The classroom and immersion pedagogy

Lyster, Roy
McGill University
Department of Second Language Education
3700 McTavish Street
Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2

BIBLID [1137-4446 (1997), 9; 111-121]

This study examines the role of teachers in providing both corrective and non-corrective feedback to students. Through classroom observation, it was found that teachers need to integrate a more systematic approach to language learning, specifically by facilitating the assimilation of students' errors through meaningful classroom interaction (e.g., using techniques that encourage students to assimilate the language).
1. INTRODUCTION

Characteristics of immersion pedagogy have often been described in terms of teaching and learning a second language (1) through content, (2) through negotiation of meaning, and (3) through classroom interaction. My talk today will focus on issues which arise at the intersection of these three key pedagogical elements; my objective is to make explicit certain challenges which language teachers face in communicative contexts such as immersion classrooms. The issues relate to the nature of interaction in classrooms where language learning is expected to occur incidentally through content taught in the second language. To examine this, we will consider two observational studies which were concerned with how teachers provide both corrective and noncorrective feedback to learners during meaningful interaction related to content. These studies suggest that an efficient way for teachers to focus on language is to negotiate with their students as opportunities arise during subject-matter lessons or language arts lessons with a thematic focus. The studies also demonstrate, however, that teachers face a dilemma as they try keep both language and content in focus for second language learners.

Immersion contexts lend themselves well to research investigating focus on form in communicative contexts for two reasons: first, immersion classrooms represent ideal communicative contexts in that language learning occurs primarily through content learning; and second, whereas immersion students develop high levels of fluency and confidence in using the L2, weaknesses in grammatical, lexical, and sociolinguistic development point to the need for novel ways of focusing on form in these highly experiential contexts. Researchers such as Allen, Swain, Harley, & Cummins (1990) Swain (1985, 1988), and Harley (1993, 1994) have suggested that weaknesses in immersion students’ interlanguage development may reflect gaps in immersion pedagogy in the following ways:

First, comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for successful L2 learning; comprehensible output is also required, involving ample opportunities for student production, as well as the provision of useful and consistent feedback from teachers and peers (Allen, Swain, Harley, & Cummins, 1990; Swain, 1985, 1988).

Second, subject-matter teaching does not on its own provide adequate language teaching; language used to convey subject matter needs to be highlighted in ways that make certain features more salient for L2 learners (Allen et al., 1990; Harley, 1993, 1994; Swain, 1985, 1988).

Both of the these suggestions lead to the issue of feedback in that, first, producing comprehensible output entails the provision of useful and consistent feedback, and second, language features can be made more salient in the input during subject-matter lessons as teachers interact with students; that is, they can provide feedback to students that draws attention to relevant language forms during meaningful interaction related to content. Yet the observation study of immersion classrooms described in Allen, Swain, Harley, and Cummins (1990) revealed that error treatment was dealt with in “a confusing and unsystematic way” (p. 67). Only 19% of all grammatical errors were corrected, and when correction did occur it generally appeared to be motivated by an “irritation” factor. The authors acknowledge a certain dilemma in this regard: If teachers do not correct errors, opportunities for students to make links between form and function are reduced; if teachers do correct errors, they risk interrupting the flow of communication.
In this talk, I will be reporting on two current studies related to feedback in immersion classrooms. The first study is one that Leila Ranta and I completed earlier this year to examine the different ways that immersion teachers provide corrective feedback and how learners react to the different types of feedback. The second study takes a closer look at the feedback and the potential for ambiguity from the learner's perspective. Both studies are part of an ongoing program of research involving extensive observations of six immersion classrooms in which we have audio-recorded about 100 hours of classroom interaction. The database used in both studies has the following composition:

- there were four grade 4 teachers: 1 from an early total immersion program (Teacher 3) and 3 from a mid-immersion program beginning at grade 4 (Teachers 4, 5 and 6);
- we recorded and transcribed 13 French Language Arts lessons with a thematic focus (we excluded explicit grammar lessons because we were interested in how teachers provide feedback during communicative interaction);
- there were 14 subject matter lessons, including science, social studies, math;
- this is equal to 27 lessons totaling 1100 minutes or 18.3 hours.

2. STUDY ONE: CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AND LEARNER UPTAKE

2.1. Data Analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed and then coded in COALA (Computer Aided Linguistic Analysis, Thornton & Pienemann, 1994) a computerized data analysis program which allowed us to code teacher-student interaction according to the feedback model which we developed for the purposes of this study (Lyster & Ranta, in press). This analytic model evolved from the database itself and allowed us to code all turns in terms of error, feedback, uptake, and topic continuation.

The sequence begins with a learner's utterance containing at least one error or unsolicited use of L1. The erroneous utterance is followed either by the teachers corrective feedback or not; if not, then there is topic continuation. If corrective feedback is provided by the teacher, then it is either followed by learner uptake or not. Uptake refers to the ways in which learners react in turns immediately following teacher feedback. No uptake entails topic continuation. If there is uptake, then the student's initially erroneous utterance is either repaired or continues to need repair in some way. If the utterance needs repair, then corrective feedback may again be provided by the teacher; if no further feedback is provided, then there is topic continuation. If and when there is repair, then it is followed either by topic continuation or by some repair-related reinforcement provided by the teacher.

The six feedback types the teachers used are as follows:

1. In explicit correction, the teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student had said was incorrect (by saying for example, “Oh, you mean...” “You should say...”.

2. In a recast, the teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of the student’s utterance, minus the error, without explicit phrases such as, “You mean...,” or “You should say...,” etc.
3. In a clarification request, the teacher indicates to the student, by using phrases such as “Pardon me” and “I don’t understand,” that the message has not been understood or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way, and that a repetition or a reformulation is required.

4. With metalinguistic clues, the teacher provides comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student’s utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form (e.g., “Ça se dit pas en français,” “Non, pas Ea,” “Is it masculine?”).

5. In elicitation, the teacher directly elicits correct forms from students by asking questions such as “Comment ça s’appelle? or “How do we say that in French?”; or by pausing to allow students to complete teacher’s utterance (e.g., “C’est un...”); or by asking students to reformulate their utterance (e.g., “Reformule cette phrase-là”).

6. Finally, repetition as a feedback type is when the teacher repeats, in isolation, the student’s erroneous utterance, adjusting intonation to highlight the error.

Concerning learner uptake, we found four types of repair in our database:

1. Repetition refers to a student’s repetition of the teacher’s feedback.

2. Incorporation refers to a student’s incorporation of the teacher’s feedback into a longer utterance.

3. Self-repair refers a self-correction produced by a student in response to the teacher’s feedback when the latter does not already provide the correct form.

4. Peer-repair refers to a peer-correction provided by another student in response to the teacher’s feedback.

Also part of uptake are utterances coded as ‘needs-repair’, which refer to simple acknowledgements when a student merely replies ‘yes’ to the feedback, as if to say, “Yes, that is indeed what I meant to say (but you’ve just said it much better!)” (see Calve, 1992). Acknowledgement may also include a “yes” or “no” on the part of the student in response to the teacher’s metalinguistic clues, or the student may hesitate, make the same or even a different error, or make a partial repair.

2.2. Results

The total database of over 18 hours of classroom interaction includes 3,268 student turns. Only one third of these student turns (34%) contain an error (or unsolicited uses of L1). Of these errors, 62% receive some kind of feedback from the teacher. The remaining 38% receive no feedback. Of all the feedback provided by teachers in response to learner errors, just over half (55%) lead to learner uptake of some kind. This means that 45% of the time, teachers provide feedback but then move on without any uptake on the part of the students. Finally, just over one quarter of all feedback turns-27%-lead to student repair. In relation to the total number of errors, this means that only 17% of all errors got repaired.

With respect to the six different kinds of feedback, recasting was by far the most widely used technique-over half (55%) of all feedback used by teachers contained a recast. (Recall that a recast involves the implicit provision of the correct form.) The other feedback types are distributed in decreasing frequency as follows: elicitation (14%) clarification request (11%) metalinguistic clues (8%) explicit correction (7%) and teacher’s isolated repetition of error (5%).
However, we were not only interested in looking at the different types of feedback; we also wanted to examine uptake—what it is that students actually do with the feedback in the next turn. Our findings revealed that the recast, the most popular feedback technique, is the least likely to lead to uptake of any kind: Only 31% of the recasts lead to uptake, with a fairly even distribution between repair and needs-repair. Explicit correction leads to uptake only 50% of the time, although it’s more than twice as likely to lead to repair than needs-repair. Repetition, clarification requests, and metalinguistic clues are similar in that they are effective at eliciting uptake from the student. Of these three, metalinguistic clues are the most successful at eliciting repair. Finally, of all six feedback types, the most successful for eliciting uptake is elicitation: All learner utterances following elicitation involve uptake with an almost even distribution between repair and needs-repair.

However, if we look more closely at the number of student repairs attributed to each feedback type, we can see that recasts, given their disproportionately high frequency, fare quite well, accounting for over one-third of all repairs (36%). Elicitation is responsible for almost one-quarter of all repairs (23%) while the other four feedback types each account for anywhere from 6 to 11% of all repairs.

One might well wonder, however, whether all repairs are equally effective indicators that students have noticed the feedback. From a common sense perspective it seems likely that the goal of the teacher should be for the learner to self-correct, or to have another student correct the error (see Calve, 1992). Pedagogically speaking, a repair in which the student simply repeats after the teacher does not seem as powerful as a student-generated repair. For this reason, one final breakdown of the data involved separating peer- and self-repair from repetition and incorporation, and referring to peer- and self-repair as “student-generated.”

When we remove student repetition, then, we find that recasts and explicit correction account for no student-generated repairs since they are definitionally incompatible with student-generated repair; that is, by definition, recasts and explicit correction both provide correct forms to students, so students can only repeat. On the other hand, elicitation, clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, and teacher repetition of error, can only lead to student-generated repair since none of these provides learners with the correct forms, only signals or clues. Elicitation proved to be particularly powerful, accounting for 43% of all student-generated repairs. (Recall that ‘elicitation’ involves asking, for example, “How do we say that in French?”) We concluded that these four techniques allow teachers to engage in the negotiation of form with their students by encouraging them to focus on form during meaningful interaction related to content.

Repetition of the student’s error is one feedback type that has been underrepresented in this discussion of Study One. That is because it was analyzed only when it occurred in isolation. However, repetition of error occurred in combination with four other feedback types, To see just how powerful some of these combinations can be, we will briefly examine in more detail corrective repetition in combination.

Of the total 686 feedback turns, repetition as corrective feedback occurred 36 times in isolation (5%) and 52 times in combination (8%). The combinations are as follows: with Metalinguistic clues (22 times); with Elicitation (12 times); with Explicit correction (12 times); and with Clarification request (6 times). It is interesting to note that of all feedback types, these instances of repetition in combination with other feedback types had the highest rate of repair: 54% led to repair; 35% led to needs-repair for a total of 89% uptake, leaving only 11% leading to topic continuation.
3. STUDY TWO: RECASTS, REPETITION, AND REINFORCEMENT

Given the recast’s overwhelming frequency, in spite of its ineffectiveness at leading to uptake and its categorical inability to elicit student-generated repair, we questioned, along with other researchers (e.g., Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 104; Calve, 1992, p. 468; Chaudron, 1988, p. 145; Netten, 1991, p. 304), whether recasts were able to effectively focus classroom learners’ attention on form. We wanted to know how easy or difficult it might be for learners to notice the gap between their initial erroneous utterance and the teacher’s reformulation. As a result, since our initial feedback study, we have conducted a second study to look more closely at the salience of recasts in classroom discourse. The results of our first study led us to believe that there may be considerable ambiguity entailed in teachers’ extensive use of recasts. We wanted to try to document this potential for ambiguity.

Our first step was to classify the different types of recasts according to structure and function. We found four types of recasts in our database: we were able to classify them in terms of structure as either declarative or interrogative, and in terms of meaning, as either isolated or incorporated.

Declarative recasts

(a) an isolated declarative recast is a reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error(s), with no additional information related to content.

(b) an incorporated declarative recast is when the teacher incorporates the correct rephrasing into a comment or expansion providing additional information.

Interrogative recasts

(a) an isolated interrogative recast is a teacher's confirmation check consisting of a reformulation of all or part of the student's utterance with rising intonation.

(b) an incorporated interrogative recast is when the teacher incorporates the correct rephrasing into a question that seeks additional information.

The breakdown of these four types of recasts revealed the largest category to be isolated declarative recasts, which account for 67% of all recasts. Along with isolated interrogative recasts (12%) that served as confirmation checks, we find then that 79% of all recasts were reformulations that neither provided nor sought additional information related to content. Only 19% of the recasts were considered to be semantically open in that they either provided or sought additional information—thus focusing the learner’s attention more on content. On the basis of these figures, then, one might speculate that in almost 80% of all recasts, the formal modifications made by teachers were easily perceived by the learners.

While this may be true if we look only at the distribution of different types of recasts, the picture changes somewhat if we examine what else is occurring in the database. We found that teachers tend to use a great deal of noncorrective repetition: that is, they often repeat students’ well-formed utterances in an effort to consolidate what students say, or perhaps simply to ensure that other students have heard. We wondered whether learners could clearly distinguish recasts from other types of repetition, so we first compared the number of recasts to the number of noncorrective repetitions. We found that, of the total number of student turns in the database, 11% were followed by a teacher’s corrective recast while
almost twice this many-19%-were followed by a teacher's repetition of a non-error. This means that 30% of all student utterances in the database were followed by either a recast or a noncorrective repetition. When we compare the frequency of recasts to noncorrective repetitions (38% vs. 62%) then, we see a preponderance of repetition which may again make it difficult for learners to notice the corrective function of recasts versus the noncorrective function of other repetitions. So, we decided to examine the structure and function of noncorrective repetition to see in what ways they differed from recasts. We were surprised to find that noncorrective repetitions very clearly paralleled the same structural and semantic categories as recasts: namely, isolated or incorporated declarative repetitions, and isolated or incorporated interrogative repetitions.

Declarative repetitions:

(a) an isolated declarative repetition is the teacher's succinct repetition of all or part of a student's utterance

(b) an incorporated declarative repetition is the teacher's incorporation of all or part of a student's utterance into a longer statement providing additional information or commentary

Interrogative repetitions:

(a) an isolated interrogative repetition is a teacher's confirmation check, consisting of verbatim repetition of all or part of a student's utterance, with rising intonation.

(b) an incorporated interrogative repetition is the teacher's incorporation of a student's utterance into a question seeking additional information.

Once we had classified all noncorrective repetitions, we were then able to compare the frequency of different types of recasts and different types of noncorrective repetitions and we were surprised to find identical patterns. We found that the frequency of declaratives and interrogatives is identical for recasts and noncorrective repetition: about 84.85% of all recasts and repetitions are declarative and about 15.16% are interrogative. Semantically, about 77-79% of all recasts and noncorrective repetitions are isolated; the remaining 21-23% are incorporated.

Given these identical functional patterns, then, one may well wonder how L2 learners can distinguish the purpose of recasts from the purpose of noncorrective repetitions. Furthermore, one might well wonder whether the teachers' intention in recasting is indeed to correct form or if their intention has more to do with content, as they confirm or seek confirmation, provide or seek additional information-as they do when they frequently repeat error-free utterances.

Given this ambiguity concerning what learners might perceive in the input, we decided to look again at uptake to see what learners do following these noncorrective repetitions. We found that teachers and students must be doing something to eliminate at least some of the ambiguity. Only 5% of the noncorrective repetition is followed by uptake. So, although recasts did not invite a lot of uptake in comparison to other feedback types, the 31% uptake that did follow recasts is considerably more than the 5% uptake following noncorrective repetitions. After only 5% of the teacher's noncorrective repetition did students repeat, or acknowledge with a 'oui' or a 'non'; the other 95% of the time, there was topic continuation. Thus, although we were unable to clearly capture this in our audio-recordings, the pragmatics
of classroom discourse may be such that teachers behave differently when providing recasts as opposed to noncorrective repetitions by possibly waiting longer or looking at students in a way that invites more uptake. However, of the 31% uptake following recasts, only 18% included repair; the other 13% involve student utterances still in need of repair and so the question remains as to how effectively recasts get learners to notice the gap between their erroneous utterance and the teacher’s reformulation.

Our final analysis of potential ambiguity in classroom interaction yielded some surprising results. In our initial analyses, we took account of reinforcement provided by teachers after student repair. Reinforcement moves included at least one of four types of reinforcement, occurring either alone or in various combinations: (1) simple affirmation or acknowledgement (oui; OK; bien sûr; mais oui; ben oui; c’est ça; d’accord; (2) praise (e.g., Très bien; excellent; Bravo!); (3) repetition of the student’s repair; and (4) additional metalinguistic information or commentary, including further elicitation. In our subsequent analyses, we found that reinforcement occurred in one-third of all error treatment sequences. However, we also found that reinforcement does not occur only after repair, but also at other unexpected points in the sequence: it occurs immediately following students’ errors and also following teachers’ feedback. This typically involves a teacher saying ‘yes’ to the content and then ignoring the error by moving on to topic continuation, or saying ‘yes’ to the content and then reformulating the student’s utterance into a correct one. As expected, a good deal of reinforcement (36%) occurs immediately after a student’s repair. However, we were surprised to find that 45% of all the teachers’ reinforcement moves occur immediately after errors: this includes 32% before topic continuation and 15% before feedback. The other 19% of the reinforcements occurred immediately after the teacher’s feedback.

In light of this potential ambiguity, as immersion teachers say ‘yes’ to content in spite of errors in form, we wondered if teachers discriminated enough to at least reinforce error-free utterances more often than erroneous utterances. So, we compared the frequency of reinforcement with recasts, reinforcement with noncorrective repetition, and reinforcement with teacher topic continuation after errors when teachers provided no corrective feedback. We found an equal ratio of reinforcement moves: reinforcement accompanied about one quarter of all recasts, one quarter of all noncorrective repetitions, and one quarter of all teacher topic continuation moves immediately following errors with no feedback. This clearly indicates that teachers’ use reinforcement to reinforce messages related to content, irrespective of language form.

Reinforcement, then, does seem to be a source of ambiguity, and reveals a true dilemma for immersion teachers as they teach both language and content: How can teachers continue to reinforce student messages related to content while giving them clear messages about language?

**Summary and conclusion**

Before concluding, I’d like to summarize these two studies. In our first study, we found that recasting is by far the most frequently used feedback technique among the four teachers in our sample even though it was the least likely to lead to learner uptake and, of course, unable to lead to student-generated repair. Because of this, in our second study we looked more closely at recasts to see how salient they might be from a learner’s perspective and
found that about 80% were isolated in that they neither provided nor sought additional information, thus allowing learners to focus more on form than on meaning. However, we found that teachers, in addition to recasting, use a lot of noncorrective repetition, and do so almost twice as often. Furthermore, when we compared recasts to noncorrective repetitions, we found that they fulfilled identical functions: isolated recasts and repetitions serve to consolidate content or serve as comprehension checks; incorporated recasts and repetitions seek or provide additional information. In addition, we found that these functions were distributed in identical proportions across recasts and noncorrective repetitions. We speculated that this must indeed be a source of ambiguity for learners. However, when we examined learner uptake, we found that there may be less ambiguity than expected given that recasts clearly lead to more uptake than do noncorrective repetitions, even though they lead to much less uptake than any other feedback type. Finally, we examined when teachers use reinforcement and we were able to confirm that this must result in considerable ambiguity from the learner’s perspective as teachers, understandably so, often say ‘yes’ to content in spite of erroneous forms.

To conclude, any recommendations made to teachers based on our analyses of recasts, repetition, and reinforcement, can only be speculative. No firm conclusions can be drawn with respect to the right or wrong ways of interacting with students because our studies are ongoing and require further experimentation to truly determine the effects of different types of feedback on L2 learning. Our results to date have been presented today primarily to encourage teachers to reflect on how they interact with their students and how they use language as they interact. Teachers are invited to reflect and to seek solutions that seem appropriate to their particular context. Nonetheless, based on common sense, we speculate that immersion interlanguage development may indeed be hindered by the many ambiguous messages we have been able to observe in immersion classrooms.

From a research perspective, it is easy to relate this study to other studies, such as those undertaken by Birgit Harley and Merrill Swain (e.g., Harley, 1993, 1994; Swain, 1985, 1988, 1996) who suggest that many features of the input in immersion classrooms need to be contrived in ways that enhance L2 learning, simply because classroom discourse does not generally entail language used in its full range of forms and functions. In a similar vein, then, we can suggest that some aspects of classroom interaction need to be contrived in ways that allow for less ambiguous information about the target language.

One way that teachers can focus on form in less ambiguous ways involves what we call the negotiation of form. This involves a more pedagogical and less conversational function of negotiation in classrooms. That is, the negotiation of form pushes interlocutors to go beyond various communication strategies used to get meaning across, such as gestures and circumlocution. As the four teachers we observed did about one-third of the time, teachers can encourage accuracy and precision within meaningful contexts by using the four feedback techniques that allow for student-generated repair: elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetition of learner error. These four negotiation techniques do not provide learners with the correct form, as do recasts and explicit correction, but instead provide signals to assist learners in self- and peer-correction, without interrupting the flow of communication.

Many teachers at this point might ask how often they should correct, and whether they should be expected to correct all errors. The four teachers in our study provided feedback on
62% of the student turns with errors—this varied roughly from 50% to 70% for the four individual teachers. These figures are not unlike findings from other studies concerned with teacher feedback (such as those reported in Chaudron, 1988, pp. 136-138), and appear to represent a reasonable ratio of correction vs. non-correction in such interactive contexts. Although it is likely undesirable for teachers to provide corrective feedback more frequently than this, our results suggest that, when they do indeed provide feedback, teachers might want to consider the whole range of techniques they have at their disposal rather than relying so extensively on recasts, which comprised over 50% of all feedback. In so doing, teachers would ensure more opportunities for learner uptake following feedback and less opportunity for ambiguity related to form and content.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that teachers need to carefully take into account their students’ level of L2 proficiency when making decisions about feedback. For example, one of our teachers (T3-Rachelle) recasts considerably less often than the other three teachers (39% vs. 64%). Her students, being in a total early immersion program, have a higher degree of proficiency than students from the other three classes in the mid-immersion program. This allows Rachelle to draw more on the negotiation techniques and less on recasts. Consequently, 70% of Rachelle’s feedback turns led to student uptake whereas less than 50% of the other three teachers’ feedback led to uptake.

Thus, we may conclude that teachers will need to recast more with beginning learners and then draw more and more on negotiation techniques as learners progress. This is logical for two reasons. First, one cannot push beginning learners to produce what they do not already know; and second, there seems to be little reason for a teacher to continue recasting forms that advanced students already know. According to Swain’s output hypothesis (Swain, ’1993, 1995), pushing learners in their output encourages them to reflect on their own language use and to notice important form-function links in the target language. Furthermore, by pushing proficient students to draw on their own linguistic resources in this way, teachers allow students to be less passive and to actively take more responsibility for their own language learning and to move closer towards autonomy as speakers of the target language.

REFERENCES


