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Native speaker–non-native speaker study abroad conversations: Do they provide feedback and opportunities for pushed output?

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An important body of literature indicates that, for language development to occur, learners must engage in exchanges that provide feedback and chances to incorporate it in their production. This research has been carried out mainly in classroom and experimental settings (Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005; Sheen, 2004). In the current study, we examine whether opportunities for feedback and uptake emerge in the context of semi-informal study abroad conversations. Oral data were collected from eight dyads of Native Speaker–Non-Native Speaker (NS–NNS) of Spanish, who voluntarily participated in Spanish–English language exchange sessions. Some feedback moves previously identified in the literature were also found in this study abroad context. In addition, learner-initiated moves played a crucial role in discourse development and led to the highest levels of uptake. We discuss how this active involvement of the learner of Spanish in the analyzed semi-informal conversations is facilitated by the fact that both interactants share an identity as language learners (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012).

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Introduction

In a recent review of study abroad research, Collentine (2009) notes a commonly underlying assumption in most studies, namely, that learners benefit from study abroad because it provides a wide range of opportunities to comprehend and produce the L2 in communicative contexts. He cautions, however, that there is a lack of primary data that document the nature of the interaction between learners and native speakers. In particular, he observes that although there are studies that have examined opportunities for negotiation from a sociocultural perspective (DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Kinginger, 2008), not much research has addressed this issue form the SLA interactionist view.

The interactionist perspective (Gass, 1997; Iwashita, 2003; Long, 2007; Pica, 1994) maintains that, through conversations, language learners are exposed to two types of evidence crucial for language learning: positive evidence and negative evidence. Positive evidence has been defined as “the set of well-formed sentences to which learners are exposed” (Gass, 1997, p. 36). Via this type of evidence learners gather data about possible and acceptable utterances in the target language. Negative evidence, on the contrary, provides information about what is neither possible nor acceptable.

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Learners typically obtain this type of evidence by means of corrective feedback, that is, an interlocutor's turn containing some sort of indication that the learner's utterance is not target-like.

There has been considerable debate in the literature with respect to whether both types of evidence are necessary or if positive evidence alone is sufficient for L2 development. On the one hand, some researchers (Krashen, 1981; Schwartz, 1993) have argued that positive evidence is all that is needed for language acquisition to take place, and that negative evidence might even be counterproductive. The implication for language teaching, including study abroad, would be that all efforts should aim at providing exposure to input rather than feedback on linguistic accuracy. Other researchers (Gass, 1997; Long, 2007; Pica, 1988; Swain, 1985; White, 1991), however, have put forward a role for negative evidence in SLA. Swain (1985), for example, has argued that through negative feedback learners can be pushed to reformulate their utterances and make them more accurate by resorting to their own linguistic resources.

Interactionists (Gass, 1997; Long, 2007; Pica, 1988, 1994) have posited a major role for both positive and negative evidence in SLA. They argue that, through the provision of negative feedback, learners are given opportunities to consider problems in their output, as indicated by their conversational partner. This negative feedback, in turn, may help them make the appropriate modifications. In other words, this process is said to allow learners to realize that there are discrepancies between their output and the target norm. Underlying this claim is Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990, 2001), which argues that some degree of consciousness is necessary for language acquisition to proceed.

As Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen (2001a) contend, there are theoretical bases for considering that uptake may facilitate acquisition. Uptake has been primarily studied in classroom contexts, and it has been commonly defined as "what the student attempts to do with the teacher's feedback" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 49). Ellis et al. (2001a) and Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001b) point out that uptake may also occur in the absence of learners' errors. That is, they broaden the notion of uptake to include not only reactive but also preemptive focus on form. Uptake would then be any learner's attempt to incorporate teacher's feedback that: a) follows a learner's error or b) follows a learner's doubt or question about a language form. Furthermore, Ellis et al. (2001a) specify that uptake is an optional move in which the learner tries to incorporate the teacher's feedback into her own output. This feedback is provided in response to an evident gap in the learner's knowledge and can vary on a number of dimensions that, in turn, may affect the likelihood of feedback incorporation (Loewen, 2004).

One of the most frequently studied characteristics of feedback in relation to uptake is explicitness/implicitness. There is some evidence that suggests that explicit feedback affords more opportunities for noticing than other types of more implicit feedback. For example, clarification requests and prompts are two types of explicit negative feedback that are likely to elicit learners' modifications of their previous ill-formed utterances. That is so because these types of explicit negative feedback hold back correct forms and instead offer hints to encourage learners to adjust their output and thus stretch their L2 knowledge. Clarification requests and prompts are then more often followed by modified responses, that is, by uptake, than implicit types of feedback, such as recasts (e.g., Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 1995, 2000). A recast is a reformulation of an interlocutor's previous utterance that corrects it in some way (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) within the context of a communicative exchange (Long, 2007; Sheen, 2006). Since the recast already provides the expected modification of the learner's output, she may not perceive an immediate pressure or need to respond to it. In fact, studies have shown that prompts are in general more effective than recasts at eliciting modified responses in the classroom (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Yang & Lyster, 2010). This is in part due, according to Yang & Lyster (2010), to prompts being more consistent in terms of discourse saliency as well as in terms of requiring self-correction.

Despite their advantages for acquisition, prompts are not as frequent as recasts, which are claimed to be the most recurrent feedback type in typical classroom discourse (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Sheen, 2004). Teachers often prefer to use recasts because they are an implicit form of feedback, less disruptive of conversational interaction than explicit feedback types such as prompts, explicit correction or metalinguistic clues. Recasts can be quite comfortably inserted in a conversation to provide feedback because they function similarly to naturally occurring conversational continuants. For this reason, it has been argued (Ellis & Sheen, 2006) that recasts have the potential to provide positive and negative evidence. On the one hand, they can act as models for acquisition and thus constitute positive evidence; on the other, if the learner is able to perceive the contrast between her turn and the recast, then, recasts can contribute as negative evidence for acquisition.

Together with recasts, another frequently studied type of feedback-including interaction has been the negotiation of meaning (e.g., Iwashita, 2003; Mackey, 2006; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Oliver, 2000; Varonis & Gass, 1985). As noted by Ellis (2006), negotiation for meaning can offer feedback types that are input-providing and output-pushing. A negotiation is input-providing when the learner indicates non-understanding to the native speaker, thus prompting her to give the learner additional input. Conversely, a negotiation is mainly output-pushing when the native speaker is the one signaling non-understanding to the learner. However, depending on the extent of the non-understanding, the native speaker may choose to use a specific indicator such as a confirmation check, which is mainly of the input-providing type, or a less specific one such as a clarification request, which is mainly an output-pushing type. It has been pointed out (Loewen & Philp, 2006; Lyster, 1998) that, in the former case, there may be an overlap with recasts, when the confirmation check repeats the learner's previous utterance without the error. While that is possible, there are also confirmation checks that are unambiguous recasts. They do not qualify as indicators of non-understanding given that they repeat the learner's utterance while correcting a form-error that has no bearing on meaning (e.g., NNS: He work in the office, NS: He works in the office? NNS: Yes).

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