

Negotiation of Form and Its Effects in NS-NNSs Conversational Interaction

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Abstract

This article presents a study of corrective feedback and learner uptake in native speaker and non-native speakers (NS-NNSs) conversational interaction in foreign language classroom setting. Transcripts totaling 10.5 hours of NS-NNSs conversation were analyzed, using Lyster and Ranta's error treatment model (1997), to investigate the feedback-uptake relationships in the context of NS-NNSs interaction. Results showed that the NS paid limited attention to the NNSs' linguistic errors. Among the existing types of corrective feedback, recast was significantly preferred by the NS, and peer translation was widely used by the NNSs. Negotiation of form was scarcely used by the NS. As for learner uptake and self-correction, peer feedback gained the best effect, while recast had the lowest rate. Negotiation of form got a higher rate of uptake, but a lower rate of learner-generated repair. Finally the results were discussed from the perspective of noticing theory in cognitive psychology.

Keywords: *NS-NNSs conversational interaction; corrective feedback; negotiation of form; uptake; self-correction.*

1. Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) has been a significant issue in the study of second language acquisition. Scholars such as Gass (1988), Schmidt (1990) held that negative evidence could facilitate language learning and played an essential role in second language (L2) learning. Other scholars such as Lyster and Ranta (1997), and Oliver (2000) examined the nature and function of CF in L2 teaching and learning. Correct feedback plays a pivotal role in L2 learning, contributing to better overall L2 performance than similar instruction without CF (Lyster et al, 2013). Lyster and Ranta (1997) classified teachers' feedback to errors in communicative classrooms into six types: explicit correction, recast, repetition, clarification request, elicitation, and meta-linguistic feedback. It was found that recast and explicit correction were ineffective in eliciting student-generated repair, and four other feedback types --- elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition --- led to student-generated repair more sufficiently and were thus able to initiate what is characterized as negotiation of form. Similarly, Panova and Lyster (2002) observed corrective feedback and its uptake in adult L2 classrooms, and found that negotiation of form led to a high rate of uptake and student-generated self-correction. Research on corrective feedback in China, such as Zhao (2005), observed the means of corrective feedback and its relationship with student uptake in English classrooms. Some other studies touched upon corrective feedback occurring in international students' classrooms in which Chinese is the target language (such as Sun, 2010; Kai & Li, 2013). These studies confirmed that negotiation of form is an ideal type of corrective feedback.

The above studies were all based on traditional classroom interaction. Little research has observed how negotiation of form works in small groups in foreign language (FL) classrooms. The present study was designed to examine the role of negotiation of form in a small NS-NNSs group. Two questions would be answered: (1) What types of negotiation of form would be used in reaction to learners' errors in the NS-NNSs conversational interaction? (2) What is the effect of negotiation of form on learner uptake and self-correction in the NS-NNSs conversational interaction?

2. Research Procedure

2.1. Subjects

The subjects were four English learners and one native speaker. The four NNSs were from a senior school in East Guangdong province in China. The native speaker had sufficient teaching experience in China. In each class, the NS gave a topic to the students and asked one student to begin the discussion by giving his own opinion on the topic, followed by questions from other students and then by free talk and discussion. The NS participated in the discussion and provided feedback to the students' linguistic errors when necessary. The

whole class was arranged in a communicative context with a brief attention paid to linguistic forms. We made a totaling 10.5-hour-transcript of the NS-NNSs conversations on everyday topics such as tiger mother and cat mother, holiday, education in China, Leifeng Month, studying with a teacher, neighbor relationships and iPad and mobile phone.

2.2. Data Collection

We categorized errors into three types: phonological, lexical and grammatical. The NNSs frequently used a Chinese (L1) word or clause, so we regarded mother tongue as a special type of “error”, as shown in Table 1. Then we calculated the NS’s feedback, and categorized them into six types: recast, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, repetition, elicitation, and clarification request. Since L1 was frequently used and could gain peers’ help and assistance, we treated “peer feedback” as a special type of corrective feedback, in an attempt to examine how the the NNSs responded to peer feedback. We then calculated each type of feedback, and arrived at its rate in all types of feedback. After that, we further calculated learner uptake and self-correction to find out the effect of negotiation of form, as opposed to that of non-negotiation of form and that of peer prompt.

Table 1: Different types of error (n=289)

Error type	number	Rate
Grammar	172	60
Mother tongue	59	29
Vocabulary	49	17
Pronunciation	9	3

3. Results and Analysis

Recast was used most frequently by the NS (43%), and explicit correction only accounted for 6%, as shown in Table 2. Recast is a kind of full or partial implicit reconstruction of the learners’ error. It not only signifies where the error is, but also offers the correct forms directly and promptly without interfering with the communication, as in Example (1):

(1) NNS : My mother is a cat mother. She don’t very strict.

NS: She isn’t very strict.

Peer feedback is a special type in the present study. Such feedback might be a translated version from L1, as in example (2). And the NS may offer immediate help after the peer negotiation, as in example (3).

(2) NNS1 : ... and I went to see, er ... see ... 烟火 (fireworks) ...

NNS 2: fireworks

NNS1: oh, fireworks

(3) NNS1: ... yes, because we met many, many 亲戚, 亲戚怎么说? (relatives, how to say it?)

NNS2 : rele ...

NNS3: releti ...

NNS2: ye, relative.

NS: oh, relative, you visited many relatives.

In example 3, NNS 1's mother tongue elicits peer negotiation, finally leading to the NS's recast. The NNSs learned the word "relatives". During the conversation, the more NNSs were involved, the more likely the problem would be solved, especially when the NS participated the negotiation. Another factor that decided successful negotiation was that the peers provided a near-target-language feedback. Otherwise, the NS had no choice but to change the topic, as in Example 4.

(4) NNS 1 : I think it (lucky money) only means, means, er,er 祝福 (wishes) ...

NNS 2: 祝, kind, ...

NNS 3: 祝福 (wishes), 祝 ..., happy ...

NNS 2: good, ...

NNS 3: congratulation ...

NS: OK, okay, Max, what about you? Did you get any lucky money?

In contrast to recast and peer feedback, the number of negotiation of form was much smaller, with repetition accounting for 12%, metalinguistic feedback 4%, elicitation and clarification request only 3% respectively. Negotiation of form was scantily used. The rate is much lower than that of immersion classrooms (such as Lyster & Ranta, 1997) and other adult L2 classrooms (such as Panova & Lyster, 2002 ; Kai & Li, 2013).

We then sought to consider the response for different types of errors. As shown in Table 3, mother tongue gained the highest rate of feedback (38%), followed by lexical error (32%), grammatical error (25%), and error in pronunciation (5%). Most feedback from the NS was made for lexical errors, and a very small amount was made for grammatical errors (n=17, %=25). It must be pointed out that the NS gave very little feedback to pronunciation errors (only 5%). Like grammatical errors, pronunciation errors received little attention. Therefore, we did not take them into consideration.

Table 2 : Distribution of different types of corrective feedback (n = 98)

Feedback type	number	rate (%)
Recast	42	43
Peer feedback	28	29
Repetition	12	12
Explicit correction	6	6
Metalinguistic feedback	4	4
Elicitation	3	3
Clarification request	3	3

Table 3: Corrective feedback for different types of error (n=68)

Error type	number	Rate
Mother tongue	26	38
Vocabulary	22	32
Grammar	17	25
Pronunciation	3	5

The next question is whether negotiation of form led to learner uptake and self-correction. As shown in Table 4, results showed that recast gained the lowest rate of uptake (only 24%), while peer feedback got the highest rate (82%). Although the number of negotiation of form is small, it gained a higher rate of uptake than recast. This indicated that negotiation of form enabled learners to pay attention to linguistic forms in communication. Among the four types of negotiation of form, repetition and elicitation got the highest rate of uptake (67%). In terms of learners' self-correction, peer feedback got the highest rate (54%). Negotiation of form did not have a satisfactory effect as expected: elicitation got 33%, metalinguistic feedback 25% and repetition 17%.

Table 4: Uptake and self-correction of different types of feedback

Feedback type	Uptake		Self-correction	
	n	%	n	%
Recast (n=42)	10	24	4	10
Peer feedback (n=28)	23	82	15	54
Repetition (n=12)	8	67	2	17
Explicit correction (n=6)	4	63	1	17
Elicitation (n=3)	2	67	1	33
Clarification request(n=3)	1	33	0	-

4. Discussion

4.1 Distribution of Different Types of Correct Feedback

It was found that corrective feedback only accounted for 34% of all errors. If peer feedback was not considered, the NS' s feedback accounted for only 24%. Why is this so? First, this phenomenon is related to the nature of conversational communication, in which fluency is the first priority. If misunderstanding does not occur, no feedback is given to linguistic errors, especially grammatical errors. But in what situations did the 34% of the corrective feedback take place? Through further analysis, we found that corrective feedback occurred in the following four occasions. First, in a single move, if an utterance is grammatically wrong, the NS may give feedback though the error does not interfere with communication., as in Examples (5), (6):

(5) NNS: I fail exam.

NS: Oh, you fail an exam.

(6) NNS: ... we have 2 year in junior school.

NS: Only 2 years in junior school. I understand.

Second, L1 has received peer feedback, as shown in Examples (2), (3), (4), but such feedback was mainly used to help peers to solve problems, most probably by offering an English translation. The NNS used an L1 word, phrase or clause to indicate that he had difficulty in expressing his idea in English. Such a signal for help often got immediate feedback from peers. And the NS displayed great interest in it, and may offer timely help:

(7) NNS 1: Yes ... but ... but ... I worry about ... en ... worry about it, but the problem is ...
就是恐怕有时候双方都不肯迈出那一步。(That is, sometimes, no one wants say hello first.)

NNS 2: He said ... er ...er ... everyone, neither of them want to do the ... want to do the ... the first thing just ... say “Hello”.

NS: Nobody wants to be the first fool.

NNSs: Yes, yes.

Third, most NS feedback was intended for vocabulary. Unlike grammatical errors, lexical errors are more likely to create misunderstandings and cause a communication breakdown. In this study, the NS often gave on-the-spot comment or explanation for an incorrect use of a word, as in Example (8).

(8) NNS 1: I think an extra teacher is ... is...unneded.

NS: Unneeded? Unnecessary is a better word, and an even better one is superfluous.

NNSs: ... super...fler ...

NS: Superfluous. S-u-p-e-r-f-l-u-o-u-s. Usually it means above what is necessary, beyond what is necessary, not necessary.

NNS 2: too much.

NS: Yes, too much. Can you say the word for me, Martin? Superfluous.

NNS 3 (Martin): Superfluous

NS: Yes. Can everyone say that?

NNSs: Superfluous.

As could be seen, recast was widely used while negotiation of form was scantily used as feedback to the NNSs' linguistic errors. This phenomenon could be attributed to the NNSs' low proficiency level of English. What's more, they seldom use English in a real communicative context. In this case, the NS tends to recast learners' ill-formed utterances by directly providing the standard and grammatical expressions. Recast is the most efficient and natural means of responding to students' error and, at the same time, provides students with supportive, scaffolded help in using their L2 (Panova & Lyster, 2002). In addition, the NNS had great interest in using translation as a type of responding to their peers' problem.

4.2 An Explanation from the Perspective of Noticing

Communicating in L2 differs from communicating in L1 in that producing L2 utterances needs more mental effort. L2 Learners may pay attention to linguistic forms only after the meaning is clearly expressed and understood. At this point, the NS's feedback may lead to learners' uptake and self-correction. Corrective feedback enables L2 learners to notice the problems in their utterances, and thus 'push' them to analyze, adjust and repair ill-formed

utterances. Self-correction is a process of extracting the ‘alternative form’. Learners are likely to benefit more from being pushed to retrieve target language forms than from merely hearing the forms in the input, because the retrieval and subsequent production stimulate the development of connections in the memory (de Bot, 1996). The fact that negotiation of form in the present study did not lead to ideal learner self-correction does not mean that negotiation of form has no such ‘pushing’ function for L2 learning. Instead, such a ‘push’ exists in an implicit state. Such phenomenon can be attributed to the following cognitive and psychological causes: (1) Learners’ noticing resources have not yet completely transformed from meaning to linguistic forms. (2) Learners may have realized the importance of form, but have no time or attention to analyze the linguistic problems. (3) Learners have realized the linguistic problems, but cannot find a suitable alternative form. It must be pointed out that if there is no storage of needed linguistic forms in the learner’s memory, any negotiation of form would be futile.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the negotiation of form and its effect in NS-NNSs conversation in a foreign language setting. The results showed that: (1) The NS gave very little feedback to the NNSs’ linguistic errors. (2) Among the types of feedback, recast was the most preferred means of feedback used by the NS, but it led to the smallest amount of learner uptake and self-correction. (3) Peer translation was a frequently-used feedback method among the NNS peers, and led to the largest amount of learner uptake and self-repair. (4) Negotiation of form was scantily used by the NS. It led to a high rate of learner uptake, but a low rate of learner’s self-correction. Such a phenomenon has been explained from the perspective of noticing in cognitive psychology. Peer interaction and its effect on facilitating L2 learning needs to be investigated in the future research. In addition, while observing the effect of negotiation of form, researchers also need to consider the time, content, and means of negotiation (Zheng, 2007) in order to have a better understanding of the negotiation of form in NS-NNSs interaction and its effect of facilitating L2 learning.

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