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Improving second Language Speaking Proficiency via Interactional Feedback

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Swanson, P., & Schlig, C. (2010). Improving second language speaking proficiency via interactional feedback. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*, 1(4), 17-30.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADULT VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY

October-December 2010, Vol. 1, No. 4

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Improving Second Language Speaking Proficiency via Interactional Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have suggested that interactional feedback is associated with foreign/second language learning because it prompts learners to notice foreign/second language forms. Using Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Long's interaction hypothesis as conceptual frameworks, this study explores the use of systematic explicit feedback to undergraduates (N = 1180) at three assessment points throughout one semester using digital voice recording technology for oral assessments. Results indicate that statistically significant differences were found in pronunciation, linguistic structure, and content from the first to last observation. Findings suggest serious implications for improving speaking proficiency, which promote the use of combining digital technology for oral language formative and summative assessment with quality, systematic, and in-depth feedback to students.

Keywords: Assessment, Dialogic Feedback, Interaction Theory, Technology, Voice Recording

INTRODUCTION

The need for second/foreign language (S/FL) instruction has become more and more relevant in our changing world. In North America where English is the predominant language, speakers of other equally important languages must not be denied quality language instruction with the goal of proficient communication. In Canada, for example, census figures indicate that while the two official languages, English and French, are spoken most frequently in homes, there are a number of other important languages such as Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish, and aboriginal lan-

guages. While 98% of Canadian residents speak at least one of the country's official languages, bilingualism in the two official languages is much less pervasive (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, 2006). Unfortunately, the same is true in the United States and research indicates that the status of S/FL study as a school subject in many other English-speaking countries such as New Zealand is very low (Sun Hoe & Elder, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

For several decades there has been reference to communicative language teaching from around the world (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Nunan, 1987;

DOI: 10.4018/javet.2010100102

Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). When S/FL instructors who claim to use a communicative approach are asked to define it, typically there are a variety of vague responses and many misconceptions such as they believe that as long as you do not teach grammar in the classroom, your approach is communicative. Furthermore, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) find that genuinely communicative classrooms are in the minority. While communicative language teaching includes some focus on language structures through corrective feedback (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), it is important to note that the notion of communicative language teaching implies more than the mere transfer of information, and when applied to S/FL teaching, it entails the development of competence, not just skill. Savignon (1985) states that “interest in communicative competence has not only not waned, it continues to grow and has led to the elaboration of descriptive models that have in turn provided frameworks for further research into the nature and acquisition of second language proficiency” (p. 129). In their definitions of communicative competence, some authors’ mention interaction as a *sine qua non* quality (Rivers, 1973; Savignon, 1978). Others stress the need for this interaction to be meaningful (VanPatten, 2003). Nevertheless, others remain closer to the original concept. That is, what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings (Gumperz, 1972).

The preoccupation with the development of speaking skills in S/FL classrooms from the inception is valid, but at what point should we start considering the development of language proficiency? Studies that measure oral proficiency tend to look at students in the intermediate-level or higher (Barnwell, 1991; Lee, 2000) while first-year learners are conspicuously absent from these discussions. Why is the first-year S/FL experience not considered in the research? Three identified reasons for this lack of data are that (1) most first-year S/FL students are not true beginners therefore, achievement of certain linguistic level is hard to measure, (2) most studies regard

oral proficiency attached to functions that are (presented but) not *learned* during the first year of instruction, and (3) the uncertainty of what place has accuracy in proficiency.

In their critical analysis of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, Lantolf and Frawley (1985) found that “the Foreign Language Oral Proficiency Assessment manual states that at lower levels of proficiency, at least, the oral proficiency testing is closer to an achievement test than it is to a proficiency test” (p. 342). This statement underscores the importance that the achievement-proficiency distinction has in S/FL testing. According to Savignon (1985) “tests of achievement, [are] linked to the instructional content of a particular course, and those of proficiency, based on a theory of the abilities required to use language for communication” (p. 129). The differentiation correlates to the content of first-year (lower-level) and second-year (intermediate-level) S/FL courses.

First-year courses are characterized by the introduction of large quantities of new vocabulary. The nature of first-year materials promotes the testing of discrete point items, and since the speaking skills, understood as “not knowledge but ability” (VanPatten, 2003, p. 70) are, at best, incipient, they are difficult to assess. In addition, many first-year textbook testing programs promote guided oral routines that give students topics or questions that have to be prepared (i.e., memorized) in advance to present later in front of the teacher. Some variations to this testing modality include dialogues that students prepare with a classmate and role-plays in which a student pretends to be one party in a situation and the teacher, or a classmate, the other. Other testing programs include written or recorded audio prompts that are, in some cases, difficult to implement in the lower levels because the learners’ listening abilities are not yet developed and the implementation requires external elements—headphones, language labs, etc.—that can complicate the delivery of the test.

Another significant issue that must be addressed is the effect that tests have on daily classroom interaction, in other words, the likelihood that external tests dictate teaching. In this

regard, Shohamy (1992) noted the difference between school context and external context tests:

- 1) The school context, in which tests and other assessment procedures are used as part of the instructional process to improve teaching and learning in the school; and 2) the external context, in which tests are used to make important decisions about the future of individuals, as in granting certificates, accepting candidates for programs, and placing students in appropriate programs. (p. 513)

Shohamy maintains that the use of external context tests to determine what happens in the classroom is counterproductive since it impacts the learning process with measurement-driven instruction. That is to say that teachers and students feel obligated to conform to guidelines dictated by the test. Shohamy also indicates that there is a problem when the diagnostic information provided by the test results cannot be used in a meaningful way; therefore, it cannot be used for repair. In the same way, the pressure to coincide with external context expectations, which, in effect, are the “narrowing of the curriculum in ways inconsistent with real learning and the real needs of those students” (p. 514).

Integrating Technology for Oral Language Assessment

According to theory, language learners improve and progress along a natural order when they receive consistent second language input that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence (Krashen, 1981). Thus, in order to advance second language competence in students, S/FL teachers should maximize teacher use of the target language in the classroom and provide ample opportunities for students to speak and listen to the others exclusively in the target language. However, affective barriers to oral language production such as public performance anxiety and authentic self-representation can cause impediments which complicate the

language learning process. Research indicates performance anxiety is negatively related to language performance and MacIntyre (1999) claims that performance anxiety is one of the strongest predictors of S/FL learning success. Furthermore, Woodrow (2006) found that students experienced the most stress when having to give face-to-face oral presentations with the instructor. She found that the major stressors reported by the subjects were performing in front of class and talking to native speakers, noting that it was imperative for teachers to consider assessing oral language ability both in and outside the classroom. She concluded that oral language assessment “could be achieved by setting out-of-class tasks utilizing the rich linguistic resources available to learners” (p. 324).

Research specific to S/FL instruction indicates that there are a plethora of digital technologies that S/FL instructors can use successfully to measure student oral language proficiency outside of classroom and that technology has a place in assessing language learners’ speaking abilities. Early and Swanson (2008) noted that there are low-cost and even free software, webware, and portable hardware solutions. Additionally, their research highlights multiple benefits of using digital audio recordings for speaking assessments with Japanese and Spanish undergraduates. From a student perspective, the use of digital recordings produced less anxiety, more thorough responses, an increased likelihood to experiment with new S/FL structures and vocabulary while trying to imitate native speakers’ speech, and an increased sense of control of students’ academic success. From the instructors’ point of view, using technology to assess students’ speaking ability increased the amount of instructional time per classroom meeting, offered instructors more flexibility to evaluate student performance (e.g., at home, during commutes on public transportation), and the recordings increased the inter-rater reliability because multiple instructors could listen to students’ audio recordings and assess them using the same instrument.

Focused on using free and open source software options for oral language assessment,

Swanson, Early, and Baumann (in press) reported many of the same benefits for students and their instructors alike. Additionally, they noted that the use of digital voice recordings allowed instructors to differentiate assessment tasks more widely. However, the researchers reported varying degrees in student linguistic improvement and they felt that any improvement in linguistic accuracy could be explained by multiple factors; most notably, students could revise their responses to teacher-created prompts numerous times before submitting a final recording for assessment purposes. Nevertheless, the aforementioned researchers reported a decrease in student performance anxiety and favorable student perceptions of implementing technology as part of the oral language assessment process.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is framed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Long's interaction hypothesis. Vygotsky viewed learning as a social process that is enhanced when teachers and students engage in activities together. The ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Here, the teacher scaffolds instruction and provides guidance, coaching, hints, and encouragement to the learner to attain the goal of performance at a level that could not be reached otherwise. Research indicates that the foundation of this type of instruction is dialogic and implemented through exchange and discussion centering on a specific academic goal in purposeful instructional conversations (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). Such instruction has been found to have positive effects on student learning (Cohen, 1994; Jensen, Johnson, & Johnson, 2002).

Alongside Vygotsky, Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis helps frame this study in which feedback obtained during conversational interaction advances inter-language development because interaction "connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (p. 451-452). Interactionists have sought empirical evidence to determine the impact of interaction on comprehension (Loschky, 1994), second language development (Mackey, 1999), and production (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). The research on feedback reveals that language teachers use a variety of strategies to correct students' linguistic errors (Chaudron, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Seedhouse, 1997) and the results from systematic empirical studies investigating the type, frequency and effectiveness of different feedback strategies (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Seedhouse, 1997) reveal two phenomena. First, the relative merits of different types of feedback remain unclear, and second, the relative effectiveness of feedback strategies depends on multiple variables, such as the particular aspects of the language being corrected, conditions relating to the provision of teacher correction, and characteristics of the students (e.g., sophisticated grammatical explanations are not appropriate for beginning students) (Ferreira, Moore, & Mellish, 2007).

Perhaps the predominant form of feedback is recasting (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mohan & Beckett, 2003; Sheen, 2004; Tsang, 2004) where teachers implicitly reformulate students' utterances without the error(s). Recasting is grounded on claims that children frequently repeat their parents' recasts during native language acquisition and some researchers hypothesize that recasts help learners notice the gap between inter-language forms and target forms, thus serving as negative evidence (Doughty, 2001; Long & Robinson, 1998). While recasts provide scaffolding that helps learners in the classroom and are ideal for facilitating the delivery of complex subject matter (Lyster, 2002),

recasts alone do not lead to any self- or peer-repair because the students can only repeat the teacher's reformulation. Lyster (1998a) notes that recasts can become ambiguous do not help learners notice their own errors. However, some empirical studies indicate that recasts are more effective than no feedback at all (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998).

Aligned with the interaction hypothesis is form-focused instruction (Long, 1998), defined as interactional moves directed at raising learner awareness of linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, and so on), which appears to be crucially incidental and has received little attention (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Research finds that second language learners benefit from form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within communicative contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Studies on the effects of instruction on inter-language indicate that there is clear evidence of beneficial effects of a focus on language forms (Harley, 1998; Long, 2001), especially when it comes to increasing the rate of learning, gaining long-term accuracy, and raising the ultimate level of attainment. The current study examines the combined effect of two sources of interactional feedback on first-semester non-native Spanish speakers' second language development: (1) in-class formative feedback and (2) summative feedback from student-recorded speaking assessments. This last one considered because the researchers concur that a long-term perspective is essential to measure any lasting effects of interaction (Mackey & Philp, 1998).

Using both Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Long's interaction hypothesis as the conceptual framework, the following research study focuses on first-semester non-native learners of Spanish in an urban university. The research question guiding this study is: What is the impact of using digital voice recording and prompt constructive feedback impact to identify elements that promote or hinder the development of oral communication.

METHODS

Sample

More than one thousand ($N = 1180$) students enrolled in introductory-level Spanish courses during the 2008-2009 academic year participated in this study. Females (69%) outnumbered males and the majority self-reported to be Caucasian (43%) or African American (45%), followed by Asian (7%), Multiracial (4%), Latino (1%) and Native American (1%). Average age was 23.01 years ($SD = 7.29$) and age ranged from 17 to one participant who reported to be 73 years of age. Upper class members (juniors = 25%, seniors, 35%) constituted the majority of the sample by undergraduate class standings and sophomores constituted the smallest grouping of the undergraduates in the sample (16%). Four percent self-reported as graduate students.

Thirteen instructors taught multiple sections of the Spanish 1001 course during the two aforementioned semesters. Seven were graduate students, two were visiting professors, three were adjunct faculty, and one was a professional lecturer. Their age ranged from 25 to 61, and the majority of the instructors were women ($N = 8$). Six of the instructors were native Spanish speakers from four different countries, and seven were non-native speakers with near-native fluency. All of the instructors had at least a bachelor's degree with three individuals having earned a master's or doctoral degree in Spanish. None of the instructors had used digital recording to measure oral language proficiency prior to the study.

Research Context

During a typical academic semester, the Department of Modern and Classical Languages offers approximately 20 sections of first-semester Spanish 1001 each semester taught by 10 to 13 graduate students, visiting professors, adjunct faculty, and lecturers. The classes are taught on campus and vary from one to three in-class meetings per week from 9am to 8:30pm Mon-

day through Friday. The maximum number of students for each section is 32 and most of the Spanish classes are taught at capacity because Spanish courses have the second highest enrollment figures, only slightly behind English Composition courses. Common textbooks and syllabi are used for all Spanish courses to ensure that all students enrolled in the four introductory Spanish courses (Span 1001, 1002, 2001, 2002) are taught and assessed using an identical curriculum regardless of instructor or section. The course is solidly grounded in the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language's national standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), which are similar to the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and Common European Framework of Reference, the Australian Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of Languages and Cultures because there was a great deal of cross-fertilization among them as the same expert consultants worked on them at different times since the standards were expected to reflect the state of the art internationally and not just nationally (Duff, 2006).

In Spanish 1001 (three-hour per week class), students develop basic skills in Spanish through the use of role-plays, conversations, games, and even solving puzzles. While the grammatical issues such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, and the use of the present and immediate future tenses are presented, less time is spent overtly providing grammatical explanations. The vocabulary ranges from introductory phrases to likes/dislikes to idiomatic expressions. To aid instruction, the Department requires instructors to use *uLearn*[®], a web-based course management system. Integrated into *uLearn* is the *Wimba*[®] voice recorder, a web-based voice tool that facilitates and promotes vocal instruction, collaboration, and assessment (Wimba, 2008). The voice recorder can be accessed by the internet and students were required to record responses at the University's language lab under the supervision of the course instructor.

Rubric

Construction of the rubric coincides with MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrod's (2001) construct of Willingness to Communicate where "the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them" (p. 547). The overall design of the study responds to the notion that students should be able to speak in the target language with a varied vocabulary, good pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Therefore, the researchers sought to study student's speaking ability in the areas of Pronunciation, Task Completion, Fluidity of Response, Linguistic Structure, and Content. The rubric contained the five criteria broken down into five performance levels ranging from 1 (*Needs Improvement*) to 5 (*Superior*).

The researchers chose to assess these five variables because the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to create language serve as a foundation for verbal communication. Additionally, the researchers felt it was important to measure the students' ability to successfully complete the entire assessment task and begin to imitate native speakers' rate of speech. Collectively, if these criteria are ignored, students may turn to listing and labeling, which only serves to limit their communicative development (Hall, 1999). The final criterion, pronunciation, which has been viewed as part of linguistic competence and not communicative competence (Pennington & Richards, 1986), was selected because as research indicates,

Teaching pronunciation early on may increase student concern for developing native / native like pronunciation, lower their affective filters, and help students to feel less anxious about speaking. With renewed confidence in the way they sound, students may be more motivated to actively seek out native speakers with whom to converse (Elliott, 1997, p. 104).

Additionally, results from studies about the explicit teaching of phonology have been contradictory and the question of what to do to improve second language learners' pronunciation becomes more complex and hence often avoided in the classroom.

Assessment Procedure

This research study began in the fall semester of 2006 and over the past several years, the researchers refined the assessment process. During the third, eighth, and fourteenth weeks of instruction, instructors assessed student speaking proficiency using the *Wimba*[®] voice recorder. Students attended class at a computer lab and accessed the voice recorder through the internet where they were asked to record responses to oral language assessment tasks. At each assessment point, instructors use the same speaking task for all classes. The tasks were:

1. Week 1: Describe yourself and a classmate.
2. Week 2: Describe your house telling how many rooms it has, the furniture found in each room, and for what each room serves.
3. Week 3: Talk about the food you like, where you eat, and what you will have for your next meal today.

For the first assessment, instructors conducted classes at computer labs during their regularly scheduled class times to familiarize them with the technology and to show them specifically how to access the voice recorder, record, listen to their recording, re-record their responses if needed, and to submit their recording to the instructor. The students were also shown the rubric that would be used to evaluate their speaking proficiency. Additionally, instructors encouraged students to focus their attention on their responses using the rubric as a guide.

To make sure the assessment was a speaking exercise and not a reading exercise, the instructors reminded students not to write and then read their response. Students rather were asked to think about their response, perhaps make a few

notes, and speak freely for a maximum of 30 seconds. The instructors informed the students that they could re-record their responses as many times as they liked before submitting their final recording for grading purposes. Students were encouraged to record a response, listen to that response using the rubric as a guide for maximum performance, and then delete and re-record their responses until they were satisfied with the recording. The system displays students' files in a threaded discussion format, showing each student's name, time, and date chronologically for each recording by assessment opportunity.

The instructors closely monitored the students during the process to avoid the writing and subsequent reading of responses. For each of the three assessments, the procedure was the same. At the first assessment point, students filled out a survey that requested demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, and class standing, e.g., freshman) and the number of times they re-recorded their responses before submitting their final recordings. Students were also asked if they liked using digital technology for speaking assessments. After each subsequent oral assessment, students were asked how many times they re-recorded responses and how their instructors' feedback impacted their speaking proficiency. At the end of the semester, the authors conducted a focus group with the instructors to discuss the study and their reactions to the study.

Inter-Rater Reliability

At the beginning of each semester, all of the instructors met with the researchers to discuss the study and the evaluation process of student responses to help improve inter-rater reliability. As a group, the instructors listened to examples of student recordings, evaluated the recordings individually using the same rubric, discussed their reasons for assigning scores on the rubric, and arrived at a consensus for evaluation.

Additionally, the researchers requested that the instructors evaluate student performance using the rubric no later than three days after the students posted their responses. The

researchers also gave examples of how to give precise, constructive feedback to the students that was aligned with the rubric. Instructors learned various methods to note errors in pronunciation, linguistic structure, and so forth. The researchers asked the instructors to give as much written feedback as possible to help the students improve their speaking proficiency. Additionally, the researchers requested that the instructors note common errors made by students, discuss those in class the following day, and continue to design activities to help students overcome such errors for a total of 2343 instances of corrective feedback. Moreover, the instructors recommended to students that they listen to their recordings once feedback was given to practice and improve their speaking. Additional formative feedback from instructors was given to students during class meetings.

Lastly, the researchers showed the instructors how to input student data for each speaking assessment into an *Excel* file for each section of Spanish 1001 he/she was teaching. The file also contained student demographic data, the course section number, and the number of times students' chose to re-record answers. After each assessment was completed, the instructors emailed the *Excel* files to the researchers. The data were entered into a *SPSS 17.0* file for analysis.

RESULTS

The researchers began by analyzing the data from the five variables followed by the students' survey information. Finally, the researchers examined the qualitative data from the focus

group meeting with the instructors. First, the researchers calculated the means and standard deviations for each of the variables of interest: Pronunciation, Task Completion, Fluidity of Response, Linguistic Structure, Content, and the total for each of the three observations (See Table 1).

For all of the variables, except Fluidity of Response, which remained the same, the average score increased from the first though the third observation. Students' total scores increased during the semester from an average of 17.36 (25 points maximum) to 21.08 for a total increase of 3.72. Among the five variables, the greatest average increase from the first observation to the last observation of student oral proficiency was for Linguistic Structure (0.99).

Next, the researchers examined the data for statistical differences in the five variables from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. The researchers conducted paired sample t-tests for each variable, and no statistical differences were found for Task Completion or Fluidity of Response. However, statistically significant differences were found for Pronunciation ($t = 4.50, df = 318, p < .01$), Linguistic Structure ($t = 5.50, df = 317, p < .001$), and Content ($t = 2.01, df = 316, p < .05$), indicating that student performance increased in these three areas during the semester. Afterwards, the differences were examined by gender, ethnicity, and class standing; no significant differences were discovered between the groups.

To determine if the differences in students' speaking ability in the areas of Pronunciation, Linguistic Structure, and Content could be

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the five criteria and total for each assessment point

	Pronunciation		Task Completion		Fluidity of Response		Linguistic Structure		Content		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Week 3	3.64	1.62	3.76	1.68	3.72	1.70	3.35	1.52	3.92	1.67	17.36	8.37
Week 8	3.82	1.61	3.87	1.73	3.72	1.69	3.56	1.57	4.01	1.68	18.24	8.61
Week 14	4.39	0.95	4.55	0.92	4.43	0.94	4.34	0.94	4.70	0.83	21.08	6.49

attributed to certain characteristics of the instructors, the researchers conducted analyses of variance. No differences were found between native speakers and non-native speakers of Spanish. Moreover, no differences were found when comparing instructors' levels of education (bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree). Such findings suggest that a high degree of inter-rater reliability was achieved.

Students and Instructors' Perceptions

Data taken from the student survey indicated that the majority of the students (61%) reported that they typically recorded and re-recorded responses more than once with more than a quarter (28%) stating that they had recorded their responses at least four times or more before submission for grading. Eighty-two percent of the students stated that they liked using voice recording for assessing their ability to speak Spanish. Most of the students (72%) stated that they found the instructors' feedback constructive and helpful to improve their oral proficiency. They particularly found the detailed notes on the rubric helpful and many noticed that the instructors had integrated the feedback into their lessons. Susan, a nineteen year-old second-semester freshman noted that she found the comments really helpful to improve her speaking skills in Spanish. Additionally, she liked being able to review her recording after she received her grade and comments (rubric with notes). Her opinion was not a solitary finding; several of the students who chose to write additional comments on their surveys made similar comments. It appeared that the constant, variable-defined feedback had a positive impact on the students' perceptions of the oral language assessment process used for this study.

From the instructors' perspective, noted during the focus group meeting that some students did not like using the *Wimba* system, and that some students specifically mentioned that they preferred using the traditional face-to-face approach in class. However, they said that the vast majority of their students found the *Wimba* system easy to use. All but one of the instruc-

tors noted that at first, they felt that the process would be time consuming. But once they began to assess student work, they found it took less time than conducting oral assessments in class. As the following comment shows:

When I had to measure students' oral ability teaching at a different school, it would take one and a half class hours to evaluate each student. Now, I can listen to their responses, even listen several times if needed, and mark the rubric in much less time. I guess there are fewer classroom interruptions (John, November 18, 2009).

Moreover, they also noted that the accuracy of evaluation and the accuracy of student response appeared to improve. As mentioned by one of the instructors:

Last year, the students kept making the same errors over and over again. Now that we're using the voice recorder, I can listen to them (recordings) and pause the recording, make notes to the student, and continue listening to the response. Unlike last year, I can give my feedback to the students and they can listen to themselves. I think the process is helping both of us to improve (instructors in the evaluation process and students in speaking ability). (Yvette, November 18, 2009)

In addition to the savings of time and the noted improvements in accuracy, several of the instructors mentioned that they were approached by students who were not satisfied with their grade for the assignment.

I had a couple of students mention that they didn't think I was fair with my grading of their recordings so I asked them if they would like one of the faculty members to evaluate their performance. So I asked one of the professors in the department if he would listen to the students' recordings and assess the students' speaking ability. (Alexandra, November 18, 2009)

In each case, the instructors told the researchers that they liked having the recording for moments just like the one just described. They felt it gave students a voice in the grading process and helped decrease any level of subjectivity in grading. Even though the instructors were not aware of the critical nature of inter-rater reliability, every one of them pointed out that they liked having a digital artifact of student performance. Additionally, the instructors mentioned that many of the students reported to have listened to their recordings after receiving instructor feedback. In fact, eight of the instructors stated that they had met with students during office hours to listen to the recordings together to get more in-depth feedback.

Interactional Types of Feedback Given to Students

In addition to recasting during class times, the most common technique used by instructors to note Pronunciation and Linguistic Structure errors was to write word and/or phrases and underline them to show that error existed. They remarked that students easily understood what was being conveyed, and some of the instructors (38%) even took the time to note at which point (e.g., beginning at the 13th second of the recording...) the error(s) could be found. Other techniques included writing letters and the particular Spanish words that were associated with the errors as well as making notes regarding agreement of subjects and verbs and nouns and adjectives.

As for the areas of Task Completion and Content, several of the instructors mentioned that they copied/pasted the assessment task below the rubric and made notes on it. By doing so, the four instructors that used this system said that their students could easily understand which piece of the assessment task they failed to address. These four believed that the students who missed point on these criteria were not as likely to make task-completion and content errors on subsequent oral assessments. The remaining instructors stated that they would have used this method because they “got sick

and tired” (Nicolasa, November 22, 2009) of writing the same errors over and over again for students, especially on the first assessment. The most common manner of giving feedback for Fluidity of Response was to note the number of pauses, dead time in the recording, and keep a tally of the number of times students said tags or filler words such as *um* or *yea*.

In class, instructors routinely used recasts and lists of common errors from the recordings to promote linguistic improvement. Additionally, students were encouraged not only to become aware of the errors being made, but also not to allow such errors to become part of their vernacular. Overall, the instructors believed that for the students who took the time to reflect critically on the assignments and the instructor feedback, linguistic improvements would be more likely to be noted earlier in the language learning process.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the data suggest that pronunciation, linguistic structure, and content of the speaking assessment task can be improved by systematic interaction using formative feedback in the classroom setting and summative feedback collected from out-of-class recordings of language assessment tasks. While research indicates that recasts can become ambiguous and perhaps not help S/FL learners notice their errors (Lyster, 1998b), by working within the ZPD collaboratively, learners and instructors can overcome and remediate immediate errors before they can become part of the students’ vernacular. Clearly, such findings are important because linguistic skills (e.g., pronunciation) are developed at different rates.

Perhaps novice S/FL students enter classrooms without any notion of self-awareness and how to become a reflective learner. The present study highlights the importance of allowing students not only to work alongside an expert in language instruction promoting the ideals of the ZPD in a dialogic manner to mediate understanding (Vygotsky, 1978), but also

receiving and acting upon strategic feedback to improve speaking proficiency. The present study moved the notion of interactional feedback to a new level by encouraging students to critically analyze their speaking ability in class and outside of class by listening to their recordings. After establishing an atmosphere of reflective learning, student feedback was improved by integrating technology into the feedback process. By utilizing two forms of feedback, after listening to the recordings, immediate recasts and formative corrections in class as well as summative feedback, instructors had the ability to offer students more in-depth and precise feedback to improve their speaking proficiency at the introductory level. Furthermore, the instructors promoted the idea that students should review their recordings after receiving feedback in order to improve their proficiency.

The findings lead the authors to believe that such interaction has helped advance students' inter-language development by connecting input, internal learner capacities, and output in productive ways (Long, 1996), that help add empirical evidence sought by interactions in second language development (Mackey, 1999) and production (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Additionally, this study offers support not only to the notion that language teachers should use a variety of strategies to correct students' linguistic errors (Chaudron, 1977; Seedhouse, 1997; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), but also to the relative effectiveness of feedback strategies that depends on multiple variables; in this case, the variables of particular aspects of the language being corrected and the conditions relating to the provision of teacher correction (Ferreira, Moore, & Mellish, 2007) are addressed.

Anecdotal evidence from conversations with instructors and students alike indicate that this may have been the first time many of the students had the opportunity to listen to themselves speaking in the target language. The researchers believe that promoting self-awareness in the S/FL classroom is imperative

to improving second language development. Moreover, the researchers note that language learners tend to avoid listening to themselves, which can impede language development. By working on the ZPD, learners can become less anxious, thereby lowering affective barriers to learning, and begin to feel more competent using the target language.

While the present study indicates that student linguistic proficiency can be enhanced by using technology and structured feedback from a sociocultural perspective, it does have its limitations. While the number of students involved in the study was high ($N = 1180$), not every student turned in recordings for each assessment which lowered the quantity of data to be examined. While efforts were made to offer feedback to each student, some chose to not turn in speaking assignments. An additional limitation is that novice instructors are less prepared than their veteran counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2001) and subsequently have less experience in the classroom.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, questions still remain and further research in the area of form-focused interaction and S/FL development is clearly warranted. It would be helpful to know how individuals' learning styles are affected by different forms of feedback. Additionally, it would be beneficial to know which feedback strategies are best fitted to each learning style and how technology can plan an integral role in S/FL development. It is clear that learning and acquiring a S/FL is very important in today's world and results from the present study provide evidence that technology and quality feedback plays an important role.

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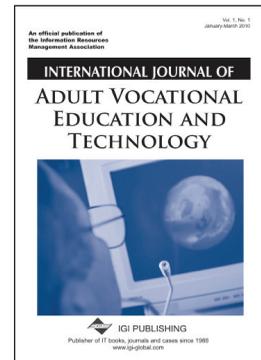
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ISSN 1947-8607
eISSN 1947-878X
Published quarterly

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