A Study of Learners' Perceptions and Uptake of Corrective Feedback in Text-chat Dyadic Interaction

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The role of corrective feedback has received considerable attention from second language researchers (SLA) and practitioners in recent decades. It has been extensively argued that corrective feedback can promote second language development (e.g., Long, 1996, 2007), and by now there exists a large amount of empirical research indicating that corrective feedback can indeed positively affect second language (L2) learning (e.g., Li, 2010). In addition, with the growing popularity of the Internet, Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has increasingly been the focus of SLA and L2 education research (e.g., Payne & Whitney, 2002). As a result, the role of corrective feedback in CMC has also emerged as an important avenue for L2 research (e.g., Sauro, 2009). So far, however, relatively few empirical studies have investigated corrective feedback patterns in the CMC environment.

To help fill this gap, this small-scale experimental study addressed three research questions: (1) Do interlocutor's intentions and learners' perceptions of corrective feedback overlap in text-chat dyadic interaction? (2) Do interlocutor's intentions and learners' perceptions of corrective feedback overlap in text-chat dyadic interaction in relation to type of feedback? (3) To what extent do learners' responses to corrective feedback depend on the type of feedback in text-chat dyadic interaction?

The participants were fourteen EFL learners from a secondary school in South China, who took part in task-based text-chat dyadic interaction via QQ – a popular instant text-chat device. The participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups: one of the groups received recasts (i.e. correct reformulations of incorrect utterances), whereas the other group received metalinguistic feedback from the researcher. Immediately after the text-chat interaction, a stimulated recall interview via QQ was carried out between the researcher and each participant. The interactional data were coded for incidence and type of feedback episodes, as well as the availability and type of learner responses to feedback. The stimulated recall comments were categorized in terms of learner perceptions, that is, whether learners noticed the feedback and its focus. Chi-square analyses were conducted to see whether any of the differences in feedback and perception patterns reached significance.

The findings indicated that (1) there were a considerable number of overlaps between the interlocutor's intentions and learners' perceptions of corrective feedback during text-chat dyadic interaction; (2) learners were more accurate in recognising the interlocutor's intentions when receiving metalinguistic feedback; (3) and metalinguistic feedback was more likely to lead to learner responses than recasts during text-chat dyadic interaction.

Potential impact of the study

The results of this dissertation research demonstrate that interacting in a second language in a CMC environment can provide an effective context for L2 learners to engage in second language developmental processes. In this study, learners carrying out second language communicative tasks were found to perceive a large amount of the feedback they received as corrective and were also able to interpret the feedback provided as intended. In other words, learners noticed the feedback supplied and its focus. Given that noticing is believed to be a necessary first step in learning new L2 constructions (Schmidt, 1990, 2001), the findings of this dissertation suggest that feedback provided in the context of text-chat interaction in CMC appears to be a useful tool in promoting processes which are believed to ultimately lead to second language development.

In light of this, an important implication of this dissertation is that second language learners as well as teachers could be encouraged to make more use of online text-chat tools as a means of promoting the learning of L2 constructions. For example, in primarily face-to-face contexts, tasks and corrective feedback delivered in the CMC mode could be utilised to reinforce what has been covered in the face-to-face classroom. This type of blended learning is not only likely to facilitate actual learning processes, but also increase learners' language learning motivation, given that text-chat interactions, in many contexts, resemble the real-life communication practices in which learners engage outside the classroom context. In distance language learning, which is an increasingly popular way of studying languages, feedback provided during task-based, text-chat interaction could constitute one of the primary ways of directing learners' attention to form while they engage in meaningful communication.

The findings of this study also have potential implications at the institutional level. They suggest that it is worthwhile to invest in computer technology and internet accessibility for language teaching purposes, even if the primary mode of language instruction remains face-to-face. Also, it seems valuable to fund the training of teachers and students in how to make the most of using such technology, especially in contexts where teachers and students may be less computer literate.

In addition to documenting the benefits of supplying corrective feedback during text-chat task-based interaction, this study has demonstrated that in the context of CMC, metalinguistic feedback may be more likely to trigger noticing than recasts. This finding has the potential pedagogical implication that providing metalinguistic feedback may be a more effective option in implementing corrective feedback in online communication if the primary goal of instruction is to direct learners' attention to targeted linguistic constructions. If this result is confirmed by further research, second language teachers could be made aware of this finding and encouraged to use metalinguistic feedback rather than recasts if their aim is to draw learner attention to particular L2 features.