question: What type of feedback is more effective to reduce students’ errors in speaking?

In order to answer this question, an exploratory research methodology was used since it “allows researchers to explore issues in detail in order to familiarize themselves with the problem or concept to be studied” (Singh, 2007 p. 63-64). This study was conducted to two different EFL classes or groups in a language center of a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Participants had, in general, an A2 level of English according to the Common European Framework and were officially enrolled in the University.

To test the effectiveness of the type of teacher’s feedback in reducing students’ errors in oral interactions, two strategies were tested: a) metalinguistic feedback and b) recast feedback. These two strategies were used in these two groups of students (EFL classes), group 1 received metalinguistic feedback and group 2 recast feedback. The aim of providing a specific feedback to a particular group was to compare, through statistical methods, how much students belonging to each group had noticed and corrected their errors in speaking as the result of the type of feedback employed by the teacher.

The EFL contents that were used for testing these two-different type of feedback strategies were the same as the ones planned in the syllabus for this course, namely: past simple, past continuous, past perfect, past perfect continuous, future forms, reported speech, passive voice and conditional clauses. These contents were taught in a period of 18 weeks and a total of 128 teaching hours as it is the duration of a whole EFL course in this HEI.

Regarding the EFL learning activities, the teacher used the ones included in the syllabus as well. For instance, video activities, role plays, conversations, etc. What changed was the type of feedback students received during their entire English course. In order to track the students' self-realization and subsequent correction of their errors an oral test was conducted every two weeks. This resulted in nine different tests. The oral test consisted of 15 different interactions between the teacher and each student. In order to promote these interactions, the teacher formulated a series of questions focusing on a specific content. The content of each oral test depended on the progress of the syllabus as explained in the following table:

Test (every two weeks)	Evaluated content
First test	Past simple
Second test	Past continuous
Third test	Past perfect
Fourth test	Past perfect continuous
Fifth test	Future forms
Sixth test	Reported speech
Seventh test	Passive voice
Eight test	Conditionals clauses type I and II
Nine test	Conditional clauses type III

Table 1:

Contents evaluated orally at the end of a two-week period

The results of the tests were measured in relation to the number of correct utterances that each student made. This means that if a student made four correct utterances his or her score would be 4/15. In order to statistically measure the effectiveness of the type of teacher's feedback and student's error correction the means and the standard deviation was analysed. Thus, for this study the independent variables were: metalinguistic and recast feedback while the dependent variable was student's error correction in oral production. Furthermore, the effect that the independent variables had over the dependent variable was measured in nine different times. The statistical results obtained from this exploratory study are explained in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the 18-week period that this study took place, the results of the tests conducted every two weeks showed that students repaired their errors and this correction was progressive during the duration of this study. This means that, in almost all cases, students error correction improved after receiving teacher's feedback. Table 2 below shows the mean and the standard deviation of each test.

Type of Feedback	Test 1		Test 2		Test 3		Test 4		Test 5		Test 6		Test 7		Test 8		Test 9	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Metalinguistic	3.3	1	5.5	0.8	7.3	1.4	7.5	2.7	8.6	1.4	9.7	1.8	11.2	1.8	13.4	1.3	14.2	1
Recast	3	0.6	4.7	0.9	5.5	0.9	5.8	1.4	6.8	1.1	8.4	0.8	9	1.4	9.6	1.8	10.6	1.9

M= mean

SD= Std deviation

Table 2:

Computed Mean and Std. Deviation of tests

Table 2 shows that, based on the means of the different tests, students improved their construction of proper utterances as the time of exposure to teacher’s feedback increased. In the first test, for instance, the mean of students receiving a metalinguistic feedback was 3.3 out of a maximum value of 15. Whereas students who experienced a recast feedback had a mean of 3. These mean values increase through the duration of the course. However, this growth was not the same in both groups. At the end of the course, students who received a metalinguistic feedback showed a better development of proper utterances than those students who received a recast feedback. This difference among proper utterances construction is represented in Figure 1.

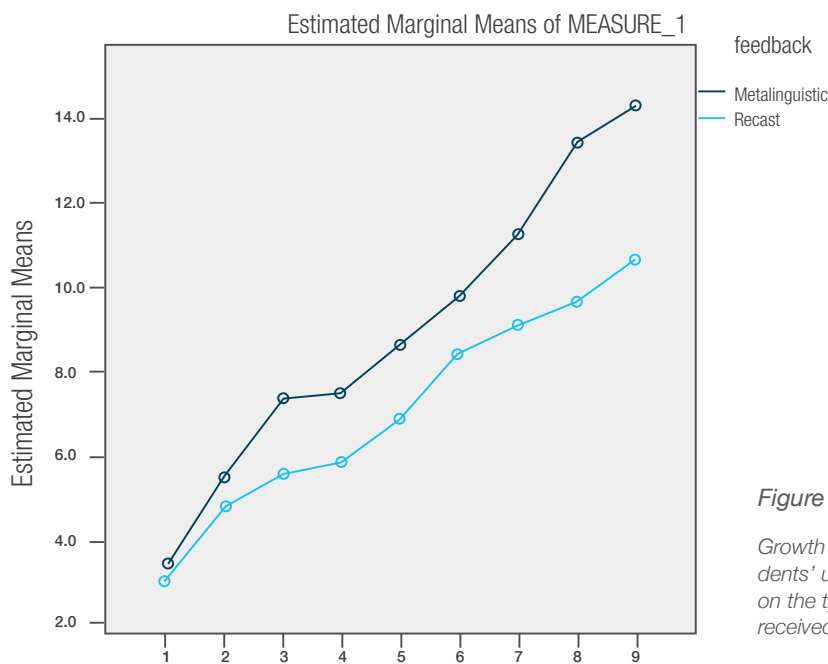


Figure 1:
Growth of proper students' utterances based on the type of feedback received

Figure 1 shows the trajectory of the development of students’ proper utterances construction during their English course depending on the type of teachers’ feedback. It is clear that metalinguistic feedback has produced better results among students compared to recast. The results of the first test (test 1) showed that there was not much variation between the scores of group 1 and group 2. However, the distance between metalinguistic and recast feedback increases as the time of students’ exposure to a specific feedback also increases.

This study was designed to determine whether recast or metalinguistic feedback strategies leads to students' proper utterances construction in speaking. The results of this study showed that exposing students to the target structures in combination with proper feedback can improve their production as it is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1. These findings are supported by Swain(1995) who claimed that corrective feedback assists students to test their hypotheses about the target language and replace them with the correct ones. Schmidt (1990) highlights the importance of consciousness, evaluating noticing as a necessary condition for L2 learning to occur. The role of feedback in drawing students' attention to the target structures is important as it helps learners to compare with their own forms and correct their errors. However, the effectiveness in error corrections is also tied to the type of feedback strategies employed by teachers. The following quotes in which the teacher uses metalinguistic and recast feedback with two different students show the effect that these strategies produced on the construction of students' proper utterances:

1. Metalinguistic feedback.

Teacher: What did you eat yesterday?

Student: Yesterday, I eat a lot of fruits.

Teacher: Is the verb eat present or past ?

Student: Mmmm I think it is present. The correct form is ate. So, Yesterday I *ate* a lot of fruits.

2. Recast feedback

Teacher: Where did you go last summer?

Student: I go to the beach with my family.

Teacher: I *went* to the beach with my family.

Student: ah, ok, I went to the beach with my family.

In the quote number 1, the effect that metalinguistic feedback provoked on the student was the one of a self-noticing and reflection. This may have produced a deeper understanding of the grammar rules, thus, a better future construction of proper utterances. The quote 2, on the other hand, manifested a plain teachers' replacement of the wrong word by the correct one. This replacement was made by the teacher and did not facilitate any analysis and internalization of language patterns. Based on these quotes and the quantitative results previously presented, it can be inferred that a metalinguistic feedback seems to be more effective.

With regard to the research question, the analysis of data showed that metalinguistic feedback led to the construction of more proper students' utterances. Thus, metalinguistic feedback is "output- pushing" claimed by Yang & Lyster (2010). While producing output, learners in this

study faced some difficulties in conveying their meaning; but by exposing them to metalinguistic feedback, they were pushed to analyze and modify their output. Ellis (2009) suggest that the effectiveness of the metalinguistic feedback, may be produced due to the high level of awareness it generates and in part from the fact that it is immersed into a communicative context. Similarly, Lyster (1998) mentioned that that negotiation of form including elicitation, metalinguistic clues, or clarification requests, led to larger numbers of grammatical and lexical repairs and lexical repairs in comparison to recast. The results of his study showed that more repairs resulted from the negotiation of form than from recasts, which are in line with the findings of the present study.

This finding is also in accordance with some studies, which compared recasts with metalinguistic feedback and reported a great advantage of metalinguistic over recast in helping learners to accomplish better learning outcomes on selected target structures. For example, the study of Yang & Lyster (2010) that examined the effects of recasts and metalinguistic feedback in a Chinese EFL setting, reported that metalinguistic prompts had larger effects than recasts for increasing learners' accuracy in the use of regular past tense forms. The finding is in accordance with Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis which emphasizes the importance of drawing the learners' attention to formal aspects of language in order to accomplish linguistic development. In this case, metalinguistic feedback stimulates learner to openly identify the gap between their interlanguage and the target forms. The procedures whereby teachers provide students with correct forms may become ineffective when helping students to learn from their errors.

Recast Feedback may be less effective due to the fact that this group of learners have not been exposed to feedback since teachers at the language center put more emphasis on meaning rather than form. Therefore, the students may have confused their teacher's feedback with a positive signal for their output. Panova & Lyster (2002) claim that recasts can be ambiguous to foreign language learners as they may tend to repeat mechanically what the teacher says without any learning happening. Therefore, metalinguistic feedback to be more effective because learners are not just exposed to the correct form of target apperars but they are urged to correct their interlanguage and elicit their self-repair.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that both metalinguistic and recast constitute two important strategies of corrective feedback that lead to error repair and could be usefully incorporated into an EFL setting. However, metalinguistic feedback proved to be more effective because it encouraged students more actively to self-repair, contrary to recast, when the correct form is provided to the students. The results revealed the highest rate of successful repairs resulted from metalinguistic feedback, whereas recast feedback proved to lead to the lowest rate of successful repairs.

Comparing the effects of these two feedback strategies provided some light on theoretical issues such as the important contributions of corrective feedback in the EFL class and the cognitive role of noticing during the process of feedback. Accordingly, it may be concluded that providing metalinguistic feedback through interaction has a significant effect on the learners' oral production in terms of grammar accuracy. The results also provided language teachers with pedagogical advice to maximize the effect of feedback in their classes.

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