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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

I'm* two rabbits / J'ai un rouge pullover*.
How corrective feedback is handled in collaborative exchange programmes between early language learners

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Abstract

This article presents how, in the social dynamics of two classrooms involved in an exchange programme, young learners provide their peers with asynchronous feedback taking place in the digital medium. Within two Call Triangles that interact thanks to Computer Mediated Communication tools, teachers sharing the same methodological precept on learning processes give more autonomy to the learners. Here we focus mainly on a salient fact to show how they make use of this freedom.

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1. Introduction

French and Scottish learners, ages 7-8, are engaged in an exchange project, registered on eTwinning. Teachers seek to make the use of communication tools routine and not limited to language learning activities. The question deals with the linguistic and intercultural balance that develops within both education contexts. However this paper exclusively shows how, during what appears to be communicative interaction, a mode of treatment of the object produces itself, proposed by the Scottish learners, accepted and validated by them and then taken back by the French. We describe and analyse two asynchronous interactions relying upon the tools to which both groups resort in the area of mediation of handling the error.

2. First interaction

Asynchronous interaction with a focus on an input, intake and feedback phenomenon.

Input 1

Description: French pupils simulate pairwork conversation they post online to convey personal information recorded on MP3 players.

Analysis: Both classrooms are primarily interested in communication activities. The French pupils use formulaic chunks they acquired “to perform communicative functions that are important to them and which

contribute to the fluency of their unplanned speech” (Ellis, 1997) - or here of their “planned” speech. The use of communication tools builds media-related skills.

Intake 1

Description: The chunks are not validated. Understanding difficulties emerge and provoke confrontations within the Scottish pupils about the inaccurate use of *to be* in sentences such as *I'm two rabbits* or *I'm a cat*.

Analysis: The errors that punctuate the message lead the Scottish pupils to self-questioning concerning the norm. Positioning themselves in relation to the learning process they deviate from their communicative activities to “focus on form”. That which is neither among the usual practices of the teachers nor recommended by the institutional programmes at such level emerges from the confrontation between experts and non-experts creating social links between their classrooms (Vygotsky, 1978).

Feedback 1

Description: Scottish learners devise corrective feedback for the French: they create a PowerPoint presentation integrating pictures of pets they suppose Scottish children generally have. They make recordings of their voices with what they consider to be the “relevant” patterns. They display the elements in a methodical order: on each page appears the animal picture with two sound buttons; the user is supposed to click on the top button first in order to hear the name of the animal(s) – eg. *gerbils*; when clicking on the bottom button he hears sentences built using the same pattern – eg. *I have two gerbils*. After the audio input, a written transcription is provided with a last mouse-click.

Analysis: Scottish learners’s use of a presentation providing audio and visual material shows the dynamic involvement in the task that demands creativity and rigour, skills usually identified with more advanced learners. They devise an original way to provide asynchronous feedback thought to help the process of “noticing” errors (Schmidt, 2001). The negative feedback they provide is supposed to be facilitative of L2 development to help their communicative activities (Long, 1996) although we may question the norm to which they refer: an emphatic stress on *have*. The role of corrective feedback is empirical, not theoretical.

3. Second interaction

A contribution to the process described above that is kept dynamic and in motion.

Intake 2

Description: The French learners approve the error analysis and assess the value of the object supposed to help them to learn the language.

They collectively decide to reciprocate. They have the idea of using a recording of their last videoconference to engage in their turn for error spotting activities. They notice a recurrent syntax error in patterns such as *j'ai un rouge pullover*. They chose it as material on which to work.

Analysis: French learners deviate from the communicative object and, in turn, engage themselves in metalinguistic reflection. They are for the first time subjected to an explicit treatment of the language. The Scottish have initiated the use of a socio-cultural tool that contributes to the learners’ metalinguistic reflection that generates a response and a challenge. This refers to the concept of integrativeness which is considered as “an openness to identify [...] with another language community” (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). It may be perceived here with a favourable attitude toward the group, the learners expressing an interest in learning their partners’ language and teaching their own language. The influence of the communication technology at hand, the use of which is encouraged by the teachers, is also supposed to stimulate the process.

Feedback 2

Description: French learners create a fashion show to provide corrective feedback. Assisted by their teacher, they shoot a film they post on a blog. Hesitations, long pauses or repetitions, etc. interrupt the fluency of their more or less spontaneous speech.

Analysis: The production of new feedback tends to show that error handling is not a simple occurrence: the incident becomes a spiral with a methodology being put in place. Engaged in a self-monitoring activity, their speech sometimes may be inaccurate. Our aim here is not to list all the factors such as

stress, pressure etc. that may make their speech non-congruent. Yet, corrective feedback adds a sociolinguistic dimension to the metalinguistic treatment with which their partners must deal.

We notice that they seek originality to provide a tool that is intended to produce a vicarious response in which corrective feedback « constitutes a brief 'time out' from communicating, allowing the learner to focus explicitly but briefly on form » (Ellis et al., 2006). There is a correlation between the information value in the feedback and the need for it. Corrective feedback mediated through a rich presentation cannot be ignored by the learners (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

4. Communication tools

The model "input => intake => feedback" recurs in both classrooms but with different modes of communication and tools for providing a recast. These tools are co-products and diffused in a restrained context to ends centered on communication needs.

Information and Communication Technology, in an asynchronous relation, allows for the exhibition of creativity and thus the liberty to find corrective strategies adapted to their level.

The tool, essential to the sharing of knowledge and know-how, encourages a form of synthetic thinking due to the demands of communication for the task, giving it a particular affinity with socio-centered pedagogies.

Because they are allowed opportunities for discussion, each individual may make proposals and engage himself through the mediation of the object to be treated or realised for a receiver (Clot, 1999). Therefore, the variety of tools and the modality used reveals a spirit of mutual aid to deal with the error, and to communicate, heightened by a hint of competitive spirit.

The contents and the disposition of the information are determined by learners who take the conceptionist role and following their ideas and conceptual needs, provide for them, according to the renewed protocols they impose upon themselves.

That aptitude to create multimodal contents seems to make way for a capacity of centralization upon oneself and the decentralization upon the individuals inside of a group, thus a better management of their difficulties.

In short, we observe a convergence between the tool and the socio-constructivist orientation that in an asynchronous relationship allows the display of student creativity to treat error. The role of the teacher is limited and therefore heuristic, analytical and observation skills are developed.

5. Conclusion

Within the interaction upon an object appearing to be communicational, another treatment of the object is proposed by the Scottish students and accepted, validated and received again by the French. There is a double validation of the process; at certain moments of their communicative practice, learners make the choice on both sides to use other modalities and strategies. Consequently, the return to the norm is a building block for communication; metalinguistic awareness finds its place in the service of communication. In the social dynamics of the classroom involved in the exchange programme, young learners become "permeable" to language input, in terms of both language form and functions, and arguably, to corrective treatment, without which learning/acquisition does not take place" (Lee, 1990, Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). The tools created result from a remedial strategy necessary for the given situation. Along with Lyster and Saito (2010) who report "an increasing number of SLA studies [that] show that CF plays a role in L2 learners' interlanguage development" we may assert that this method of corrective feedback helps to successfully repair on a specific form. We may suppose that this level of corrective feedback is powerful because it is richly presented (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). We notice that in such a context, learners gain autonomy and develop their creative skills while entering a process which contributes to develop their metacognitive skills (Ellis & al., 2006). Moreover, we observe that within an institutional context, the project focusing on computer-mediated communication generates "focus on form" not mediated by the teachers but by peers.

6. References

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