Reducing international graduate students' language anxiety through oral pronunciation corrections

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This mixed methods study examines the relationships between teachers' oral corrective feedback (CF) and changes in international graduate students' language anxiety levels. The participants were sixty advanced-level adult ESL students, all of whom were training to be teaching assistants (TAs) at a large Midwestern US university. The data were collected through classroom observations, survey questionnaires (pre- and post-surveys), and in-depth follow-up interviews with 40 of the 60 students. The study revealed that most of the teachers' oral CF had positive impacts on the students' affective variables, specifically lowering their anxiety about speaking English. However, certain clarification requests increased the students' anxiety instead. These results highlight the potential affective risks of CF, and the study suggests how ESL instructors can use CF to encourage or even create positive emotional states in their ESL students.

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1. Introduction

Many studies suggest that future research on corrective feedback (CF) account for individual learner differences—those "likely to influence whether and how learners process CF" (Sheen, 2011, p. 159)—to assess CF's mechanisms and wide-ranging effects (Kim, 2004; Mackey, 2006; Rezaei & Mozaffari, 2011; Russell, 2009; Yang & Lyster, 2010). Despite considerable scholarly attention to how these differences influence L2 acquisition and development (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999; Woodrow, 2006; Zheng, 2008), though, only a few studies have considered the associations between ESL learners' affective (i.e. emotional) variables and teachers' oral CF (e.g. DeKeyser, 1993; Sheen, 2007, 2008). Therefore, the present study specifically extends prior research on oral CF and L2 learner anxiety, applying Horwitz's (2001) observation that "language anxiety is fundamental to our understanding of how learners approach language learning, their expectations for success or failure, and ultimately why they continue or discontinue study" (p. 121). Rather than simply confirming that students with low anxiety are likely to learn English faster or have more positive attitudes toward speaking English, this study takes a different approach: it traces how teachers' oral error corrections affect adult ESL students' existing anxiety levels, and how interactions between CF and anxiety help or hinder students' oral English development.

2. Literature review

2.1. The effects of CF on L2 oral production

Several recent studies of adult ESL students (Lee, 2013; Han & Jung, 2007; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Suzuki, 2004) have shown positive associations between oral corrective feedback, learner repair, and uptake in adult ESL classrooms. Most of these studies use Lyster and Ranta's (1997) taxonomy of CF, which identifies six feedback moves: recasts, explicit correction, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. Studies following this approach have assessed the outcomes of certain types of CF on L2 development. For instance, Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) compared the efficacy of implicit CF (recasts) and explicit CF (metalinguistic feedback), while Ellis (2007) examined the extent to which recasts and metalinguistic feedback influenced the effects of CF on various grammatical structures. Likewise, Yang and Lyster's (2010) study compared the effectiveness of recasts and prompts (including clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition), and Chu's (2011) study juxtaposed output-promoting CF (clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition) and input-providing CF (explicit correction and recasts). While these studies offer useful tools for targeting CF to certain tasks or certain students, they ignore how oral CF might influence L2 learners' anxiety, which can influence their oral English development both positively and negatively.

Language anxiety often serves as a catalyst for other affective variables among adult ESL learners. MacIntyre (1999) defined language anxiety as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient … the propensity for an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking, listening, reading, or writing in the second language" (p. 5). Similarly, Sheen (2011) reminded us that "foreign language anxiety (as a highly specific kind of situational anxiety) constitutes an important individual variable that is related causally to various L2 criterion measures" (p. 135). Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, and Humbach (2009) affirmed that "proponents of the language anxiety hypothesis argue that language anxiety is a stable personality trait triggered when a student has to perform oral and written tasks in the L2" (p. 728). However, they investigated anxiety in combination with several other cognitive and non-cognitive features. Their subsequent longitudinal analysis showed that students with high anxiety exhibited significantly slower progress in L2 development, compared to students with low anxiety.

Anxiety was further investigated by Woodrow (2006) in a mixed-methods study that cataloged the major reported causes of second language anxiety, and analyzed its relationship with second language performance. Woodrow's participants were 275 students who were taking intensive EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses immediately prior to entering Australian universities. Her results indicated that anxiety is the most crucial predictor of L2 oral proficiency development, and that it is most often brought on by interaction with native speakers of English. Students with high anxiety, especially those from Heritage Confucian Cultures, often experienced retrieval interference and skills deficits.

The central role of corrective feedback in L2 pedagogy has made it an important variable in previous studies of individual differences, including differences in language anxiety. DeKeyser (1993) explored the effectiveness of CF on individual differences in language proficiency, grammatical sensitivity, extrinsic motivation, and anxiety. The participants were thirty-five Dutch-speaking Belgian high school seniors, who were learning French as a second language. Focus on form was their primary instruction method, and all classroom communication was in French. The teachers used oral error correction for an entire academic year, and most of the error correction in communicative activities was related to morphosyntax. Even though the results showed that there were no significant interactions between individual factors and CF, students with high previous achievement, high language aptitude, and low anxiety profited most from their teachers' oral error correction on a written grammar test. Given that these students were learning French, a popular and official language in Belgium, it's possible that language anxiety functioned differently for them than it would for adult L2 learners in American ESL university classrooms. For instance, the Belgian students could expect a large community of other Dutch speakers, even in academic and professional contexts. The same cannot be said for most international graduate students in American universities, who are typically expected to study, communicate, and publish in English. Furthermore, cultural differences between the international students and their colleagues and professors may heighten the role of their affective variables in how they respond to CF.

Sheen's (2007) study likewise focused on learner attitude, but in a context more relevant to the present study. Sheen (2007) showed how different types of CF influence the acquisition of English articles, as well as the extent to which individual differences mediate the effects of CF. Here, the participants were 80 intermediate-level ESL adult learners in the American Language Program (ALP) of an American community college. Three grammar assessments were administered: a pre-test, post-test (one day after), and a delayed post-test (12 days after), consisting of a timed dictation test, a writing test, and an error correction test, respectively. In addition, Sheen (2007) administered an aptitude test prior to the pre-test, a questionnaire to investigate the learners' attitudes toward error correction, and an exit questionnaire to explore the learners' awareness of the treatments' focus. The results demonstrated that when students had more positive attitudes toward CF, they improved their test performance. However, this relationship only held if the learners noticed what was being corrected during the initial CF interactions.

Sheen's (2008) study investigated the interplay between language anxiety, recasts, and L2 learners' grammatical accuracy. More specifically, Sheen (2008) examined "learners' responses to recasts" in terms of their language anxiety (p. 846). She found that high anxiety prevented some learners from benefitting from the interactional feedback moves that